



Dog racing season kicks off in Sarasota

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By Kate Flexter

SARASOTA, Fla. -- It's the start of dog racing season at the Sarasota Kennel Club and for animal rights activists, that means the start of a new season of protests against the sport.

Protesters say the dogs are kept in cages without proper care or human interaction and that racing is hard on a dog's body causing injury and often death. State records show that a dog dies from racing related injuries on average every 3 days in the state of Florida.

"The injuries they sustain include broken legs, broken necks, paralysis and things like that and it's just cruel and it doesn't need to happen," said Kelly Driscoll.

Director of Racing at the Sarasota Kennel Club Tom Bowersox says the Kennel Club's dogs live comfortably on site in clean facilities with spacious crates and a medical staff on duty. He says opponents often aren't well informed about those facilities.

"I'm sure there's quite a few of them that have never been in a greyhound facility and just basically go off the hearsay of other groups," said Bowersox. "That's not always good. it's best to see firsthand what you're actually talking about."

"My reaction to that is let us in," said Driscoll in response to Bowersox's statement. "If you have nothing to hide and you're so proud of your facilities, then let the public in so they can see it and make a decision for themselves." ABC 7 asked the Kennel Club for access to it's facilities where the dogs are housed, but we were turned down.

Critics of greyhound racing say the real action at the tracks isn't the racing though, it's the poker rooms. According to state law, facilities that have poker rooms are required to run a certain number of races per season. Activists say that piece of legislation is perpetuating a sport that would otherwise disappear.

"In order to be poker rooms, they're running dogs around a little circle, but nobody's out there betting nobody's out there watching," said Driscoll. "They're there for the poker."

Bowersox admits that he has seen the popularity of the sport decline through the years.

"The economy has really changed dog racing," said Bowersox. "It's just the business is not there like it used to be because of economic reasons, and I'm sure we're not the only business in the area that's having problems with that."

From 2001 to 2013, the U.S. saw a 68% decrease in the amount gambled on greyhound racing.

"So how long has your family owned this place?" I asked Bonita Springs track owner Izzy Havenick.

"Since 1967," Havenick replied. "Way back then all of these stands would've been packed. Now, we're lucky if we get 100 or 200 people in here."

Havenick recalls when dog racing was hugely popular, but says today, the younger generation just isn't interested in the sport.

"The popularity in dog racing has definitely declined and as younger people are raised they want things that are more instant gratification and dog racing is definitely not that," said Havenick.

State law requires a track to run 90% of the number of races ran in 1996. For Havenick's track, that means 1,200 races a year. That's more than any other track in the nation and Havenick says he's losing money.

The state is potentially losing money too. From 2001 to 2013, state dog race revenue declined by 82%. That doesn't even take into account the regulatory costs.

"It would really be a win win for the state and for these businesses because we could make other parts of our business grow if we weren't forced and mandated to lose money by the state of Florida," said Havenick. Havenick says that at the end of the day, this legislation is antiquated and he says its time the state legislature starts listening to those speaking out against it.

"You have the greyhound racing people and the anti-greyhound racing people all supporting the same bill and yet it never passes in the legislature," said Havenick. I think most track owners are optimistic that Florida will eventually allow us to choose how much racing we do so that businesses can flourish again."