

FORT MYERS FLORIDA WEEKLY®

IN THE KNOW. IN THE NOW.

WEEK OF FEBRUARY 27-MARCH 5, 2019

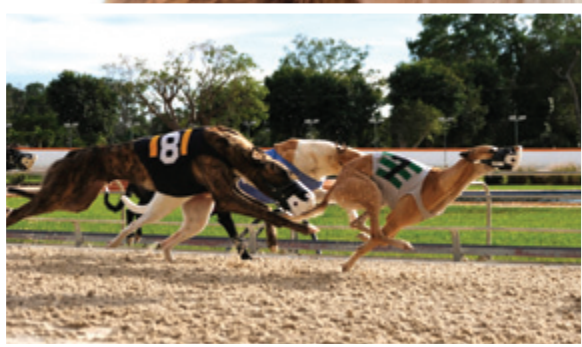
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INSIDE: How to adopt a greyhound. **A13 ▶**

Where will they go?

▼ Greyhounds run at the Naples-Fort Myers Greyhound Track in Bonita Springs, which plans to end racing on May 3, 2020. The dogs' futures are in question.



Greyhound races in Florida must stop by the end of next year. Thousands of dogs will need homes. Their fates lie with the industry and nonprofits.

BY EVAN WILLIAMS

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IT'S IN ITS FINAL LAP, BUT GREYHOUND racing is not over yet in Florida. That won't happen until races must legally stop at the end of 2020, as approved by voters last year under Amendment 13. Between now and then, and with a potential flood of dogs available starting on Jan. 1, 2021, thousands

SEE WHERE, **A12 ▶**

Calls for action seen in survey results on climate change

SPECIAL TO FLORIDA WEEKLY

As hurricanes, floods and wildfires have increased in number and intensity over the past decade, attitudes around the U.S. have been changing, including in Southwest Florida, where survey results show support for local action and solutions in response to the changing climate.

"Hurricane Irma was a wake-up call for Southwest Florida," said Rob Moher, presi-

dent and CEO of the Conservancy of Southwest Florida, in response to the results of the first survey measuring Southwest Florida residents' views on changing climate. "As a result, we wanted to evaluate Southwest Floridians' interest in working toward solutions to make our communities more resilient from intense storms and flooding."

SEE CLIMATE, **A23 ▶**



COURTESY PHOTO

Green algae bloomed last summer.

INSIDE



Fun on the water

Love boating? Enjoy this guide which details all things that are more fun on the water.

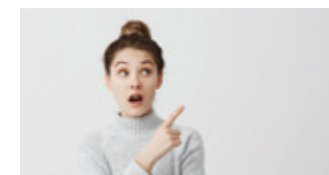
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Networking

Guadalupe Center's signature fundraiser, "Old Hollywood."

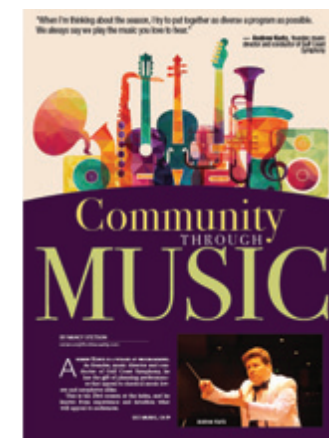
A43 ▶



Business

Debate about raising the minimum wage has grown louder in Florida.

A36 ▶



A&E

A look at Gulf Coast Symphony's season, with comments from the maestro.

C1 ▶

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KEEPING YOU CONNECTED.



WHERE

From page 1

of dogs will need homes as Florida tracks phase out racing.

Amendment 13 specified no plan for finding dogs homes as the sport ends. And the Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation, although charged with overseeing the dogs' safety while they are still racing, is providing little if any oversight on their post-racing life.

