A Losing Bet: Greyhound Racing's Impact On Shelters

In one state, these dogs aren't even legally "dogs"—they're just cash cows

BY JANET WINIKOFF



Marketed as family-friendly entertainment, greyhound racing is hard on the dogs—and on the shelters and rescues that take on the costs of caring for, adopting, and sterilizing retirees. JANET WINIKOFF

It's a sunny November day at the Palm Beach Kennel Club in Florida. Several parents, toddlers in tow, sit in the grandstands alongside diehard gamblers, waiting for the next race to begin. The thrill of betting on young racing greyhounds is marketed as inexpensive family entertainment—"faster than the speed of hound," according to the track's advertisements.

The family-friendly feel continues within the clubhouse as well as around the track, where brochures promoting greyhound adoption groups are crumpled and scattered on a table next to racing forms. The Kennel Club's website explains that the facility is "very interested in the welfare" of its greyhounds. The website promotes adoption of retired dogs and cites the club's work with several placement groups.

And yet it was at this very track that, according to a WPTV news report in 1998, four dogs were hit by a truck after escaping from their kennels. In 2000, the *Palm Beach Post* reported that the bodies of three dogs had been discovered on the property of the kennel club; they had been buried by their trainer to cover up the fact they'd died from heatstroke. And in 2003, the same paper reported that another greyhound had died after being struck by the track's mechanical lure.

As the next race starts up and the dogs shoot out of their gates, another group of greyhounds isn't moving so fast. Five miles away at the Peggy Adams Animal Rescue League in West Palm Beach, Fla., four former racing dogs turned in by their trainers wait to be adopted.

A Cycle of Cruelty

Unlike the animals bred and sold as pets, greyhounds bred for racing are valued more for their potential as cash cows than as canine companions. A racing greyhound must prove his economic worth on the track—and if he doesn't, he'll often be disposed of.

"A lot of shelters don't realize that greyhounds are being bred to be discarded," says Kansas City Retired Greyhounds as Pets (KCREGAP) spokesperson Cher Oliver.

COVER IMAGE: JAMES KLOTZ/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

Owned, leased, and sold like cars, racing greyhounds begin their "careers" at approximately 18 months old. Before each race, the dogs are muzzled, weighed, displayed to the public, and then loaded into starting boxes where they howl and bark so loudly that it's easy to hear them in the grandstands. As the mechanical rabbit lure starts moving around the track, the dogs are released for the chase.

Greyhounds are typically bred at commercial puppy mills known as "farms" that can house over 500 puppies at a time. Promising racers are sold and transported to training farms, while young dogs lacking racing acumen are often killed or "culled."

"If farms in states like Florida were investigated, they'd probably find mass graves at every single one," says Greyhound Companions of New Mexico president Judy Paulsen.

The racing life isn't any more glamorous or humane. Young racers are routinely shuttled between kennel compounds and the track, spending as much as 22 hours a day in their crates, let out only to relieve themselves, train, and race. Sores, abrasions, and hair loss on the back of the legs—the results of near-constant confinement—are common.

The dogs are typically fed a diet of what's known as "4-D" raw meat, so called because it comes from animals who are dead, diseased, dying, or down (injured). The website of the Greyhound Racing Association of America claims that the 4-D diet is actually beneficial to the dogs. It argues that the meat the dogs are fed is no different than most of the meat in commercial pet food.

However, the meat that greyhounds are fed is raw. This raw 4-D meat diet is thought to cause hemolytic-uremic syndrome, a form of *e. coli* poisoning contracted through eating raw meat. The illness, which can cause renal failure, was nicknamed "Alabama Rot" after greyhounds from an Alabama track became sick. "4-D meat is used because it's cheap. … The cost of care for the dogs is always kept at a minimum," says Susan Netboy, founder of the Greyhound Protection League in Penn Valley, Calif. "I don't think rotten meat makes anyone stronger."

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During races, they occasionally injure themselves colliding at the turns, and they tend to run into each other when the lure comes to a sudden halt at the end of a race, slamming into each other or jumping over one another to avoid accidents. Dogs may receive injuries from running, but they are muzzled to prevent them from biting and mouthing each other—behavior that develops as the dogs train to compete and that the racing industry describes as "play." At most tracks with live racing, this scenario will play out every 15 minutes, about 14 times a day.

