

## Decouple dog racing, other gambling

By

Published: Wednesday, February 18, 2015 at 10:49 AM.

It's rare to find an issue Republicans, Democrats, animal rights activists and greyhound racing track owners might agree on.

And yet decoupling, a proposed law that would finally bring rationality to greyhound racing and the other forms of gambling that occur on greyhound race parks, can't seem to make it through the Tallahassee mud.

In 1931, Florida became the first state in the nation to legalize greyhound racing, and it remains the home of the sport with more tracks — 12 — than the rest of the country combined.

For a time, greyhound racing competed with horse racing for prestige and attention from the public. Joe DiMaggio, Babe Ruth, Janet Leigh and Frank Sinatra all made appearances at dog tracks, and at one point, it was the sixth most popular sporting activity in the country, according to a report on the industry from Grey2K USA, a nonprofit group opposed to greyhound racing.



### [WHAT'S YOUR VIEW? WRITE US A LETTER.](#)

However, the sport, as currently regulated, seems near the finish line.

Ebro Greyhound Park lost \$2.9 million on racing in the 2012 and 2013 fiscal year. Ebro's profits — \$2.05 million — came from its card room, which under state law it can only keep open in conjunction with greyhound racing. Ebro's financial picture is mirrored at almost every track across the state and across the nation, greyhound racing experts say.

In other words, the government is forcing a business to engage in an unprofitable activity as a smokescreen for a profitable one. So the races keep going even if no one is watching or gambling on them so the tracks can keep their card rooms open. It's the perfect example of government micromanaging private industry.

Track owners say if decoupling is passed, they will continue racing — the sport still has its fans — but they most likely will run far fewer races than they currently are forced to run. Some tracks might close altogether, which is an ongoing nationwide trend. Ebro wants to expand, and residents there passed a referendum in support of slots at the track, a referendum ignored by Tallahassee.

Racing critics like Grey2K support the legislation because fewer races might mean fewer injuries and deaths for the dogs. They say in 2014, 193 greyhounds died in Florida as a result of racing injuries. They also argue that the dogs are kept in cages for most of their lives, injected with steroids and other drugs and at times cruelly discarded when they are of no more use to the dog breeders.

However, it is not necessarily fair to paint the whole industry with one brush.

Circuses, zoos and horse racing have all seen their share of cases where humans were inhumane to animals. But in all of these industries, it is more likely that the animals — which are valuable to their owners — are treated humanely and with the proper care. And greyhound racing officials have worked diligently to ensure the animals are taken care of, including creating and supporting greyhound adoption programs and banning individuals from the sport who are suspected of mistreating the dogs.

Along with decoupling, everyone agrees Florida's laws against animal cruelty should be strictly enforced at the zoo, the kennel and, yes, the dog track.

Officials from Grey2K and the ASPCA are currently on a media tour in the hopes they can convince the public and the legislature to pass decoupling this year. A decoupling bill passed Florida's Senate last year but was never heard in the House.

Along with the entrenched interests against decoupling, any bill that deals with gambling often brings out pro-gambling forces who hope to expand the activity in Florida. However, the legislature should handle decoupling as a stand-alone issue and resist the temptation to try and meddle with other forms of gambling.

It's that kind of thinking that created this mess.