

ANIMALS

The era of greyhound racing in the U.S. is coming to an end

Concerns about the dogs' welfare and declining betting revenue have led tracks across the country to close in recent decades.

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY ERIKA LARSEN

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ST. PETERSBURG, FLORIDA— It's 8:30 on a Saturday night in August. A gibbous moon hangs low in the Florida sky, its pale glow no competition for the red neon proclaiming, "GREYHOUND RACING" and "DERBY LANE." About 300 people are scattered around grandstands that once held thousands, murmuring among themselves while the loudspeaker plays big band and rockabilly tunes.

They fall silent when it's time for Frederick Davis to lead the parade of dogs.

"TNT Sherlock," says the announcer, calling the names of the eight sleek animals as Davis makes them pause in front of the stands. Each dog wears a big number attached to a snugly fitted vest known as a "blanket." "Tailspin," the announcer calls, "...Charlotte York...."

Next, Davis, 41, and the eight handlers he supervises will put the dogs in the starter's box. The mechanical rabbit named "Hare-son Hare" will zoom past, squeaking and shooting blue sparks. The doors will fly open, and the greyhounds will burst onto the track, their bodies a blur, their paws tossing sand in the air as they gallop around the oval for 30 seconds. They hit speeds of up to 45 miles per hour, making them second only to the cheetah, the fastest land animal on Earth.

Famed sports columnist Ring Lardner called Derby Lane "the Churchill Downs of greyhound racing." When the dogs run, you can still get a hint of its glory days. This was once a place that seemed full of glamour and excitement. The stands would be packed with men and women in suits and hats. Babe Ruth and Sophie Tucker were frequent visitors. Joe DiMaggio once left Marilyn Monroe in an idling car chatting with the valet while he ran inside to place his bets.

Derby Lane is the oldest continuously operating greyhound racetrack in the United States, but it's headed on its last stretch. Two years ago, Florida had more greyhound tracks than any other state—11 out of 17 nationwide. Now it's down to three, with about 1,700 dogs still racing.

In 2018, Florida's voters had the chance to approve a constitutional amendment—Amendment 13—that would ban betting on greyhounds as of December 31, 2020. The proposal, which effectively bans greyhound racing, was brought by critics of the sport who contend dog racing is cruel and inhumane.

The racing industry bet on beating the amendment, arguing that its supporters were exaggerating stories of dogs' mistreatment. The industry spent just a fraction of what supporters did on the campaign, believing the sport was popular enough that the majority of Floridians wouldn't vote to ban it.

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He's not the only Derby Lane employee wondering about the future.

"It's a shame to have to shut down after 95 years," says Derby Lane CEO Richard Winning, 64, whose office overlooks the track. His family has owned Derby Lane since it opened in 1925. He predicts that once the Florida tracks close, the ones in other states will follow.

"In 20 years, will anyone even remember what greyhound racing was?" he asks.

This is the one thing on which he agrees with Carey Theil, whose Massachusetts-based greyhound advocacy group, Grey2K USA, spearheaded the drive for Amendment 13: Once Florida's tracks are gone, so too is the whole industry.

"Florida really *was* the industry," Theil says.

Proverbs, royalty, and bribes

Winning is a born storyteller, with a droll manner, a gray beard, and a trio of cigars tucked in the pocket of his teal fishing shirt. He started out at the track 45 years ago collecting 50-cent pieces from the turnstiles, and since then he has worked almost every other job. He remembers when the regulars included rakish gamblers called "The Flicker" and "Champagne Tony," the track restaurant served a 37-ounce prime rib, and a live band—not recordings—played between races.

Winning says greyhounds are the only breed of dog mentioned in the Bible, which is sort of true. The King James version of Proverbs 30:31 includes them in a list of things which are "comely in going." (Scholars say the original Hebrew refers to Afghans or Salukis).

The King James translators knew about greyhounds because, back in the early 1600s, England was enthralled by a sport called "coursing," in which two greyhounds raced to catch a scampering rabbit. Queen Elizabeth I was a fan—hence greyhound racing's nickname, "the Sport of Queens."

In the 18th century, an eccentric English nobleman obsessed with coursing created the modern English greyhound through selective breeding, according to Cynthia A. Branigan's *The Reign of the Greyhound*. With lean, aerodynamic bodies, long legs, and shock-absorbing foot pads, greyhounds were built for speed. They have a proportionally bigger heart than other breeds, and more red blood cells and hemoglobin, which carry more oxygen to their limbs. Their sprinting gait (a "double suspension rotary gallop") and high proportion of fast-twitch muscles power short, quick bursts of speed.

But dog racing as we know it today originated with an American inventor named Owen P. Smith who ironically wanted to be kind to animals. To him, the dying rabbits sounded like a child screaming.

The son of a Memphis undertaker, Smith was a sometime barber who loved to tinker. His brilliant idea: replace the live rabbit with a mechanical one. In 1910, he secured a patent for "the Inanimate Hare Conveyor."