That leaves the fate of greyhound racers almost entirely to the industry and its partners, including dog breeders, dog owners and kennel operators, who must work with nonprofit adoption groups to find homes for the greyhounds — although Amendment 13 passed on arguments that the industry and its partners often mistreated or failed to protect greyhounds. (The track owners themselves support adoption groups but otherwise don't oversee finding homes for the dogs.)

Pro-racing advocates argue that those reports were grossly exaggerated and that most racing dogs had a good life, typically from their early years on a farm to a one-to-three year racing career and finally to a long, lazy post-racing life with an adoptive family.

Industry professionals say there may be 3,500 to 7,000 racing greyhounds at Florida kennels at the seven of 11 tracks that still hold live races. It's virtually impossible to know how many dogs are still racing in the state since only kennel operators know how many dogs they have. The number of dogs in Florida also shifts depending on the season.

It's a business

There were 11 tracks holding live dog races in Florida in recent years, making it the unofficial U.S. capital of greyhound racing, with only seven tracks holding races in five other states — West Virginia, Arkansas, Iowa, Texas and Alabama. Florida was the first state to make greyhound racing legal and taxable in 1931.

As it stands now, four Florida tracks have stopped races already. Two more plan to stop next year, and another five plan to keep holding races until the end of 2020. Adoption groups and track operators assured Florida Weekly there will not be a problem finding homes for these dogs, known for being calm couch-potatoes who are easy to care for, sociable, and yes, even sweet smelling. Many of the top-performing dogs are also expected to be hauled to kennels at race tracks in other states. Some may be sent back to breeding farms.

Right now adoption groups are having no problem finding a home for greyhounds. But some animal advocates are concerned about this scenario: what will happen when a track closes and there are suddenly hundreds or thousands of dogs remaining in kennels? They could need costly care at the kennel operators' or dog owners' expense each day while waiting to be adopted, even though there is no longer any income from gambling to offset that cost.

"When the kennel owners aren't making any money on the dogs anymore, they aren't going to want to continue to pay rent on the kennels," said Karen Feldman, a veteran reporter and editor who wrote extensively about the greyhound industry and animal welfare and is now a restaurant reviewer at Florida Weekly. "Many won't be able to get bookings at the few remaining tracks. So what happens then?"

The Naples-Fort Myers Greyhound Track plans to end racing on May 3, 2020. The program lists eight kennels there; it's not uncommon for a kennel to have 50 or more dogs.

It is expected that on Jan. 1, 2021, five Florida tracks will have just stopped races, all about the same time. Amendment 13 sponsor Grey2K estimates there are around 500 to 1,000 dogs per track.



COURTESY PHOTOS
Felda resident June Kennedy and her retired racer, Honey, at Square 1 Burgers & Bar in Fort Myers. Right: Mary Anne Grzybowski is president of the nonprofit Greyhound Pet Adoptions, Florida Southeast Inc. In addition to being fast, greyhounds are known for being laid-back couch potatoes.

Even if the dogs are well loved, they are also a business concern. Will some dogs be euthanized if dog owners or kennel operators are forced to pay the full bill to take care of them if they wait month after month while the dogs are awaiting placement?

"That's the worst-case scenario," said Sharon Dippel, who runs GST's Sun State Greyhound Adoption, the official adoption group for the Naples-Fort Myers track. "I don't foresee that happening."

The business structure of greyhound racing is set up like this: track owners rent space to the kennel owners, each of whom operates a kennel at the track. Some kennel operators own dogs themselves. Or, they might lease their dogs from people who invest in dogs and place them with the kennel operators to race them.

When the dogs are done racing, it is up to each owner to decide their fate. They are put up for adoption or sent to become breeders (only the top racers qualify). In some cases they have been euthanized or taken in as family pets.

"You've got family kennels," Ms. Dippel said. "This is their business. Can they keep their doors open months at a time without getting income? The reality is, no, they probably can't."

