

BELOW THE FOLD

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Politicians lining up for Rubio's seat

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Seeking a new track



With racing's decline, dog parks suggested as site for Rays

Greyhounds race to take the lead Wednesday at Derby Lane. Richard Winning, below, incoming president, says he would consider the track as a location for a new Rays stadium. LANCE ROTHSTEIN/STAFF



Richard Winning says Derby Lane faces challenges as the popularity of dog racing wanes, and he is looking for new products.

BY STEVEN GIRARDI
Tribune staff

ST. PETERSBURG — Sitting on the Pinellas County side of the Gandy Bridge, with 130 acres and plenty of parking, the Derby Lane greyhound track just might be an ideal spot for a new baseball stadium the Tampa Bay Rays are seeking.

At least that's what Richard Winning, incoming president of the family-owned track, said he has read in newspaper stories on a few occasions. And he said he might agree — should anyone actually ask him.

"We're always open to talk. But nobody's talking," Winning



STAFF

said last week as he relaxed in his office overlooking the race track. "The Rays aren't talking to anybody."

Derby Lane is marking its 90th

anniversary this year, making it the world's oldest continuously operating greyhound racing track.

But as it does, the dog racing industry has declined dramatically, and even Derby Lane, often considered the premier dog track in the country, is looking for other sources of entertainment and income.

Like other Florida tracks, Derby Lane is running poker games and simulcasting races from other locations to keep going. So when someone mentions baseball, Winning is ready to listen.

"Why not?" he said, grinning.

There is ample space for the

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Lieutenant governor may

Politicians lining

GORDON CHEVROLET'S
Month-end Sale

Derby

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dog track and a stadium, he said, noting the downtown St. Petersburg site the Rays considered a couple of years ago was only 15 acres.

"We're still looking for a new product," Winning said. "What product, I don't know."

St. Petersburg City Councilman Karl Nurse mentioned the stadium possibility most recently during a council work session in May on the future of the Rays at Tropicana Field, though he said this past week he had no specific insight on it.

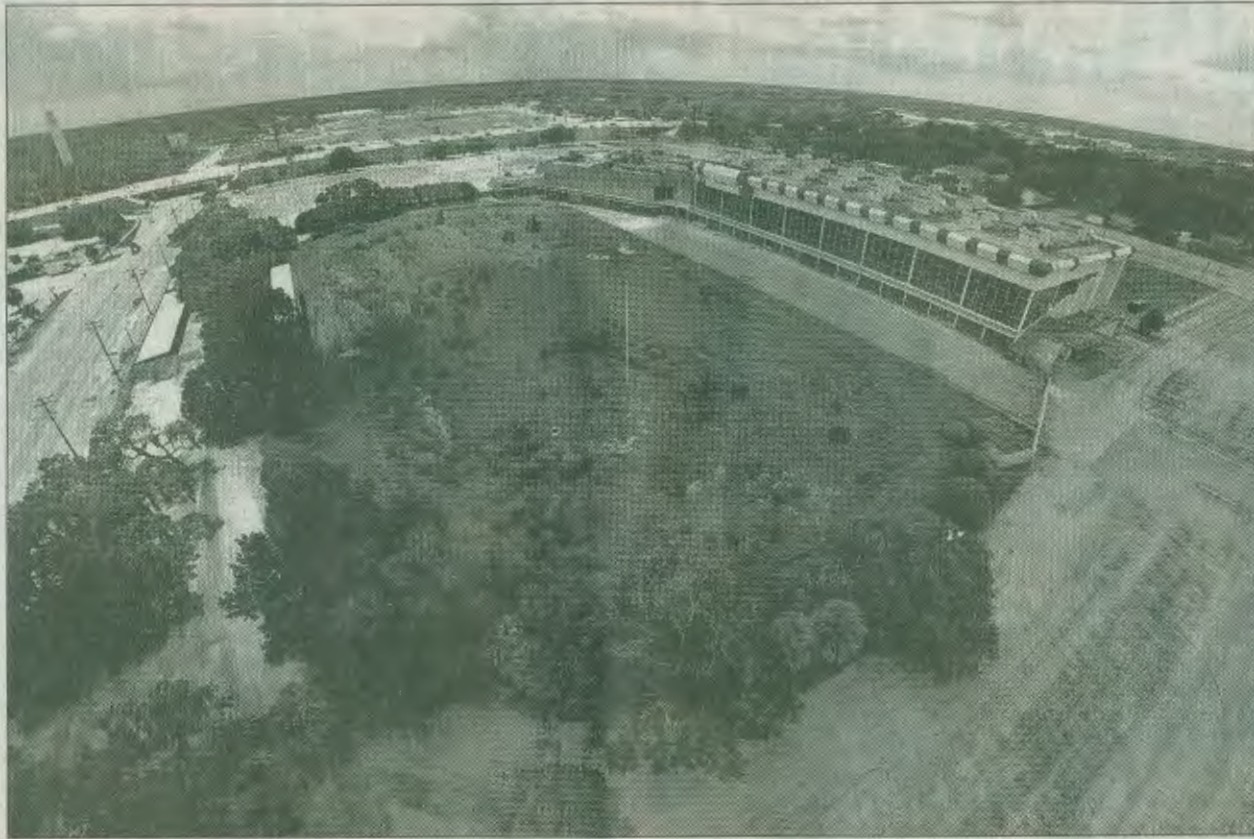
"I had been told they would be open to talking about this," Nurse said. "You don't have to be a rocket scientist to see dog racing in Florida only exists because of the money they make on cards."

