

Top trainer Steve Clark claims track conditions putting greyhound lives at risk after dog put down

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AGRC/YouTube

Jay Low was leading race number 10 at the Auckland greyhound meeting, then collided with another dog leading to its fall.

A top greyhound has died and five more have been injured racing on a substandard track – and now racing authorities have punished a trainer who's refusing to race in conditions that he says puts the animals' lives at risk.

Leading trainer Steve Clark, who made champion stayer Swift Fantasy a household name in 2010-11, had to put down his 12-race winner Jay Low last Sunday after she shattered a hock racing at Manukau Stadium in South Auckland.

And he says more greyhounds will be killed or suffer career ending injuries unless the shocking state of the country's racetracks is addressed.



Jay Low tumbles in race 10 at the Auckland greyhounds meeting last Sunday at Manukau. Subic Bay won the race and Jay Low was later put down as a result of her injuries.

On one of the biggest days racing at the track when nine heats for the Auckland Cup and Railway Sprint were contested, veterinary attention was needed for six dogs – three with serious hock damage.

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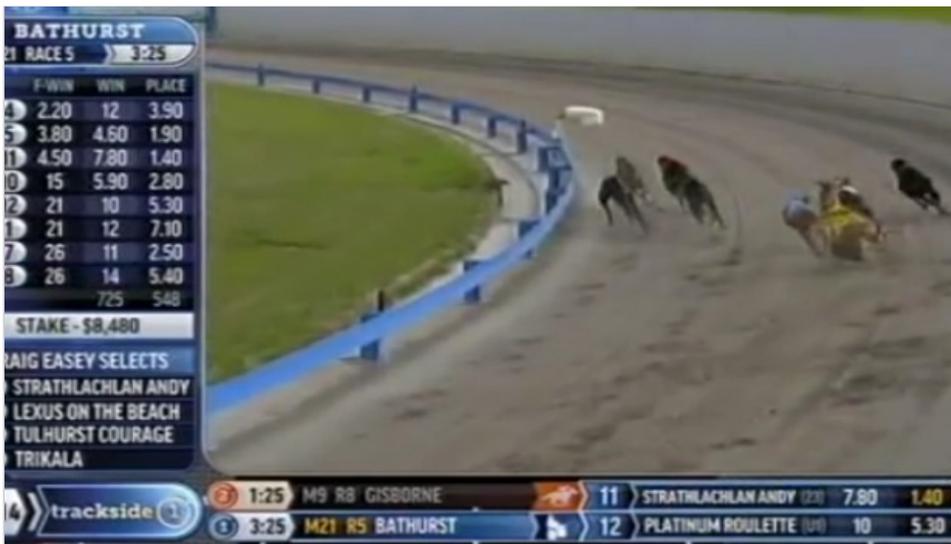


Jay Low tumbles in race 10 at the Auckland greyhounds meeting last Sunday.

And when Railway contender Jay Low had to be destroyed after she was dragged down and fell on inconsistent ground that Clark has been complaining about for months, the owner of Clark's crack sprinter Yeboah, Tony Potts, refused to run the dog in his qualifying heat.

"The tracks up here at Auckland and Cambridge are not being prepared properly," Clark said. "They're poorly conditioned, and too many dogs are being injured."

"We've lost 11 dogs from our kennels in the last three months because of track injuries and, unless something is done, there'll be a lot more hurt."



Jay Low tumbles in race 10 at the Auckland greyhounds meeting on Sunday.

Yeboah had been favourite in pre-post betting for the Railway and would normally have been subject to a 28-day stand-down for being withdrawn without a veterinary certificate. Clark believes by imposing no ban, the judicial committee acknowledged the track was not up to standard.

Clark had 11 dogs entered to race at Manukau the next day – including four of Swift Fantasy's first litter – but he withdrew them all on race morning, convinced the track could not possibly be safe just 24 hours later.

Clark has now been hit with 28-day stand-downs on all 11 dogs, his entire racing team, with the Racing Integrity Unit declaring he was not at the track to judge whether it was safe or not.