As a dog advances in his racing career, he accumulates racing grades. Dogs start out with a grade of "J." If a dog proves skillful at racing, his grade will advance, with the hope of eventually attaining an "A." However, should a dog repeatedly fail to finish in the top three, lower grades are meted out. As a dog's performance declines—due to injuries, lack of racing ability, or age—he will be moved to what are known as "low rent" tracks, which are typically found in economically depressed communities. There he will remain, until his performance declines so much that he is dropped or "graded off" from racing altogether. According to The Humane Society of the United States (HSUS), a greyhound's racing career is usually over by the time he's four years old.

The racing industry claims that the majority of these "retirees" are adopted into happy homes or sent back to the breeding farms. However, evidence from advocacy groups opposed to greyhound racing indicates that once a dog grades off, his "retirement" will more likely consist of running at a lower rent track in Mexico, being sold to medical research, or simply being killed.

Racing's Link to Pet Overpopulation

While most shelters have been working to raise public awareness of the pet overpopulation driven by pet stores, puppy mills, and backyard breeders, many fail to realize that the greyhound racing industry is also culpable. Only 13 states offer racing—but 800 greyhound breeding farms are scattered throughout 43 states. Florida, Texas, Kansas and Oklahoma rank at the top.

The National Greyhound Association (NGA), a pro-racing organization, reports 3,768 greyhound litters registered in 2006. Lack of external oversight makes it difficult to determine the accuracy of the NGA's figures—and it's impossible to determine how many litters were bred but *not* registered. But if you multiply the NGA's registered litter numbers by The HSUS's estimate of between six and 10 puppies in an average litter, the resulting figures are eye-opening: The number of greyhounds born annually likely ranges from around 22,500 to 38,000. And greyhounds are bred constantly to ensure that the betting public will always have dogs to wager on at post time.

"There are 14 tracks in Florida alone, and it takes a minimum of 1,000 dogs to keep just one facility in operation," says Christine Dorchak, co-founder of the Massachusetts anti-racing advocacy group Grey2K USA.



Animal care and control agencies usually don't perform track inspections, and only get involved in greyhound neglect and abuse cases if an insider registers a complaint. MIKE WINIKOFF

Although the racing industry wants the public to believe that the majority of retired dogs are placed quickly and easily by greyhound rescue groups, these organizations often face the same placement difficulties encountered by shelters.

"I could pick up the phone today and get 500 greyhounds," says greyhound advocate KCREGAP's Oliver. "Every state, even those where racing is illegal, is impacted. There are rescue groups in each state trying to place a glut of greyhounds."

And it's not just rescue groups that are left to care for and find homes for unwanted greyhounds. Shelters across the country are winding up with dogs surrendered by trainers and owners or turned over by private rescue groups that took in more dogs than they could handle.

Most racing greyhounds leave the track unsterilized—which means that shelters and rescue groups often bear the brunt of subsidizing greyhound spay/neuter surgeries as well. At the Peggy Adams Animal Rescue League, 39 greyhounds graded off the track were sterilized last year through the shelter's subsidized spay/neuter program.

"The track, racing industry and state make millions of dollars exploiting these dogs. They have their own veterinarians. They should be helping these animals by providing all greyhound rescue groups with a wide spectrum of services to care for, sterilize and adopt out these dogs," says executive director Joan Carlson-Radabaugh.

"A Ticking Time Bomb"

The greyhound industry has passed on more than dogs and spay/neuter costs to shelters. It may have also passed on disease problems.

In January 2004, University of Florida veterinarian and immunologist Cynda Crawford was asked to investigate the outbreak of a kennel cough-like illness that had surfaced at a Jacksonville, Fla. track. Through exams, tests and necropsies, Crawford and her team of researchers discovered that the mystery illness was actually an airborne influenza virus later named H3N8 or "canine influenza."

According to a 2005 article in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association* ("Canine Influenza Virus Surfaces," Vol. 227, No. 9), the virus is thought to have jumped from horses to dogs. While no one knows how the virus crossed species, theories include the possibility that the disease spread when dogs were exposed to infected horses; in greyhounds, this could have occurred at any of the tracks that race both species. Another theory sug-

A Model of Support

Although most shelters have no official policy regarding racing or the treatment of greyhounds, several are very clear about their position, including the Lakeland Animal Welfare Society (LAWS) in Elkhorn, Wis.

Shelters and other humane organizations have a responsibility to oppose racing even if they reside in a state where racing is illegal, says shelter manager Kristen Perry. "It's important to educate your members and let them know where you stand on issues of animal welfare," she says.

According to Perry, the LAWS anti-racing position statement was developed about five years ago to educate her shelter's community about the neighboring Geneva Lakes Racetrack, which closed its doors in 2005 due to declining revenue. LAWS continues to support anti-racing measures as explained in its position statement.