And, he said, as potential stadium sites go, the closer you get to a bridge the better to attract fans from Hillsborough and Pinellas counties.



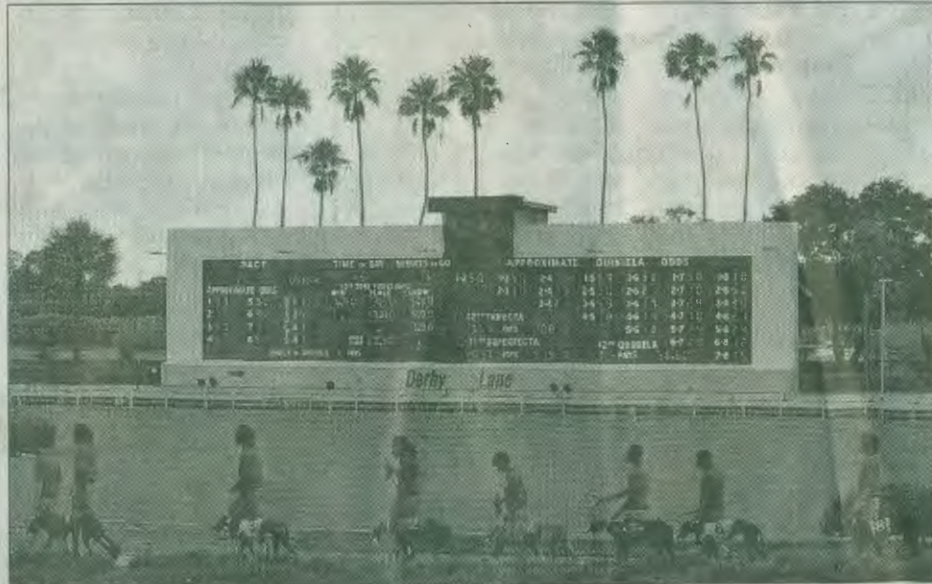
Derby Lane isn't the only dog track that has been floated as a potential stadium site.

Hillsborough County Commissioner Victor Crist has been pushing the Tampa Greyhound Track as a prime location for a stadium, which also would energize efforts to revitalize the long-struggling Sulphur Springs neighborhood where it sits.



JAY CONNER/STAFF

Tampa Greyhound Track is a 25-acre track at Nebraska Avenue and Bird Street, easily accessible from Interstate 275.



LANCE ROTHSTEIN/STAFF

like other athletes, but "an owner is not going to spend that money on a dog and mistreat it," he said.

Derby Lane opened its poker room in 1996 as the state eased the laws regarding card game betting. But to offer card games, dog tracks must continue to run races. The Tampa track now stages its races at Derby Lane, from July through December.

Lobbying attempts to persuade legislators to allow cards without dog races, called "decoupling," have failed so far, as have efforts to allow slot machines or other gambling activities at the tracks, Winning said.

"If we could give it to our customers, we would like to give it to them," he said.

Crist said casino gambling options for the card rooms would be lucrative, sharply increasing the value of parimutuel licenses. Winning said it would benefit the state, as well, as the private racetracks would have to pay taxes and fees that likely would exceed the approximately \$132 million the state collected last year through its exclusive revenue-sharing compact with the Seminole Tribe's gaming casinos, including the Hard Rock Casino in Tampa, increased the competition for gambling money.

el betting began to wane with the coming of professional football in 1977, and then hockey and baseball teams in the 1990s. The state lottery, with \$100 million jackpots, and the Seminole Tribe's gaming casinos, including the Hard Rock Casino in Tampa, increased the competition for gambling money.