"Nobody in the history of any sport brought about a change comparable to that worked by the inventor of the device, and yet no inventor in sports history is so little known," *Sports Illustrated* commented in 1973.

Smith did more than invent a humane lure. He and two partners designed the first modern greyhound track, which opened in 1919 outside Oakland, California. It failed, as did several others they opened. The tracks flopped because they didn't allow betting. Gambling, while popular, was illegal.

The first commercially successful track was one Smith and his partners opened in 1921 in a swampy South Florida area known as "Humbergus," later to become the city of Hialeah. It was so close to the Everglades that the track owners hired a snake-catcher to intercept stray reptiles. Five thousand people turned out for the first race, watching a dog named Old Rosebud take the \$60 purse, according to *Going to the Dogs: Greyhound Racing, Animal Activism, and American Popular Culture*, by Gwyneth Anne Thayer.

The key to its success: Electric lights. Running races at night meant working people could attend. With Florida's 1920s land boom in full roar.

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Although betting was illegal, tracks in the 1920s “did something sneaky,” Winning said. “They sold shares in the dogs.” The winners would get their money back plus a “dividend.” Losers would fail to recoup their “investment.” Other tracks skipped the subterfuge and ran “on the fix”—they bribed local lawmen.

In 1931, with the Depression bankrupting local governments, Florida legislators floated a bill to legalize wagering on dog and horse races and tax it. Governor Doyle Carlton, a Bible-thumping Baptist, opposed the bill. Thirty years later he contended, “interested parties were buying their way through the legislature” and claimed gamblers offered him \$100,000 to sign the bill. He vetoed it instead. State senators overrode his veto, making Florida the first state to legalize betting on horse and dog races.

Once that law passed, racing took off. New greyhound tracks popped up across the state, from Tampa (1932) to Orlando and Jacksonville (1935) to Pensacola (1947) to Key West (1953).

Greyhound racing became part of Florida’s sun-and-fun image. Mickey Mantle filmed a cigarette commercial at Derby Lane. Boxing champs and movie stars hung out at the tracks. The 1959 movie *A Hole in the Head* shows Frank Sinatra and Keenan Wynn betting on races at Miami’s Flagler Kennel Club.

‘Dachau for dogs’

Florida tends to be a sunny place full of shady people. The money involved in dog racing attracted plenty of them. Winning recalls seeing Tampa mob boss Santo Trafficante, Jr., laying down bets at Derby Lane. Some mobsters were more than customers. Lucky Luciano and Meyer Lansky had an interest in South Florida dog tracks, according to Scott Deitche, author of seven books on the Mafia.

A state racing commission was supposed to keep out unsavory elements. But in 1950, Senator Estes Kefauver’s Special Committee to Investigate Organized Crime reported that mobsters controlled the commission and made illegal campaign contributions to politicians, including then Governor Fuller Warren.

The mob’s involvement sparked frequent rumors about fixed races where dogs were overfed before the race to slow them down, or their toes cinched up with rubber bands to alter their ability to run, or they were drugged to make them faster or slower.

Dog-doping has continued to be a problem, particularly with the use of cocaine, which can grant a short-term burst of speed. In 2017, state racing officials revoked a trainer’s license because five of his greyhounds running at Derby Lane had tested positive for cocaine. Months later a trainer at a North Florida track was also suspended after a dozen of his dogs tested positive. In the three years since then, state officials say, 10 more trainers have had dogs test positive for cocaine.

The use of performance-enhancing drugs is just one of greyhound racing opponents’ concerns about the industry. Grey2K, which has spent nearly 20 years compiling reports on the welfare of racing greyhounds, says that even standard industry practices amount to mistreatment. When the dogs aren’t racing, for example, they’re often confined to small cages in warehouses. Dogs are forced to race under conditions that can cause serious injuries, too, they say. Grey2K’s website has collected documented cases of greyhounds that have broken their legs and backs, fractured their skulls and spines, and even gotten electrocuted by the lure.

The Florida Greyhound Association, an industry group, did not respond to requests for comment.

The larger concern is what happens to them when they’re not racing.

In 1952, the *Greyhound Racing Record* said only 30 percent of greyhounds bred for racing would become competitors, leaving open the fate of the other 70 percent. Even those that do race only do so until they’re about five years old. Grey2K has compiled all the news stories over the years about greyhounds being destroyed or sold to laboratories for experimentation.

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The scandals cut down greyhound racing's popularity as fans were turned off by the repeated reports of mistreatment. Meanwhile, competing gambling operations—first the Seminole and Miccosukee Tribes' casinos, then the Florida Lottery—began siphoning off the profits, Winning said.

The loyal fans tended to skew older. In 2001, when Steven Soderbergh filmed a scene at Derby Lane of George Clooney and Brad Pitt recruiting someone for their *Oceans 11* robbery, their target was Carl Reiner, then 79. He fit in perfectly with the graying greyhound crowd.