None

Trainer Steve Clark, second from left, with connections of Jay Low, the greyhound put down after racing at Auckland on Sunday, including father and son owners Graeme and Luke Ashby.

For Maramarua Forest-based Clark and his partner Kath Wilson, that means no income for the next month because they rely on the dogs' earnings for their livelihood. They take a share in the animals in lieu of training fees.

"It's a sad day in the sport," Clark said. "I've done nothing wrong. I just stood my ground to protect my dogs from getting hurt.

"I walked past Jay Low's kennel the other day and burst into tears. Knowing she's not here any more is tough."

Clark said Jay Low's owners Graeme and Luke Ashby needed a lot of consoling on Sunday and he was adamant he would not risk injury to their other dog, Boris Gump, by running him the next day on the same track after the stewards' report of incidents throughout the day read like an account of stock-car racing.

"They lost Lady Shambi here 18 months ago after she broke a hock when favourite in the Waterloo Cup and I'm not going to put them through that a third time."

Clark knows fixed-odds punters would have lost money through Yeboah's scratching but Potts had given up the chance to win thousands in prizemoney to keep him safe.

"I wasn't going to lose Yeboah. My dogs always come first, their safety is paramount," Clark said. "We've succeeded as trainers because everything we do is for the good of our dogs."

Clark has appealed the RIU's decision to stand down his dogs, saying it had a discretion not to impose penalty if a trainer had a valid reason for scratching.

"I say I had a valid reason. I withdrew my dogs on animal welfare grounds. And I did it early enough so the reserves could get a start. "

Clark said he believed Greyhound Racing New Zealand was paying only lip service to animal welfare, painting over problems, when after the Australian live-baiting scandal they should be actively improving the lot of the animals.

Last year greyhound racing came under intense scrutiny when it was discovered that many Australian trainers were using live animals to train their dogs to chase the lure. Many were banned and trainers here were warned about the outlawed practice.

He had fielded calls from both greyhound officials and New Zealand Racing Board staff trying to keep a lid on the Manukau incident.

He was also disappointed that fellow trainers "lacked the balls" to take action, instead simply crossing their fingers that their charges pulled up safely and scorning him for making a fuss.

"But for the first time in my career I'm willing to be the scapegoat."

Clark said he believed the reduction in injuries on the second day at Auckland – only one dog was referred to the vet with a wrist injury – was not because the track was vastly improved but more a reflection on the slower class of animals competing – "faster dogs put everything into their racing".

Clark said he applauded GRNZ chairman Craig Rendle for launching an urgent investigation into the track surface at Auckland last Sunday.

Rendle said the safety of greyhounds was GRNZ's No.1 priority and injuries like that to Jay Low were totally unacceptable.

"The death of a dog is a tragedy that GRNZ must do everything in our power to prevent," Rendle said. "We will be undertaking a thorough investigation of how this happened and what we need to do to remedy the situation for the future."

A statement from GRNZ said it expected its report on the investigation to be completed by the end of the week when it would be presented to the board. Until then it declined to make any further comment.

Clark said he had an undertaking from Rendle that things would change and the chairman had indicated he wanted GRNZ to take over the maintenance of all tracks around the country.

"The greatest thing that could happen would be for them to employ someone from Australia or America to get our tracks up to scratch and keep them that way.

"Covering them up with sand to make them look pretty isn't solving anything."

Clark said he had no regrets about his action and if he encountered another unsafe track he would have no hesitation in pulling out his entire team again.

Clark said if he had to wait three or four weeks for an appeal to be scheduled, as was the norm, he could not afford to keep feeding the 10 retired dogs he had been slowly filtering to the Greyhounds As Pets (GAP) programme to ensure they all found a home.

The last thing he wanted to do was put them down.

Barry Lichter has a small share in the greyhound Bee Lichter, one of the 11 Clark-trained dogs scratched from Auckland.

- Stuff