LAWS opposes greyhound racing for the following reasons:

- Some trainers, despite prohibition by law, continue to use small animals as live lures.
- Breeding practices continue to contribute heavily to the surplus population of dogs.
- Physical injuries are common occurrences during both training and actual racing.
- Weigh-in procedures sometimes carry abuses in order to maintain weight class.

gests that dogs may have contracted the virus after being fed contaminated horse meat.

H3N8 outbreaks soon became commonplace at tracks, boarding kennels, and even animal shelters. By 2006, H3N8 had been confirmed in 22 states, impacting both racing greyhounds and companion dogs with equal force. Since H3N8's discovery, some racing commissions have tried to reduce the risks of disease transmission by periodically halting the transport of greyhounds into their states. "There are over 50,000 young greyhounds now traveling the interstate circuit of 34 tracks in 13 states," says Dorchak.

While it's still unclear whether the disease spread directly from tracks to sheltering facilities, many wonder if the greyhounds taken in by shelters and rescuers across the country have brought H3N8 into shelter environments, where it affects both greyhounds and other shelter dogs. "For animal shelters and pet owners, canine influenza had become a ticking bomb. In Palm Beach County, that bomb went off..." reporter Stacey Singer wrote in a 2006 article in the *Palm Beach Post*.

That year, the Peggy Adams Animal Rescue League treated over 180 dogs for canine influenza, while Palm Beach Animal Care and Control, which takes in 26,000 animals annually, had to halt dog adoptions and euthanize symptomatic and exposed dogs in order to protect other animals countywide. Soon H3N8 had spread; in 2006, the Cheyenne Animal Shelter in Wyoming was forced to make the same decision, euthanizing 42 dogs in order to stop the spread of the disease when an outbreak occurred.

Although many veterinarians across the country supported the decision by shelters and animal care and control agencies to euthanize animals in order to curb the spread of the disease, the measure was called "irresponsible" by veterinarian and NGA consultant Brad Fenwick, who was quoted in several *Palm Beach Post* articles about the outbreaks.

In his interview with the *Post*, Fenwick indicated that, should an influenza vaccine be developed, the racing industry would oppose vaccinating its dogs. "The National Greyhound Association's fear is that an influenza vaccine would go on the market, and every racetrack and every state racing authority would force them to immunize their dogs multiple times for no value," he said.

Dianne Sauve, director of Palm Beach County Animal Care and Control, proposed a way for animal care and control agencies to help keep H3N8, Alabama Rot, streptococcal toxic shock syndrome and other diseases prevalent at racetracks at bay. In a 2006 *Palm Beach Post* article, Sauve—tactfully avoiding any implications of fault—suggested that animal care and control agencies have the authority to impose quarantines on private shelters, racetracks, or any other facility that has an outbreak.

"I'm not saying the racing industry has mishandled this. ... As far as my office is concerned, that's an unknown," Sauve said. "[But] we already monitor and perform surveillance for rabies and illnesses in commercial breeding establishments and pet stores."

Who Protects Greyhounds?

When it comes to protecting greyhounds, many animal care and control agencies fail simply because they assume some other agency is adequately monitoring greyhound welfare. Most only visit local tracks when called in by a track employee or racing official. "We would only respond if there was a cruelty complaint or neglect complaint," says Officer Kevin Earley of Brevard County Animal Care and Control, located in the same Florida community as the Melbourne Greyhound Park.

For the most part, tracks and farms are secretive about the way in which they keep and care for dogs—and they're able to be so because the racing industry is largely allowed to police itself, often overlooking or minimizing instances of abuse, neglect, and injury. But in 2005, Grey2K USA provided reports indicating that approximately 160 greyhounds are injured annually in Massachusetts, and another Grey2K report noted that over 350 dogs were injured at New Hampshire tracks that year.

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Handlers known as "leadouts" load dogs into the starting boxes before a race. JANET WINIKOFF

At some tracks, animal caretakers and even veterinarians are considered "racing officials," whose primary duty is to ensure that the dogs are in racing shape and don't test positive for performance-enhancing drugs. Most of these officials report to state racing or wagering commissions—which exist not to guarantee that racing dogs are treated well, but to ensure that gambling remains a lucrative venture for the state. In Florida, the mission of the Division of Pari-Mutuel Wagering is the "efficient, effective, and fair regulation of authorized gaming at pari-mutuel facilities."

According to the Palm Beach Kennel Club's website, the club is one of the area's largest tourist attractions, "with over 700,000 visitors annually. And PBKC is one of Florida's largest taxpayers, contributing pari-mutuel, real estate and other taxes to the state's coffers. The track also relies on area vendors for goods and services, benefiting local businesses. Over $15 million was spent in this area in 2007."

