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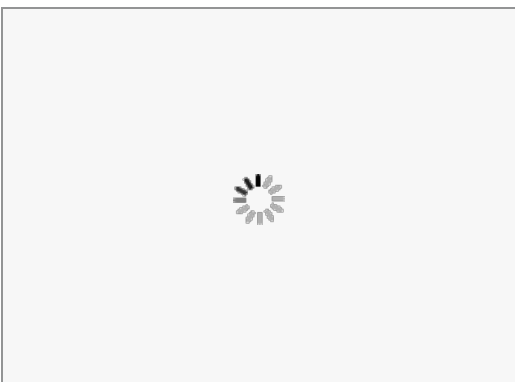
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A vanishing sport: Dog racing is running its course

Owners don't have much incentive to refurbish the aging trackside of the dog-racing business when they can put that money into the more-lucrative casinos.



BY LINDA ROBERTSON
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Barney O'Donnell wades through dozens of his dogs when he steps into their turnout pen. They surround him, jumping up to his waist and wagging their tails as he scratches ears, pats heads and shakes paws.

“What do you want? How you doing, buddy?” O'Donnell says. “Cindy, how's my Cindy?”

O'Donnell, 81, has been training sleek greyhounds to race for 55 years. It's a tough business that dirties your fingernails and burns your nerves. The barking, bathing, feeding and racing never stop. O'Donnell has acquired a crust over the years, the same way a mollusk thickens its shell. But his gruff voice turns to honey when he's talking to his dogs. “They understand curse words, you know,”

he says. “You can't swear at 'em. It hurts their feelings. They're very smart.”
It would be easier to treat the dogs as numbers, just as the few bettors do at the racetrack, where the grandstand has the feel of an abandoned relic. O'Donnell has devoted his life to greyhound racing and, now, right before his eyes, the sport is vanishing.

Only the hard-core fans remember his stars Derek's Cadillac, Yellow Printer, My Tipper, Placid Ace, Starlight Irene. Only the old-timers remember Rocking Ship, the Jesse Owens of dog racing who won 53 of 86 races and \$100,000 before he died from a snake bite in 1973.

O'Donnell goes to work at 6 a.m. seven days a week at the Florida Kennels in Hialeah yet wishes he could detach himself from his dogs and retire. There are often fewer than 100 people in stands that used to hold 8,000, 10,000, 14,750 on one record night.

Dog racing has been in decline for 20 years. In Florida, where 16 tracks survive, the handle, or amount wagered, on racing has dropped from about \$620 million to \$300 million in 10 years. Pari-mutuel wagering on dog racing, horse racing and jai alai has fallen 44 percent in the past 10 years, from \$1.7 billion to \$958.5 million, and state tax revenues have fallen by 55 percent as a result. The handle at Miami's Flagler dog track was \$25 million last year.

But patrons wagered \$68 million on the 734 slot machines in the adjoining Magic City Casino. The cardroom grossed an additional \$5.1 million.

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“Live racing is a money-loser,” said Juan Fra, Magic City’s general manager. He’s spent his entire career in the business, starting as a 15-year-old leadout who walked the dogs through the post parade to the starting line. “I feel bad for the people on the greyhound side. Like fishermen, it’s what they know. But you’ve got to adapt. Luckily, I love poker.”

At the intersection of Flagler Street and Douglas Road, giant neon signs shimmer with the name “Magic City Casino.” There’s no mention of dog racing at what used to be known as “Fabulous Flagler.”

When you enter the casino, it’s not easy to find the dog track. The people who do can choose from thousands of empty seats.

The song *Who Let the Dogs Out?* plays on the loudspeakers. An announcer gives handicapping information but those at the Tres Hermanos bar aren’t listening. A race begins when the start box lids flip open and eight greyhounds bound out, angle toward the rail and chase the mechanical rabbit around the track. They run with long, lunging strides. As they charge into the homestretch, a spectator shouts out. “Come on, number four!” Letsgroovetonite, who avoided the bumping in the first turn, holds on for first in 30.99 seconds.

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