Ms. Dippel and other supporters have a plan to make sure that all the racing greyhounds are taken care of. They are starting a nonprofit called Florida Track Adoption Network to support that influx of dogs as they await adoption.



She calls on track owners, adoption groups, kennel operators, Florida businesses and the public to work together to protect and find homes for the dogs.

"This charity will be the place where the public can donate funds for track closures," she said. "And it will only use that money for track closures."

One snag: the charity has applied for 501(c) (3) status but was delayed because of the government shutdown. She's not sure how long it will take the government to process the paperwork. Ms. Dippel roughly estimates it could take about \$2 million in donations to fund care for Florida's greyhounds and their placement.

The money will help fund care for the waiting dogs, the cost of hauling dogs and adoption groups that work individually with each track to place the dogs, although they must be entirely pro-racing organizations, Ms. Dippel said. Complicating the adoption process, the fight over Amendment 13 widened a bitter divide between anti- and pro-racing adoption groups. Those against greyhound racing have been blacklisted by pro-racing and industry organizations. The National Greyhound Association and the Florida

greyhound association did not respond to repeated quests for comment.

Ms. Dippel points out that there are more than 100 pro-racing adoption groups that the charity would approve to help, along with a limited number of greyhound haulers whose trucks hold 30 to 36 dogs a piece.

"The problem is going to be not with closure, but when all five tracks close at one time," she said, at the end of 2020. "There's got to be a plan in place and it's got to be well thought out."

Who is in charge?

State regulators who oversee greyhound racing did not respond to repeated questions from Florida Weekly about the state's plan to oversee the final months of greyhound racing. The Florida Department of Business and Professional Regulation's Division of Pari-Mutuel Racing, the agency charged with protecting the dogs, has no plans to ensure the dogs' safety when they are done racing.

"DBPR does not track the number of racing dogs in the state of Florida," wrote the DBPR's Jonathan Burns in response to Florida Weekly questions. "I encourage you to reach out to some of the private racing facilities and rescue organizations to learn about plans those communities may have for transitioning racing dogs over the coming months."

The DBPR did not respond to questions asking what that oversight entails and if the state has a plan in place to make sure the dogs find homes other than to say that "the DBPR's regulatory authority and efforts will continue unchanged."

State statute reads: "The division shall supervise and regulate the welfare of racing animals at pari-mutuel facilities."

Track owners and other adoption groups assured Florida Weekly that each dog will find a home.

"When greyhound racing winds down, we assure you we will find homes for every greyhound," wrote Theresa Hume, a spokesperson for the Palm Beach Kennel Club.

Isadore "Izzy" Havenick, vice president of political affairs for the Hecht family, owners of the Naples-Fort Myers track, said he is as concerned as ever for the dogs' well-being but believes dog owners and ultimately adoption agencies will find homes for the dogs.

"It's always a concern, but we trust the people who work with us," he said. "We trust the adoption agencies and we're going to do everything we can to make sure that we protect our assets."

It is up to each dog's owner what will happen to it.