"Part of the Division's regulatory responsibility is the health, safety, and welfare of the patrons, as well as the racing animals," says Sam Farkas, deputy press secretary for the Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation (DBPR), which oversees Florida's Division of Pari-Mutuel Wagering (racing that involves monetary bets). According to Farkas, the DBPR monitors vaccination records, does kennel inspections, and analyzes the results from veterinarians who have drug-tested the dogs.

The Fox Guarding the Henhouse?

Greyhound advocates, however, point to recurring cases of dogs contracting life-threatening illnesses, testing positive for cocaine, suffering from broken bones during races, dying from heatstroke during transport, and being injured or killed by the tracks' mechanical lures. Dogs are also sometimes killed by gunshot so that owners don't have to pay a private veterinarian to euthanize them humanely. The dogs' ears are then cut off so that their ID tattoos can't be traced, and the bodies are buried.

These ongoing problems, advocates argue, demonstrate that the agencies officially in charge of overseeing animal health and welfare within the racing industry are at best ineffective at enforcing humane standards—and at worst, in the pocket of the industry itself.

"To have the pari-mutuel division take part in the investigation is like having the fox guarding the henhouse," Janet Skinner, Florida spokesperson for the Greyhound Protection League, told the *Miami Herald* in 2002. "The Division gets the bulk of its money from dog racing, so it doesn't behoove them to find something wrong."

KCREGAP's Oliver concurs, noting that few employees will risk biting the hand that feeds them. "Vets who are being paid by the industry are not going to speak out against atrocities," she said.

Farkas disagrees. "We don't feel that there's any conflict of interest," he says. Although the DBPR also regulates the veterinary profession, and Farkas acknowledges that most licensed veterinarians would never put their licenses in jeopardy of revocation, he asserts that the DBPR doesn't have any enforcement ability. "We can pull a trainer or veterinarian's license, levy fines, or call the authorities if we saw something [illegal] but ... we are only as strong as the legislature allows."

Accidents and illnesses at racing tracks are common, but many greyhounds are in trouble before they even get there, advocates say. While there are plenty of official industry regulations governing how dogs should be transported, there's almost no oversight. "I have to laugh at all the rules and regulations designed to protect the dogs while being transported," says Paulsen of Greyhound Companions of New Mexico. "Mandatory air conditioners, frequent turnouts, water availability ... everyone breaks the rules, but no one says anything about it."

Dogs regularly die in transport. In 2000, six dogs died from heatstroke while being hauled from a track in Oregon to a track in Sanford, Fla., and in 2002, several dogs died when an air conditioning system broke on a truck transporting dogs from Miami to Naples, Fla. Between 2003 and 2007, at least five accidents, involving either overturned rigs

or collisions, have taken place around the country.

When is a Dog Not a Dog?

It's hard to protect greyhounds when you can't even define them. In Kansas, where the National Greyhound Association is based, the state's Pet Animal Act statute, which provides basic protections for companion animals, excludes greyhounds from its definition of the word "dog." "Dog," the Act states, "means any animal which is wholly or in part of the species Canis familiaris but does not include any greyhound." NGA executive director Gary Guccione has put a different spin on the language, stating in an American Greyhound Council press release that the NGA considers greyhounds to be dogs, but different from the dogs bred to be pets.

Greyhound racing industry groups use the art of categorization to their own benefit in other ways, too. Not only are some of the animals defined as dogs by all standard reference books not truly dogs, but, the American Greyhound Council warns, there is also a big difference between "animal welfare" and "animal rights" groups. The council's website explains: Someone who supports "animal welfare" will "take a neutral position on greyhound racing." Only extremist animal rights activists, the site says, oppose greyhound racing—and these people will "promote misinformation about retired greyhounds to harm industry image." By describing detractors as radicals, racing proponents aim to neutralize criticisms aimed at the industry as a whole.

The racing industry and some animal protection groups battle each other openly. But the question of whether to speak out against the industry is one of the greatest schisms dividing greyhound advocacy organizations. While anti-racing groups hope their criticisms will result in change, some greyhound rescuers feel they can do more good for more animals by remaining neutral and keeping silent about the abuses inherent in racing.

Rescuers Walking the Line

According to anti-racing advocates, owners and trainers routinely coerce greyhound rescuers, threatening to refuse them access to dogs if they say anything negative about greyhound racing. "They absolutely do that," confirms KCREGAP's Oliver.

