

## Kennel Club counting on slots

By **STACEY SINGER**

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**POMPANO BEACH** — Hank Kuemin sat at the Lucky 7s machines smiling like he'd just gone to heaven.

His daughter had the day off, so for fun she drove her 85-year-old dad through two counties, from Jensen Beach to Pompano Beach, for a day of gambling. It was the nearest place where they could play slots.

At the Isle Casino and Racing at Pompano Park, Kuemin fed a \$20 bill into a machine - and soon it started ding-ding-dinging like a stuck doorbell. Dime after dime, the machine tallied his take: \$400 worth of beginner's luck.

"This is my first time here," he said with a chuckle. "I'll be back."

The nature of gambling in Florida is changing as players increasingly put their dollars into slot machines rather than the old-time horse and dog races. To survive, parimutuels statewide want to follow the route that Broward County's tracks have taken, morphing since 2006 into "racinos," where slots and poker support racing purses.

The Palm Beach Kennel Club would like to make the same leap. A look at Broward's racinos shows how disparate the transition could be.

At the Mardi Gras Casino at Hollywood Greyhound Track in Hallandale Beach, the first floor of the building next to the dog track has become a long, dark, slots-

playing and simulcast arena packed with every imaginable type of video poker, slots and bingo machines - even at each restaurant table.

During the week, half the parking lot is cluttered with the remnants of the weekend-only flea market surrounded by a chain-link fence. At dinnertime, the casino fills with just-off-work blue-collar folks dourly attempting to turn the day's cash into something more.

A few blocks away, Gulfstream Park has buffed up its grand stucco building by putting a noisy slots casino at one end and a poker room on the other. In the middle are restaurants and bars filled with simulcast screens. Nearby, construction crews hammer away on a planned shopping venue. The atmosphere says date night, especially when the elegant horses run.

### Moral objections fade

To the north, the old Pompano Park harness track towers over a new casino, a \$200 million bet on Florida by Isle of Capri Casinos Inc. of St. Louis.

Doug Shipley, the Isle's gaming vice president, says the goal was to create a resort experience, from the landscaped front entry to the multiple restaurants and bars. Buses pulling in from Palm Beach County's over-55 communities on weekday mornings suggest that the cruise-ship feel is a winner with retirees.

"If you're a parimutuel in Broward, you can just put slots into your existing building, paint the walls and put in carpeting," he said. "We did it right. We started from scratch."

Key to the casino's popularity is the all-you-can-eat buffet, where Diane Pepe, 77, griped that her friend Catherine Ingrisani, as usual, was the day's big winner.

Eight friends, all widows who live in the Villas of Delray, west of Delray Beach took the bus that morning. The Isle has been a favorite for the women since it opened in 2006. It offers two draws: penny slots they could play all morning, and a magnificent buffet for \$11.99: all the carved brisket, buttered rolls and blueberry cobbler they could eat. The upstairs poker room guaranteed some of the gentlemen of Delray Villas would board the 9:30 bus, too.

Pepe said she had stuck to the penny slots and was down \$40 or \$50 by lunchtime. Ingrisani, 75, was a bit bolder, and saw her wallet fatter by \$120.

Most of the customers who play at Isle come from Palm Beach, Martin and St. Lucie counties, Shipley said. The Villas of Delray widows had never been to the Palm Beach Kennel Club's dog track and poker room. They weren't comfortable betting on dogs. They worried about the animals and couldn't make sense of the handicapping. Poker wasn't for them, either.

But if there were slots at the track, they'd go, they said.

The dog track's owners, the Rooney family, would be delighted to offer slots. But that would require a change in state law. A bill that would allow video gambling machines at parimutuel dog and horse

tracks and jai-alai frontons passed the Senate last week, but success in the House now looks like a long shot as Speaker Marco Rubio continues to object on moral and economic grounds.

Parimutuel lobbyists are betting that the state's economic crisis will force him to reconsider.

There was a time when most Florida voters and politicians could be counted on to reject gambling.

Yet drip by drip, gambling has flooded Florida, from the gas-station Lotto tickets to the seven Seminole casinos. The tribe is adding Vegas-style slot machines, blackjack and baccarat to their mix, thanks to a recent pact with Gov. Charlie Crist.

Grandmothers, parents and their adult children, husbands and wives plunk down their cash for the thrill of chance, making moral objections seem like a relic.

A report to the Florida Council on Compulsive Gambling surveyed 1,260 Florida residents older than 55 and found that one in four had gambled during the past week. Eighteen percent had never gambled.

Players, revenue increase

Florida is far from alone. The American Gaming Association reports that 37 states now have legalized electronic gambling: video slots, video bingo, video poker. They're at Indian casinos in 28 states, commercial casinos in 12 states and racetrack casinos in 11 states, including Florida. Commercial casinos raised \$5.2 billion for local and state governments in 2006.

The march toward gambling in Florida started slowly. Parimutuel racetracks have

been around the longest. The Florida Lottery was added in 1986 with a promise of supplying Florida's schools with a new source of revenue. Yet even that year, as they did in 1978 and 1994, voters rejected casino-style gambling. One strong voice of opposition has come from Florida Baptists.

James Smith Sr., editor of the Florida Baptist Witness, the weekly newspaper of the Baptist Convention, articulated the Baptist view: Gambling is a vile way for government to raise money.

"It is a perverted, truly evil notion that our state should depend on its revenues by counting its citizens as gambling losers," he wrote in a column.

The momentum toward state-sanctioned gambling gained speed in 2004.

Presented with a constitutional amendment to approve slot machines at parimutuels in Broward and Miami-Dade counties, state voters narrowly agreed. It seemed a limited expansion, since it only applied to existing parimutuel venues in two counties.

But it was the entree the state's two Indian tribes needed to add casino gambling on their property. Since then, the Indian casinos have been growing while parimutuels around the state have been closing down, from Tampa to Biscayne Bay.

The bills that would expand video gambling would benefit horse and dog tracks as well as jai-alai frontons by sending a cut of the proceeds to breeders and players.

At the Gulfstream Park casino in Hallandale Beach, while slots players waited three-deep for a chair at the Hot Shots Progressive video terminals, a 45-

year pony bettor named David, who didn't want to give a last name, spat that he wouldn't stick a quarter into a slot machine if it was his last piece of change.

But he appreciated how the slots players fattened the horse purses. Eight percent of the post-tax slot take goes to the horse breeders and their purses.

As he spoke, he looked up at a wide-screen television, following racing at Tampa Bay Downs. He liked horse No. 9 because of the odds: 22 to 1.

"Look," he said, pointing to his program, "the odds-on favorite has quit races in the past.

"Excuse me. I've got to go place a bet."

Minutes later, he watched \$100 evaporate as No. 9 failed to place. He was down \$600 for the day.

He pulled deeply on his cigarette before throwing it to the ground.

"It's just money," he said. "One day in New York I made \$52,000 on one race."

Then again, he once lost \$30,000 on a single race. The horse was named Miss Cigarette.

"I didn't think she could lose," he said with a grin. "I was wrong."

Next race, David made the right pick. Horses named "Sarah's Image" and "In Honor of Johnnie" won and placed, and David made \$500. Now he was out only \$100. His luck was turning.

"I'll be back tomorrow," he said. "I come every day."