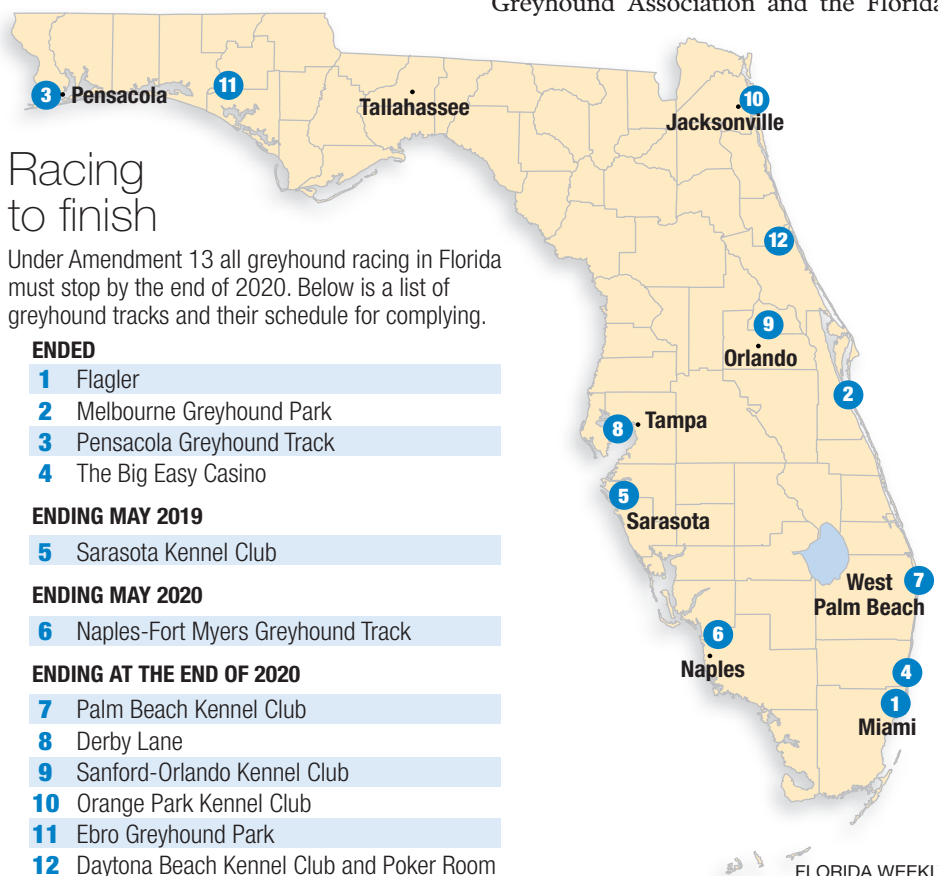
"I know the tracks are working collectively to help, but what an owner does with their dogs is — you'd have to ask the owners," Mr. Havenick said. "We all fund adoption agencies, provide adoption agencies at our facilities. But it's their property. They can do whatever they want."

As for the Hecht family's own property, the Naples-Fort Myers Track in Bonita, built in 1957, is slated to be demolished, and a smaller one that includes a poker room, simulcast center and restaurant constructed in its place.

"In all honesty (the greyhound racing) business was on a very downward slide," said the track's general manager, Juan Fra. "Of course we are saddened by the loss. Some of our employees are going to lose their jobs, and some of our long-time dog men. But we have to move on and keep the business going."

Greyhound breeders, owners and kennel operators, some whom have been in business for generations, stand to lose the most from the end of the sport. But for some Florida race track owners, who have seen revenue from greyhound races decline drastically from a peak in the 1990s and had been forced by state law to hold the dog races if they wanted to also offer other forms of gambling, the new rules may even ultimately help business.

State records show betting handles on





EVAN WILLIAMS / FLORIDA WEEKLY

Dogs are lined up for a race at the Naples-Fort Myers Greyhound Track. Adoption groups plan to work with dog owners and other industry professionals to find homes for greyhounds as racing is phased out.

live greyhound races at Florida tracks declined from \$196.4 million in fiscal year 2005-06 to \$77.5 million in 2017-18.

"Before the amendment even passed, dog racing in Miami was losing a ton of money so we wanted to do something different," said Mr. Havenick, whose family also owns Flagler Dog Track & Entertainment in Miami. "... Racing had a following and as there got to be more and more entertainment options around the state from professional sports to cable to TV to the lottery, business at the track started dwindling."

Adoption groups, both those for and against ending greyhound racing, said the dogs are popular pets and they don't expect to have trouble finding them good homes.

No dogs will be euthanized, insisted Port St. Lucie resident Mary Anne Grzybowski, a retired bookkeeper and volunteer president of the nonprofit Greyhound Pet Adoptions, Florida Southeast Inc. She opposed Amendment 13.