Some groups, such as Greyhound Pets of America (GPA), have policies which prohibit their representatives or volunteers from saying anything negative about racing. The organization's bylaws specifically state that "GPA is politically neutral and is neither pro nor anti-racing and is interested only in finding good homes for greyhounds." In talking to the press or TV/radio media, GPA representatives are required to "steer the conversation towards how good the dogs are as pets."





A greyhound surrendered by her trainer waits at the Peggy Adams Animal Rescue League.
JANET WINIKOFF

For More Information

The Humane Society of the United States
202-452-1100
humanesociety.org

Grey2K USA
866-247-3925
grey2kusa.org

Greyhound Protection League
800-446-8637
greyhounds.org

USA Defenders of Dogs (USADOG)
317-244-0113
usadog.org

UC Davis Koret Shelter Medicine Program
sheltermedicine.com
(For information on canine influenza)

It's only by walking that line, some advocacy groups believe, that they will be allowed to continue to rescue retired dogs. Many tracks now promote their partnerships with greyhound placement groups, and if the partnerships are uneasy, it's not apparent from the many happy photographs of rehomed greyhounds displayed on track websites.

But New Mexico advocate Paulsen says that while the threats of being barred access can be legitimate, she's never experienced a shortage of dogs. "Some of the trainers won't work with me, yet I'm perfect proof that even if you're blacklisted you can continue to get dogs," she says. "A lot of people believe the threats and decide not to do anything. There are so many people that believe the rhetoric."

Sally Allen, president of USA Defenders of Greyhounds (USADOG), a group that speaks out against racing, agrees that rescue remains possible even for groups that take a stand, since some trainers disregard blacklisting policies and hand the dogs over in secret. "I've been blacklisted since 1998 and have never had trouble getting dogs," she says.

Oliver believes that if greyhound advocates really care about dogs they need to remain resolute. "If you want to save greyhounds, why would you remain silent?" she says. "Without saying anything you're allowing suffering to continue to happen."

While greyhound rescuers have to walk a fine line in their dual desires—to help individual dogs and to see abusive industry practices come to an end—a few seem to suffer from no inner conflict at all. Rescuers are human, and they too can fall prey to the thrill-seeking drive that helps tracks stay in business. Such was the case with a Florida greyhound rescuer who brought a greyhound named Abby to the Palm Beach Kennel Club last November, hoping to spotlight her for adoption. The rescuer told track attendees that Abby had been "retired" after she'd broken her leg racing. She mentioned that Abby was her "favorite dog." And five minutes later, she sat with the dog in the grandstands as she asked her husband to place a bet on the next race.

Working Together

Most advocates, though, would not support the racing industry, and are doing all they can to form partnerships on behalf of the dogs hurt by it. But some shelters don't fully understand the issue. "The problem is that the tracks are giving out PR that says that racing is okay, and a number of the greyhound groups are afraid to speak, so shelters are hearing that there isn't any kind of a problem," KCREGAP's Oliver says.

Paulsen believes that humane agencies and greyhound groups should be working hand-in-hand on the issue. "We're working with shelters in New Mexico to teach them that if a greyhound goes into the shelter, we want to

help them," she says. "We're currently developing materials that will educate shelter employees and volunteers about greyhound racing and the special needs of dogs coming off the track."

According to Paulsen, retired racing greyhounds have issues that aren't usually mentioned in the racing industry's adoption materials. Some greyhounds can have sleep aggression or other behavior issues, and may be more prone to disease or injury as a result of inferior diets and inappropriate care. "These dogs can get injured so easily," she says. "Their immune systems are often compromised and they have very specific behavioral needs … they come from an environment that is so different from other dogs'."

On the flip side, humane agencies can teach rescue groups how to implement better adoption policies and hone their counseling skills. "When I first started out, people from shelters were supportive and helped me develop adoption applications and figure out which questions to ask," says Allen.

While some greyhound rescue groups may refrain from taking a stand against racing in order to keep acquiring retired dogs, most private humane groups aren't in such a delicate position. Yet most humane organizations haven't developed a position statement on greyhound racing. Municipal animal control agencies, which are government run, may not be able to take a position—especially if they're located in states that allow racing. But private shelters have more leeway to educate their supporters (see p. 24 for sample language).

While all advocates agree that it's important to care for and properly place the dogs coming off the track, some greyhound lovers remind us that the real issue communities need to address is how to end the inhumane "sport" of dog racing in the United States. AS

Janet Winikoff is the director of education for the Humane Society of Vero Beach and Indian River County in Vero Beach, Fla., and has worked in the field of animal protection for 15 years.



