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animal advocates imperil greyhound industry

by *Amy B Wang* - Jun. 21, 2009 12:00 AM
The Arizona Republic

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For Gene and Karen Hand, greyhound racing is a family affair. The couple fly in from Nebraska to catch the races at Phoenix Greyhound Park, where one of their dogs - Priceless Az Mo - competes.

On this trip, they've brought their 5-year-old grandson, Kaiden.

"You know, this is a nice crowd tonight," Gene said on a recent Saturday night. Behind him, rows of empty blue plastic chairs stood empty.

Attendance at Phoenix Greyhound Park - the only dog track that remains in the Phoenix metro area - dropped 14 percent last year alone and has declined 56 percent since 1998, according to its annual reports.

The track is facing a number of challenges, including a slumping economy and competition from casinos have led to smaller crowds. And animal-advocacy groups have increased pressure on lawmakers to close parks down.

Officials with GREY2K USA, a Massachusetts-based greyhound-rescue group, say they have pushed for legislation to close 14 racetracks across several other states since 2004.

They have set Phoenix Greyhound Park in their sights. The group recently released a report, based on public records, detailing injuries that have occurred at the track.



Michael Chow/The Arizona Republic

Tiny Tidbit (center) leads CW's Triple Play to win the first race on Monday at Phoenix Greyhound Park. The park's attendance has declined 56 percent since 1998, according to its annual reports.

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By the numbers

- 451:** The number of dog injuries reported at Phoenix Greyhound Park in 2008.
- 25:** The number of dogs injured seriously enough to be put to death.
- 14 percent:** The decline in attendance at the track last year.
- 56 percent:** The decline in attendance at the track since 1998.
- 17 percent:** The decline in the park's pari-mutuel revenue last year.
- 53 percent:** The decline in the park's pari-mutuel revenue since 1998.

Sources: Arizona Department of Racing, GREY2K USA.

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In 2008, there were 451 reported injuries at the Phoenix track, according to the group's report. The injuries ranged from minor sprains to career-ending wounds, such as a broken leg. Twenty-five dogs died or were put to death because of their injuries.

"This is the highest we've seen at a single track," said Christine Dorchak, president of GREY2K USA. "We feel that the records speak for themselves."

Phoenix Greyhound Park general manager Dan Luciano insists that greyhound racing is a highly regulated industry and that groups such as GREY2K USA are blowing the records out of proportion.

He said the injuries in the group's report represent about 1 percent of the total number of race starts for a calendar year.

"Animals get hurt," he said. "Athletes get hurt. Greyhounds are athletes."

He said the track performs daily maintenance to minimize the chances of injury to the dogs.

For Dorchak, that's not good enough. She said that dogs are dying in the name of entertainment and profit. Dorchak hopes her group can get a measure on next year's ballot to phase out greyhound racing in Arizona.

An industry in decline

On a recent Tuesday - easily the park's slowest day, according to assistant general manager Dennis Young - the handful of people there were mostly clustered at tables away from the track, watching a Diamondbacks game on TV.

The problem isn't just local.

Membership with the National Greyhound Association, which includes owners and trainers, went from a peak of 7,052 in 1989 to 1,851 as of this month.

Aaron Dubrouillet, a trainer with the local Brian Werner kennel, said the industry garnered an unflattering reputation in the 1990s.

"We didn't police ourselves very well, and there were some bad characters out there," he said. "They basically did whatever they wanted to do to dogs. One apple can ruin a bunch. That's kind of what this industry fell into."

As attendance dropped, so did revenue. In 2008, Phoenix Greyhound Park's annual pari-mutuel revenue - the amount of total bets wagered on all live and simulcast races at the complex - fell by nearly 17 percent, to about \$46.4 million. Just 10 years ago, in 1998, it was nearly \$100 million.

Improving racing

Recognizing horse and greyhound racing might suffer with the growth of casinos, the state Legislature gave the industry a tax break in 1995. Because of that, Phoenix Greyhound Park has paid no taxes on their pari-mutuel wages for the past four years, according to the Arizona Department of Racing.

This is particularly frustrating as the state faces a budget crisis, said Joan Eiding, the Phoenix-based editor of "Greyhound Network News," a newsletter that advocates for better greyhound treatment.

"We're closing schools," Eiding said. "Teachers are being laid off, medical personnel are being laid off, and the tracks aren't paying taxes. Why? It's crazy."

Luciano said the park channels revenue to the state in other ways.



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"We provide jobs, we provide taxes - payroll taxes, property taxes," he said. "We're a business in Arizona. I don't know that we want to eliminate businesses."

Track executives are again turning to the Legislature for help.

This time, they want to bring slots and video gambling to the building to turn the park into a "racino" and attract more people.

Dubrouillet said it was unfortunate that people no longer take the time to go through programs, study the race records, track certain dogs and then place bets, as they used to in greyhound racing's heyday.

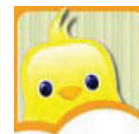
"You've gotta put some effort into it, and people are a little bit lazy," he said. "But for the thrill of it, I believe you get a lot more bang for your buck. It's exciting, whereas pulling a handle and seeing if you get three cherries . . . to me, that doesn't do it."

For the Hands, greyhound racing has never been about the gambling but about "the appreciation of the animals," Gene Hand said. As they prepared to leave the track, their grandson stuck his arm out.

"Look!" Kaiden shouted. He didn't point to the eight greyhounds thundering by but to the handheld electronic Yahtzee game he had been playing through several races.

He had a high score of 352. "Beat my record, Poppa!"

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