"Young people don't like to have to handicap" the dogs' chances, Winning grumbles, referring to the way ardent bettors carefully examine each dog and its record. "They just want to stare at their phones" and not put the time in.

Now the typical race fan is Jim Wickert, 77, a retired golf course owner who shows up at Derby Lane every Wednesday and Saturday sporting his jaunty tan Orvis fedora. A Derby Lane regular since 2003, he enjoys handicapping the dogs' chances.

"I like trying to figure them out," he said. "I don't bet big, but it's still exciting when you do figure things out and they run the way you think they should." He said he once won \$10,000 on a race.

He's not sure where he'll go once the track closes. Nothing else seems as exciting.

When Winning looks back at Florida's racing heyday, in the 1980s, he remembers Keefe, the dog that won the Distance Classic in 1986. Some 12,779 people turned out that day to watch this superstar run—the largest crowd in track history. Now a Saturday crowd at Derby Lane might number 700 tops, Winning says.

Over the past 10 years, the money brought in by live greyhound racing has dropped from \$117 million to less than \$40 million a year, state figures show. At Derby Lane alone, it dropped from about \$12 million to \$3.2 million in 2019.

The industry tried to adapt, winning legislative approval in 1997 to add poker rooms and simulcasting, which allows bettors at one venue to wager on races at another. Now the poker rooms are packed with younger customers, and the simulcasting has its fans too. Those will go on after dog racing ends, Winning says. But it wasn't enough to save Florida's racetracks.

'45-mile-per-hour couch potatoes'

For a decade, Grey2K tried to persuade Florida legislators to ban greyhound racing, to no avail, Theil says.

Finally, they appealed to the state's Constitutional Revision Commission, which meets every decade to update the constitution. A Tampa area state senator named Tom Lee—Winning calls him "our idiot legislator"—proposed Amendment 13. The amendment technically bans betting on live dog races, but by extension, it essentially bans the races themselves. Without betting, there is no profit, and the tracks can't afford to stay open.

Grey2K and its allies, such as the Humane Society of the United States, spent \$3 million convincing voters to pass it, Theil says. They spent almost all of it running graphic TV ads showing injured racing dogs.

The Florida Greyhound Association fought back with ads that asserted that Grey2K was exaggerating its stories of injuries and death, as well as warning that the amendment was full of "trickeration" that would somehow lead to bans on hunting and fishing. Its yard signs implied that banning racing would also ban greyhounds.

But the association couldn't get support beyond its declining fan base. Thayer, author of *Going to the Dogs*, says the track owners, kennel owners, and dog trainers had been too fractured among their individual interests for too long to present a unified front.

Nearly 70 percent of the voters said yes to the amendment. Winning and others in the industry insisted the voters were confused somehow. A lawsuit to overturn the vote went nowhere.

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So far, Dippel says, plenty of people have lined up to adopt the soon-to-be-unemployed dogs. She says it helps that the tracks are not all shutting down at once. Some closed shortly after the 2018 vote, while others closed in early 2020 because of the coronavirus.

Who's adopting them? "Everyone you can think of," says Linda Lyman of [Bay Area Greyhound Adoption in Tampa](#), another of the organizations working to find homes for Derby Lane's 776 dogs. "People who had greyhounds in the past or even just heard about them."

They're not high-strung animals, says longtime Derby Lane veterinarian Donald Beck. They're affectionate. In his years of working at Derby Lane, he's never been bitten—but he has been scratched a few times by excited dogs jumping on him.

As pets, greyhounds still like to run when they get outdoors, even without a mechanical device to chase, Dippel says. But when they get back indoors? "They're a 45-mile-per-hour couch potato."

Plenty of people got into the racing business because of their affection for greyhounds. Trainer and kennel owner John Farmer, a Klamath Tribe member from Oregon, fell in love with the breed when he was 11 and his mother let him watch races at Multnomah Greyhound Park. He's now 55, with so many mementoes of his winning dogs that he carries them in an overflowing Tupperware container.

Once Derby Lane shuts down, he figures he'll have to relocate to one of the few remaining states that still have greyhound racing: West Virginia, Iowa, or Arkansas—though Iowa and Arkansas's tracks are expected to close by the end 2022. (Texas's last track closed in June for financial reasons.)

Grey2K is working to convince those states to join Florida in outlawing the industry, just as it's going after the other countries where it remains legal: Australia, Ireland, Mexico, New Zealand, the United Kingdom, and Vietnam.

Farmer remains hopeful that he can use his Native American heritage as a way to save racing in Florida. He's got a plan to convince either the Seminole or the Miccosukee tribes to acquire a track that would operate in conjunction with one of their casinos and thus be exempt from state or federal regulation. That would, he said, "build a tradition." So far, though, the tribes have expressed no interest.

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