Gamblers, especially younger people, want instant gratification, Winning said. Although a dog race takes only 30 seconds, people don't want to spend the time studying racing forms and handicapping races before they bet. "Racing, you have to

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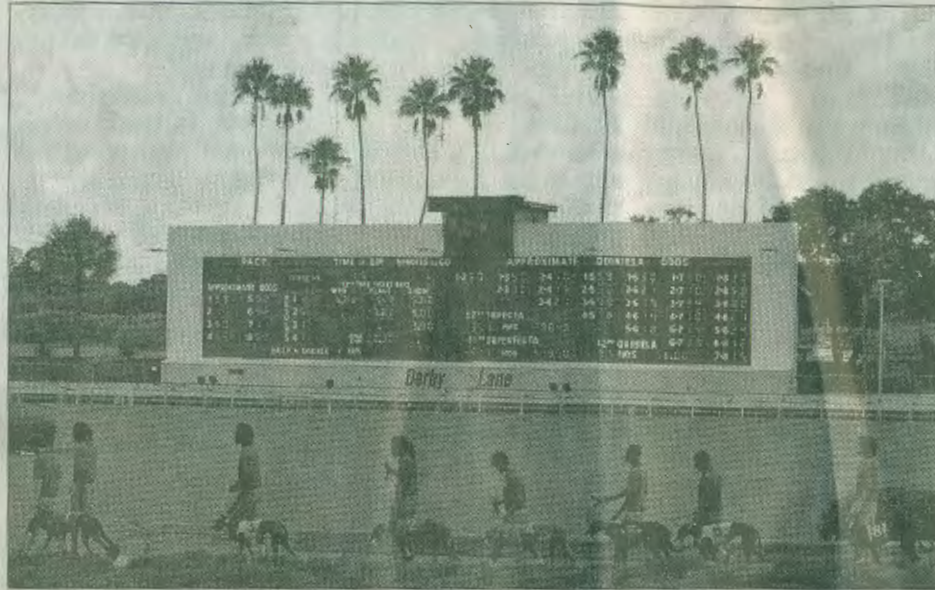
The 25-acre track at Nebraska Avenue and Bird Street, easily accessible from Interstate 275, opened in 1933 and suspended dog racing in 2007. It was bought by the Tampa Bay Downs horse track owners in January and holds daily poker games and simulcast wagering on horse and dog racing and jai alai.

Crist said the size and location of the tracks make them the best stadium options in the area, especially since downtown St. Petersburg has been rejected, downtown Tampa is questionable and the Jefferson High School property in Tampa's West Shore district is too politically controversial.



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"They're the only two locations that make sense for baseball," he said.

As Winning, 57, takes over as Derby Lane president July 1, replacing his cousin, Vey Weaver, the track faces a whole set of challenges and perhaps opportunities as the gambling landscape continues to change.

Winning grew up in the dog track business, the great-grandson of T.L. Weaver, a lumber baron and Derby Lane's accidental founder in 1925. Weaver supplied lumber to some greyhound promoters to build a race track. But they went broke and

couldn't pay, so Weaver inherited the dog track.

In a stroke of good fortune, it was the same year the Gandy Bridge opened, the first across Tampa Bay, giving Hillsborough residents a clear path to Pinellas and the dog track.

Forty years ago, when Winning began working at the track, the only baseball conversations were about the spring training fans and professional baseball players who came to bet on dog races and for the fine dining restaurant, Black-and-white photographs of Babe Ruth, Lou Gehrig and others hang on the walls.



At its height during the 1980s, Derby Lane brought in 1 million customers and about \$105 million in revenue during its four-month racing season, from January through April, Winning said. "Now it takes all year to get 600,000 people here," he said.

As the area has grown, so have the entertainment options and the amount of traffic people have to battle to get to places. "You get home and you say, 'I'm not going anywhere,'" he said.

Winning said interest in dog and horse parimutu-

el betting began to wane with the coming of professional football in 1977, and then hockey and baseball teams in the 1990s. The state lottery, with \$100 million jackpots, and the Seminole Tribe's gaming casinos, including the Hard Rock Casino in Tampa, increased the competition for gambling money.

Gamblers, especially younger people, want instant gratification, Winning said. Although a dog race takes only 30 seconds, people don't want to spend the time studying racing forms and handicapping races before they bet. "Racing, you have to do some mental work," he said.

In addition, there has been increased pressure from animal rights groups. Some states, like Massachusetts and Colorado, have banned dog racing. Winning argues the dogs are well cared for, even pampered, and do what they like to do best — run. They run up to 45 mph, making them the second-fastest land animal in the world behind the cheetah.



"These animals are athletes," Winning said. Racing dogs cost \$8,000 to \$9,000 each and are expensive to keep. Sometimes they get injured,

clinics of other gambling activities at the tracks, Winning said.

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Winning said similar legislation is proposed each year, and he makes the trip to Tallahassee to lobby for it each year.

For now, Winning said the poker room is thriving, with an older "coffee klatch" morning crowd and younger people in the evenings, and the track continues to run eight races a week from January through July.

If he is worried about the future of the track, he doesn't show it.

"I have really enjoyed it," he said. "I hope it's around another 90 years. Though, I won't be here to see it."

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