

# Greyhound races are a thing of the past. Here's why Florida still hasn't learned that.

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By **Duncan Strauss** June 16

PALM BEACH, Fla. — During the third race on a recent sweltering Sunday at the Palm Beach Kennel Club, a sleek black greyhound named Atascocita Laden broke from the pack early in the 545-yard course and sprinted to a decisive victory. There was nothing overly surprising about the result: Atascocita Laden was a favorite, and the tip sheets had him picked to finish in the money.

For some Americans, though, it may be surprising that greyhound racing still exists. Forty states have done away with it or outlawed it over concerns about cruelty and dog deaths. Today, just 19 U.S. dog tracks remain active.

But Florida is an outlier. The state is home to 12 of those greyhound tracks, which keep hosting races even as crowds and profits dwindle. When Atascocita Laden crossed the finish line, only about 20 spectators were trackside. The Palm Beach Kennel Club and its peers collectively lose about \$30 million each year on dog racing, [according to financial statements](#) the tracks are required to file with the state.

This confounding situation is the result of a weird wrinkle in Florida law that requires the tracks to offer dog racing to operate their highly lucrative card rooms. The Florida legislature, seeking to limit the number of card rooms statewide, passed a statute in 1997 that stipulated licenses would go only to existing “pari-mutuel” betting facilities — horse tracks, jai alai courts and, yes, dog tracks.

The result is that the 7,000 or so racing greyhounds in Florida are running merely to keep the poker tables full. These days, the Palm Beach Kennel Club — a sprawling compound that also features simulcasts of horse racing held elsewhere, an enormous poker room, two restaurants and multiple concession stands — offers 15 dog races daily, with an additional 15 Friday and Saturday nights. On that Sunday, the grandstand above Atascocita Laden was a vast sea of empty seats, but the poker-room tables were packed.

Greyhound racing is “a Depression-era relic that happens to still exist today,” said Carey Theil, executive director of Grey2K USA Worldwide, a greyhound protection organization. “We’re seeing dogs suffer and die right now at Florida tracks in races that the tracks don’t want to hold.”

The total amount wagered on U.S. dog races has dropped from \$3.5 billion in 1991 to approximately \$500 million in 2014, according to a statistical report by the Association of Racing Commissioners International. Given the immediate return of much of that amount to gamblers in winnings, plus overhead costs, greyhound racing has become a fail-safe recipe for tracks to lose gobs of money.

Experts point to a handful of factors for the industry’s decline, including competing forms of gambling or entertainment, a lack of interest among younger people, and growing awareness about welfare concerns for the dogs.

State figures indicate that nearly 400 dogs have died at Florida tracks since 2013, and Grey2K USA and plenty of other animal protection groups list a host of concerns about the greyhounds’ treatment. They say the dogs are confined to cramped kennels for 20-plus hours a day; sustain frequent injuries including head trauma and broken legs; and are sometimes given drugs such as anabolic steroids, which can prevent females from going into heat. One veteran Florida trainer’s license was revoked in April after five of his dogs tested positive for cocaine.

Jack Cory, the longtime lobbyist for the Florida Greyhound Association, dismissed those charges as “misconceptions,” and said racing dogs “do what they love to do — they run — for two or three years, then they get adopted out to a loving family.”

“The end of greyhound racing could happen” in Florida, Cory said, “but it would happen over my dead, bloody body.”

Despite the downward national trend, there’s little indication that the end to racing is near in Florida. In recent years, multiple bills have been introduced in the state legislature to separate, or “decouple,” greyhound racing from casino gambling, but they’ve all failed to win sufficient support, including in the recently completed 2017 session.

The efforts have been blocked by a tangle of conflicting agendas among the tracks and other pari-mutuel entities, as well as powerful influences such as Disney, which fears that any legislative changes could bring additional gaming that would undermine tourist and convention business. Leading lawmakers also want to fashion a more comprehensive gambling bill that extends well beyond separating racing from card rooms.

One pivotal aspiration for tracks is being granted the opportunity to add slot machines to their operations. But the tracks won’t abide a provisions or geographic stipulation that might mean only some tracks would land slots.

Betting operations “all want what the other guy gets, or they don’t want the other guy to get anything,” said state Sen. Dana D. Young, a Republican who has sponsored a number of bills relating to greyhounds, most recently one that would ban the use of anabolic steroids in females. It died in the Senate. “Gaming legislation is the most difficult thing that we do.”

Even if a decoupling bill were to pass tomorrow, experts say, it would not end greyhound racing in Florida. Rather, it would probably provide tracks the option to cease racing, but the prediction is that at least some would continue, in part to absorb the dog-betting revenue of the closed tracks.

Izzy Havenick, who helps run two family-operated Florida dog tracks and casinos, said he would happily leave behind greyhounds if possible. That would allow his businesses to expand their other, more profitable, gambling operations. But Havenick said he's lost faith in the legislature to make it happen.

“We'd need to have a statewide constitutional amendment, which would probably take us about three years to get organized,” Havenick said. “It would be very costly, and we would need 60 percent of Floridians to vote for it. But unless the legislature acts, the only way in Florida to change the law is to go to the people.”

Meanwhile, Atascocita Laden and his ilk will keep running.



Atascocita Laden races at the Palm Beach Kennel Club, one of 12 dog tracks in Florida.  
(Duncan Strauss)