"That's not going to happen," she said. "We will do what is necessary when Palm Beach Kennel Club closes to rehome these greyhounds. The top greyhounds will go to different states where the tracks are. The pro-racing community has programs already. We're working on things already to make sure all of these dogs find homes."

These days, she is even struggling to keep up with demand for greyhounds.

"In 2017 we adopted out 118 racers," she said. "We've already adopted out at least 30 this year. We are averaging three a week going home. If we could get enough doctors' appointments, enough vet appointments in a week, it would be higher than that."

Sonia Stratemann of Elite Greyhound Adoptions of South Florida, based in West Palm Beach, was an outspoken advocate for 13. She also says the dogs are popular and won't have trouble finding homes, even if organizations like hers are black-listed by the National Greyhound Association for their support of ending greyhound racing.

"There are groups begging for dogs," she said.

The end of greyhound racing will affect dogs still in Florida and puppies that are being brought up to race in other states.

"There were breeding farms in Kansas, Oklahoma and Texas that fed dogs to Florida," Ms. Stratemann explained. "So it didn't just affect Florida. All the breeding dogs, the puppies that just won't make it in to racing, they're all going in to rescues now and have been since before the amendment passed."

A day at the track

Even on a recent, relatively busy Friday afternoon at the Naples-Fort Myers Greyhound Track — a result of "Dollar Day" — the three-story building's grandstands soaring over the track were at least half empty. It must have really been something, once.

Naples residents and retirees Neil and JoAnn VanDyke enjoyed races with their friends and the \$1 hot dogs. Ms. VanDyke made some bets and ended the day \$45 ahead.

"It was a fun, good day," she said. "Most of them I played to show. A couple I played to win and just lucked out. It's sad they're going to close it. I'm going to miss it."

Most of the action was taking place at simulcast screens inside the facility, some

customers watching anxiously at races being broadcast from elsewhere in the state or country, hands folded. Another room was full of card players.

The crowd skewed older and silver haired, lining up for hot dogs and popcorn, as well as beer and liquor. The greyhounds raced that Friday as they have in the Sunshine State since even before 1931, when lawmakers made Florida the first state to legalize and tax the sport.

The dogs yelped excitedly as they waited in gates on their mark and kicked up track sand in chase of the ever unattainable "rabbit" at speeds upwards of 40 mph. FF Rockstar Rita netted a Florida Weekly reporter 10 cents on a \$2 bet (though in all, the paper lost \$10 that day).

One former racer who stood with spectators was held on a leash that read "retired not rescued," a reference to the pro-racing stance that these dogs have a good life at the track.

Felda resident June Kennedy, a rural letter carrier, owns two racing greyhounds. She also owns one retired racer, Kiowa Kay Study, or Honey.

Greyhounds are typically born and bred on farms in and outside Florida to race, said Ms. Kennedy, who recalled visiting her great aunt and uncle's greyhound farm in Indiantown, which they sold in the 1980s. The dogs begin training at a year old and may be placed at a track around age 18 to 20 months, though some greyhounds who show no predisposition to chase a lure will be adopted as pets early. Their careers as racers typically last one to three years before they are retired and put up for adoption, and they live to be 12 to 15 years old.

"They are happy dogs," Ms. Kennedy said. "If you see them at the end of a race

they are just lit up with excitement. They do not know if they won or lost. They just know they chased (the mechanical rabbit) around the track and it went in to the wall and they want to know where it went."

Advocates for Amendment 13 to end greyhound racing, which 69 percent of Florida voters approved in 2018, say racing greyhounds have a low quality of life, much of their time spent in kennels. A 2015 report by American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and Grey2K found that since 2008 over 3,000 broken legs have been documented among greyhounds, along with other reported injuries from racing included fractured skulls, broken necks, and electrocutions. It found that about one racing greyhound dies every three days in Florida.

