

# Honoring our history of kindness to animals

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## ABSTRACT

The pro-racing war chest has the luxury to be further supplemented often unwittingly by patrons of Abe & Louie's, Papa Razzi, Atlantic Fish Company, Joe's American Bar and Grill, and other restaurants owned by Charles Sarkis, who is also the owner of Wonderland racetrack.

## FULL TEXT

MASSACHUSETTS voters have a chance to live up to our renowned and pioneering legacy of compassion on Nov. 4 by voting yes on ballot Question 3 to phase out greyhound racing.

Though the racing industry has tried to paint the ban as a radical act promoted by extremists, nothing could be further from the truth - particularly when viewed in historical perspective. The record shows that throughout our past, we've understood the concept of kindness to animals better and earlier than most.

The Commonwealth was among the earliest states to pass laws criminalizing animal abuse, outlawing the cruelest trapping, prohibiting pigeon shoots, and implementing the first fire codes for horse stables. Animal protection pioneers also changed common societal attitudes and practices, such as leaving house cats behind to starve during prolonged family vacations, and drowning dogs when owners get bored with them.

The Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals was founded in 1868 as a result of public outrage when two horses were literally driven to death during a brutal race from Brighton to Worcester. The country's first modern animal adoption shelter also started here with the Animal Rescue League.

This remarkable thread of our history goes back to a time before Massachusetts was a state. When the colony established a code of "Liberties" in 1641, it included the first law about animal protection in the world: "No man shall exercise any Tyranny or Cruelty towards any brute Creature which are usually kept for man's use." This elevated the Commonwealth to the lofty position of world leader in the enlightened treatment of animals.

The state has also shown that true humanity includes care for all the voiceless among us. The same Massachusetts reformers of animal welfare were also involved in protecting children, establishing women's rights, abolishing slavery, and expanding education. While surprising now, animal rights were often treated equally with child welfare. For instance, the Animal Rescue League's Kindness Club taught about animals while implementing an early version of after-school programs for underprivileged urban children. Our compassion quotient rises as one toward animals and people.

Today, greyhound racing is illegal in 34 states, including some - Idaho and Louisiana - not known for their protection of animals. For what may be the first time in history, Massachusetts's failure to follow suit places the Commonwealth

in an unfamiliar position: lagging behind the national measure of humane protection instead of leading it.

To make matters worse, the state in 1986 and 2001 approved subsidies and tax breaks to the racetracks, shamefully driven by the industry's political contributions.

There can be little doubt that the 1986 subsidy bill freed enough of the racetracks' funds to allow them to spend a reported \$3 million - three times what the trailblazing grassroots GREY2K USA could raise - on the last ballot initiative in 2000, which they defeated by a mere 48.6 percent to 46.7 percent. The pro-racing war chest has the luxury to be further supplemented often unwittingly by patrons of Abe & Louie's, Papa Razzi, Atlantic Fish Company, Joe's American Bar and Grill, and other restaurants owned by Charles Sarkis, who is also the owner of Wonderland racetrack.

This time around, defenders of commercial dog racing cannot contradict the factual evidence of widespread suffering by greyhounds used as tools for gambling. The accuracy of this evidence is not in dispute; indeed, it has been compiled by Grey2K directly from the dog tracks' own statistics, by virtue of the 2001 tax break bill requiring the release of injury and fatality records. More than 800 dogs have been injured while racing since 2002.

The industry's campaigns have boasted of the long history of dog racing in Massachusetts, which started in 1935. The upcoming ballot will ask us to choose between two competing histories - one that continues to exploit animal suffering as entertainment, or one that elevates humane leadership over profit.

Living up to our legacy of compassion when deciding whether to vote yes on Question 3 - the Greyhound Protection Act - may require nothing more than heeding the words of our Massachusetts Bay Colony forerunners: "No man shall exercise any Tirranny or Crueltie towards any brute Creature which are usualie kept for man's use."

Matthew Pearl is author of "The Dante Club" and a volunteer at the Animal Rescue League of Boston.

Credit: Matthew Pearl. Boston Globe

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