

# Changes on the Horizon

- Thursday, February 19, 2015 - 06:00



By Mike Ford

Staff Writer

ORANGE PARK – Changes could be on the horizon for greyhound racing tracks in Florida in the wake of reported canine deaths across the industry's dozen venues in the state.

Between June 2013 and last December, 23 dogs died at the local track that is home to the Orange Park Kennel Club, according to state statistics compiled from reports to the Division of Pari-Mutuel Wagering. Grey2K Executive Director Carey Theil, who campaigns to reform greyhound racing across the US, said dog advocates and Florida race track owners both want to change a state law that keeps greyhound racing in operation. The local race track is owned by Best Betjax, which Clay Today contacted for comment on this story, and was directed toward its public relations representative, Michael Munz, who did not respond as of press time.

At issue is a law that ties dog racing to poker and other gaming conducted on site near the race tracks, a policy referred to as coupling. State law mandates that greyhound racing tracks, which also operate card rooms continue to hold dog races to keep their card room licenses. State Senator Rob Bradley (R-Fleming Island) chairs the Senate Committee on Regulated Industries and said legislators will look at ending the coupling requirement in the upcoming session – a move many welcome. Theil explained why he thinks decoupling will become reality.

"We'll eventually pass a greyhound decoupling bill – every dog track supports it because the 12 of them in Florida are losing a combined \$40 million a year on greyhound racing," Theil said.

There is no specific decoupling bill proposed now, but Bradley anticipates the subject to come up.

"Decoupling continues to be considered because dog racing has been becoming less and less popular so we will give decoupling serious consideration," Bradley said. "There isn't a specific bill that has been filed right now, but it will definitely be on the table for discussion."

Theil and the state senator both indicated reforming greyhound racing has failed in the past because of kennel club behavior. Bradley said they act like a "circling firing squad" that makes small reform efforts fail. He said regulating the industry has to be uniform and all at once, rather than piece by piece. Theil said this is because lobbyists are holding everything hostage in effort to expand gaming.

"They want slot machines and they won't go along with any kind of bill until they get it. The other thing is they have a history of squabbling with each other. For example, there was a bill in 2011 that passed in the House and the Senate but died on the last day because the two chambers couldn't agree on the language. One of the race tracks thought the language favored one of the other tracks, so the greyhounds were held hostage," Theil said.

Under current laws, not only can tracks not quit dog racing if they want to keep their card rooms, but they are also prohibited from phasing out of it in large chunks. In any given year, the number of races can only decrease by 10 percent from the previous year under a Florida law known as the "90 percent rule."

Bradley indicated the 90 percent rule was put in place to make sure the coupling rule matters by ensuring those who have card tables make a tangible effort to maintain dog racing. Bradley also said the matter has historic roots in the fact that dog tracks have a decades-long history in Florida that other forms of gaming were added to.

"Some of these dog tracks have been around for decades but they only added poker tables about 15 years ago. It was because people's interest in gaming had evolved, so they started offering other forms of gaming to those who were already there for dog racing," he said.

There are 21 greyhound racing tracks in seven states – more of them in Florida than any other. Like Alabama, the Sunshine State doesn't require greyhound injuries to be reported to the public.

That also may change, as bills have been proposed in both chambers of the Florida Legislature that aim to reform reporting requirements.

Bradley said the health and welfare of racing dogs must be highly valued in the legislative process of regulating the industry. However, animal rights advocates like Theil have been calling attention to animal neglect and abuse for several years. In addition to the 23 greyhounds that died in Orange Park, 25 greyhounds died at the track in St. Petersburg in the same time period.

While some of these deaths are due to natural causes, broken legs and other racing-related injuries are also to blame. An 80-page report published this year by Grey2K found 909 greyhound deaths, which included 758 injured dogs, since 2008, across the 21 locations. The report also cites 11,722 greyhound injuries since 2008 that include fractured skulls, broken necks and electrocution from coming into contact with the rail used to motivate dogs with the fake rabbit the dogs "chase." The report indicates 27 cases of cruelty and neglect documented by regulatory agencies that include starvation and denial of veterinary care.

Regulators have also found 16 cases of dogs testing positive for cocaine since 2008. Theil said he doesn't have hard data to show why the drug is used, but he knows the practice exists.

"We don't know exactly why cocaine is used, but we do know cocaine has been used in the United Kingdom to fix races. So, from injecting dogs with cocaine to keeping them confined in cages, there is a full range of abuse and neglect taking place, Theil said.

"In 13 years of research, we've found this to be a 20th Century industry with a failed business model that is losing money – that happens to still be around because of state mandates."

Locally-trained greyhound, Flying Facepaint, has made history becoming the only greyhound to win 16 straight races at Orange Park Kennel Club. The red brindle, is a three-and-a-half-year-old male and is trained by Mike Gerard of Jacksonville. Flying Facepaint runs for Lester Raines Kennels in Charleston, W.Va. and for owner and Greyhound Hall Of Fame inductee and breeder, Vince Berland in Abilene, Kan.

Last modified on Thursday, February 19, 2015 - 06:00