But pro-racing advocates say citing those numbers are a scare tactic and argue that the general pet population has a higher instance of injury and death than greyhounds. ■

in the know



How to adopt

GST's Sun State Greyhound Adoption is the official adoption group for the Naples-Fort Myers Greyhound Track and works to place dogs on the east and west coast of Florida, though there are many excellent groups in Florida that adopt out greyhounds.

For Sun State and most groups there is a typical adoption fee of \$250, which includes spay or neuter, up to date shots, teeth cleaning, heartworm check, microchip, martingale collar, leash and muzzle.

Facts about greyhounds: They are calm, odor free, indoor dogs that don't require a lot of exercise. They are quiet and spend most of the time sleeping. They are happy to follow you around the house and love to go on car rides. They live to age 12 to 15, barring illness. They have thin skin, no undercoat and little body fat so need protection from heat and cold. They are inside dogs. They are meant to be skinny. They are sensitive and can become nervous or unhappy if there is tension in the home. They have gentle, loving personalities.

Adoption requirements: an application. Sun State checks for ownership, or to gain approval from landlords or condo associations. A home visit is required. Must live in Florida.

For west coast adoptions, call Sharon Dippel at 813-263-3427.

You may also reach Ms. Dippel if you are interested in supporting Florida Track Adoption Network to help place greyhounds as racing ends at this above number or at sunstategreyhounds@gmail.com

For east coast adoptions, call Crystal at 503-756-4285.

Adopting a greyhound: Karen's experience

BY EVAN WILLIAMS
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The breed is known not just for its high-speed racing but also as loveable and often lazy pets. Owners attest that they like getting out for a quick run but also enjoy leading a very chill life.

"We say that they go 45 miles an hour for a minute and the rest of the time they're on the couch," said Karen Feldman, who owns two greyhounds, 12-year-old Lonestar and 7-year-old Fireball, both male. "They are the quintessential couch potato. You don't need a lot of space or time to exercise them. What you need is a big bed and a big couch."

Ms. Feldman has been adopting greyhounds since 1989.

In all, she finds them easy to care for. They're calm, don't shed much — and are even known for smelling good and not getting that typical "dog" smell. She remembered rolling her eyes when an adoption agency once told her that years ago, but she found it to be true.

Their teeth can get grungy and they like to kiss, she said, so keep their mouth clean. And don't let them off the leash outside of a dog park or your property or they might enjoy a chase.

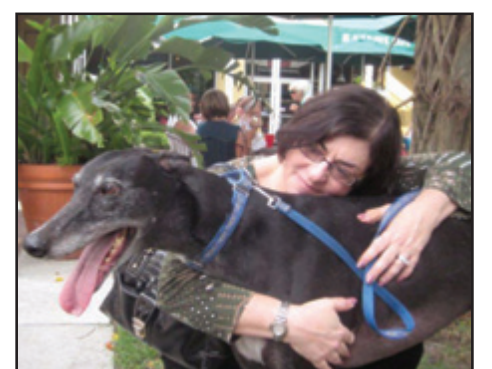
"If they see a squirrel you cannot catch them," she said.

Ms. Feldman lives with cats, who get along fine with her greyhounds. It is,

however, a good idea to introduce your cat and check out the dog's expression: "Do they get the sushi look?" she asked. "... Does it look like they want to eat that thing?"

She found that greyhounds tend not to make good guard dogs and bark rarely, though may appear intimidating to some; and that former racers may have minor quirks when it comes to getting used to a house instead of a kennel. For instance, they often don't know how to climb stairs and might run in to a clear glass door.

"They're super sweet," Ms. Feldman said. "There are some who are a little bit shy at first. All of mine have been like politicians. They'll work the crowd anywhere they go." ■



STEPHANIE DAVIS / COURTESY PHOTO
Karen Feldman embraces her beloved late greyhound, Blaze, at the Bell Tower Shops. He enjoyed going to PetSmart each Sunday and doing zoomies on the bed.