



Track closures reflect an industry in decline.

by Jeff White

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The closure of the Canidrome in Macau two years ago seemed to herald the irreversible decline of greyhound racing worldwide. Track closures in several other countries have confirmed this trend.



USA

The most significant track shutdowns of all are in Florida, where the

November 2018 state referendum to ban dog racing was supported by 69% of the state's voters. For almost a century in America, Florida has been synonymous with greyhound racing. At the time of the referendum it was home to 11 of the 17 race tracks remaining in the United States. That's 65% of the country's entire dog racing industry. As of this writing, at least six have closed their doors, and the other five will be gone by the end of this year.

In a surprise move last October, Southland Casino Racing of West Memphis, Arkansas, announced it would be phasing out live greyhound racing by the end of 2022, to concentrate on its much more profitable casino business. It's the last remaining track in Arkansas.

Of the five other U.S. tracks still operating, two are in West Virginia, where a recent public opinion poll showed more than 80% of residents oppose greyhound racing and public subsidies to the industry. Nevertheless, the state legislature defeated a bill in February this year that would have ended a \$17 million subsidy to greyhound racing, effectively putting it out of business. Another attempt to pass a similar measure will be made in 2021.

The one remaining track in Iowa state is headed for a major financial crisis after 2022, when the current annual subsidy of \$4.6 million in casino profits ends. The track's general manager has also pointed to a potential shortage of dogs available for racing, as the industry continues to shrink and breeders turn their attention to more attractive pursuits besides churning out greyhounds.

In Alabama, Birmingham Race Course holds live races 5 days a week, but gets more revenue from gambling machines and betting on simulcast races from other tracks. The executive director of the Birmingham Racing Commission once described the track as being in "survival mode"—and that was before Florida and Arkansas pulled the plug.

In Texas, Gulf Greyhound Park actually shut down for two years, 2016 and 2017, but was brought back, zombie-like and on life support, in 2018, with only 36 race meetings a year. Gulf is also a notoriously dangerous track, with a high injury and death rate. The Alabama and Texas tracks are unlikely to have live greyhound racing after 2022.



IRELAND

Greyhound racing in the Republic of Ireland, which has been in steady economic decline for many years, had a particularly bad year in 2019. The first ominous sign was in January, when the Irish Greyhound Board (IGB) retained Indecon Economic Consultants to undertake a “comprehensive strategic review” of the economic viability of the Republic’s 16 dog tracks, 10 of which were fully owned and/or controlled by the Board. The remainder were privately owned and operated.

While that study was underway, the state public broadcaster, known as RTÉ, was preparing an investigative report for television on the widespread and routine cruelty of Irish

greyhound racing. When it was broadcast in June, “Running For Their Lives” caused a sensation in the country. Among other things, it showed that almost 6,000 greyhounds were killed by the industry every year from 2013 to 2015. Politicians and media commentators called for the defunding or outright banning of the industry, which is heavily subsidized by the state government. Anti-racing demonstrations were held weekly outside several of the track stadiums for the rest of the year. Several major corporate sponsors withdrew their support of the industry. Tourism Ireland stopped promoting greyhound racing to tourists.

On August 8, the Duffy family who owned the struggling Lifford Greyhound Stadium in County Donegal announced that they would be closing their doors permanently on August 17, due to the loss of funding from the IGB, after 60 years of operation.

On August 9 the management of Longford Greyhound Stadium also announced that they would be closing down for financial reasons at the end of the month, after 80 years of operation. A “fundraising committee” was established by the

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Source: <https://www.scmp.com/sport/article/2171515/only-one-10-macau-greyhounds-adopted-while-rest-still-languishing-closed>

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local dog racing community and fans, which raised €34,000 to pay for necessary work on fire safety and electrical upgrades at the stadium, and the owners were able to reopen for racing late in September. However, the Covid-19 crisis pushed the track over the edge, and it closed forever on March 23, 2020.

The Indecon report, commissioned in January, was released in early December. It found that track attendances overall had fallen by 55% between 2008 and 2018, and even further since then. It recommended that the IGB cease funding the operations of three privately-owned tracks, for lack of long-term sustainability: Enniscorthy in County Wexford, as well as the already-closed Lifford and now-closed Longford stadiums. The report also recommended the outright closure of the IGB-owned Youghal Stadium in County Cork.

The IGB promptly accepted the recommendations. It is doubtful that Enniscorthy will be able to survive without IGB subsidies. Indecon also said that if the industry continues its current trajectory of decline, a further three stadiums would have to be de-funded or closed outright.

A Cork radio station ran an online poll in December, which showed 86% support for ending public subsidies to greyhound racing. A country-wide opinion poll in September had already shown 66% opposition to continued public subsidies to the industry.

To round off the Irish *annus horribilis* in December, the company that owned the Limerick racetrack filed for voluntary liquidation. Racing continues, but the liquidator is looking for a new owner.



UNITED KINGDOM

The U.K. has 21 greyhound tracks, but its oldest one, Belle Vue Stadium in Manchester, which opened in 1926, is now marked for demolition. Its current owner, Crown Oil Pension Fund, obtained planning permission last December to build 247 new houses and apartments on the 11.9-acre site, including 35 “affordable” housing units. The Stadium is currently leased to Arena Racing Company, and racing is continuing for the time being. No date has yet been set for the termination of racing.

Belle Vue follows the fate of another old greyhound stadium, Hall Green in Birmingham, which closed in July 2017 to make way for the construction of 210 housing units, and Mildenhall Stadium, which closed in January 2018 for financial reasons.



AUSTRALIA

On June 29, 2019, the greyhound track at Port Augusta, South Australia, held its final race meeting, after over 40 years of operation. Dwindling numbers of dogs being entered for racing was cited as the main reason for the track’s lack of economic viability.

Among the handful of countries that still have commercial greyhound racing industries, Australia is probably the one where the industry remains relatively strongest. The robust gambling industry (which constitutes the financial bedrock of any racing industry in the world) and the strong political and financial support by state governments keep Australia’s greyhounds running for their lives, despite growing public opposition. Even in the face of canine and human disease epidemics, the industry insists on carrying on business.

Waiting for racetracks to close for financial reasons (as in Ireland) is not an adequate perspective for ending the cruel practice of commercial greyhound racing in the near term. As the Florida experience has shown, education, mobilizing public opinion, and putting pressure on governments and political parties are more promising routes to that goal.

