

Greyhound racing

The final flutter

Changes in gambling habits may kill off dog racing for good

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AS THE race begins, the dogs leap out of their traps like missiles. “Trap four has taken the lead!” shouts an excited commentator as they come around the first bend. The race



could be at any number of gritty greyhound tracks across the country. But it exists only on a screen in a south London betting shop. The dogs are computer-animated; the commentary is pre-scripted and automatic.

Virtual greyhound racing is just one of many computer-generated betting opportunities at British bookmakers. There are also virtual horse races and even virtual football matches. Men cluster around touch-screen machines, feeding £20 (\$31) notes into a virtual roulette table. This computer wizardry is making lots of money for betting companies and giving gamblers a little more variety. But the move from real dogs to virtual ones threatens to kill off a working-class pastime.

Greyhound racing has been in decline since the 1960s, says Lord Lipsey, a former chairman of the British Greyhound Racing Board (and a former writer for *The Economist*). Before then it thrived partly because gambling “off-course”—away from race tracks—was illegal. In the 1950s as many as 70,000 spectators would flock to tracks such as White City in west London to drink and bet. The capital alone had 33 greyhound-racing stadiums. Now there are just 25 registered tracks in the whole of Britain.

Having crippled the dog-racing industry, off-course betting helped keep it alive. Because gamblers still needed something to bet on, bookmakers began paying stadium operators to hold

races in the late 1960s. Under this system, known as the “Bookmakers’ Afternoon Greyhound Service” (BAGS), a single meeting can generate as much as £10,000 for a stadium operator. On top of this, bookmakers pay a levy from bets to help cover animal-welfare costs and stump up prize money for the biggest races. The support of the bookmakers is now vital to the industry’s survival, says James McCreadie of the British Greyhound Racing Board.

Virtual gambling now threatens that business model. Since 2008 the gross gambling yield (a measure of profit) generated by betting on dogs in bookmakers has fallen by 20% to £240m, according to data from the Gambling Commission, the industry regulator. Over the same period the profit generated by fixed-odds betting terminals of all kinds has increased by 37% to over £1.4 billion—more than the total made from horses, dogs and football combined. Greyhounds are less important to the bookies than ever.

To counter the decline, the BAGS operators hope to sell TV rights overseas. They reckon they can lure gamblers away from betting on horse-racing, which costs bookmakers even more. But in the meantime the industry is shrivelling. On December 29th Oxford’s stadium held its last race, becoming the latest of many closures. Like the tracks at Walthamstow and Portsmouth, it will be converted into housing. Other tracks, such as that in Wimbledon, in south-west London, are being allowed to fall into disrepair before going the same way. In 1928 Winston Churchill dismissed greyhound racing as little more than “animated roulette”. It may turn out to be little match for actual animated roulette.

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