

Greyhound Racing Facing Extinction in Massachusetts

Boston – Voters in Massachusetts will soon decide whether greyhound racing should continue there, though the real question might be whether the once-popular sport dies a quick death or a slow one.

Across the country, the legions of blue-collar fans the industry relied on have been lured away by casinos, lotteries, online gambling and other forms of betting.

Track owners fighting the proposed ban fiercely oppose claims that the dogs are mistreated. But animal-welfare issues aside, others involved in greyhound racing glumly concede a cultural shift away from the sport.

„It’s certainly changing,“ said Gary Guccione, executive director of the National Greyhound Association. „It has downsized in recent years. We’ve seen a decrease in the number of tracks and dogs being bred.“

In the 1980s there were more than 50,000 greyhounds bred each year to race at about 60 tracks nationwide, Guccione said. This year, the number of dogs will drop to less than 20,000 and the number of tracks has been cut almost in half.

Since the end of 2004 alone, 13 U.S. tracks have closed or have ended live dog racing, according to the Committee to Protect Dogs, which is leading the campaign for the Massachusetts ban. It has raised nearly USD 400,000 since January 2007, nearly 10 times as much as opponents of the ban have raised.

Racing fans still come to sit at tables in front of television monitors at Wonderland Greyhound Park in Revere, one of the state’s two dog tracks. Live racing won’t resume until the

spring, but they can still wager on races elsewhere via simulcast.

It's a far cry from the 22,607 fans who filled Wonderland on May 16, 1945, when the track set its single performance attendance record – or the day in June 1939 when 1,500 people packed a dinner at Boston's Copley Plaza to honor Rural Rube, who had just won 19 races in a single season.

If the ban passes, Massachusetts will join seven states that already ban live greyhound racing: Idaho, Maine, North Carolina, Nevada, Vermont, Virginia and Washington, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures.

Gary Temple, general manager Raynham Greyhound Park in Raynham, is leading the opposition to the ballot question. He calls backers „zealots“ who are misleading the public about track conditions and the treatment of dogs.

Temple said handlers and owners have invested time and money in the dogs and the tracks are some of the most highly regulated industries in the state.

„I am animal lover myself and I would never allow an animal to be mistreated here,“ he said. „There's a lot of passion and love that these trainers give their dogs. They are family members.“

Of all the claims made by the tracks, the most contentious is the statement – repeated by Temple – that they have achieved a 100 percent adoption rate for their dogs once their racing days are over.

Backers of the question say it's untrue. They point to statistics reported by the tracks to the state racing commission that show just 31 percent of dogs were adopted in 2007, while 55 percent went on to race at other tracks. The remaining dogs went back to their owners, to breeding farms and a handful – less than 1 percent – were euthanized.

Activists say there's no way to monitor what happens to the dogs sent to tracks in other states – and even Temple concedes that „after they go to another track, it's up to that track.“

Christine Dorchak, one of the organizers of the question, said dog racing is particularly cruel for greyhounds.

„These dogs are very gentle and very fragile,“ she said. „When eight of them are put in a pack and trained to run after the same object, they can be injured very easily. It's basically putting these dogs on a collision course.“

Dorchak's group has documented what they said are hundreds of cases of dogs' being injured at Massachusetts tracks since 2002, when the state first required tracks to report injuries. The injuries range from scrapes and cuts to broken bones.

Dorchak said the new statistics have strengthened the case for closing the tracks since 2000, when a similar ballot question lost narrowly.

Closing the tracks could mean the loss of about 1,000 jobs associated with dog racing, according to Temple. Dorchak called any loss regrettable, but added, „Our economy should not be built on cruelty to dogs.“