

# **The Controversy Over Pari-Mutuel Betting in Florida, 1925-1931**

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Although horseracing flourished in antebellum North Florida, its reemergence in the twentieth century rose amidst public outcry against gambling during Florida's boom times. Until the 1931 Legislature legalized pari-Mutuel wagering, racetracks operated under various betting systems to circumvent the law and conduct their race meets. The state-sanctioned legalization of betting led to dependence on track-generated revenues to support burgeoning state growth and accompanying public service demands.

The fight for and against pari-mutuels and racetracks in Florida pitted religious and business leaders, racetrack operators, bettors, legislators, private citizens, and the governor against each other. Agitation against racetrack gambling surfaced in the 1925 legislature session, culminating in the State Supreme Court's declaration in 1927 that pari-mutuel wagering was illegal. The Miami Jockey Club switched to oral betting to circumvent the law. While religious and some business and political leaders vehemently opposed gambling, pro-racing advocates wielded their influence with the legislature to legalize betting on horse races as a way to raise revenue for the state during the economic hard times of the Depression.

Despite the anti-gambling sentiment and lobbying, the Florida legislature legalized pari-mutuel wagering in 1931 over Governor Doyle Carlton's veto. The lure of an equal share of sin tax money to each of the sixty-seven counties for schools, the aged, and public works overrode the argument against gambling and the accompanying fears of an influx of riff raff and criminals.

The law required local voter approval to allow racing and some observers thought betting would be confined to no more than two counties, in not just Dade. Although no widespread groundswell rose to engulf the state in racetracks, considerable interest in building and operating tracks appeared not only in Dade, but in Hillsborough, Palm Beach, St. Johns, Broward, and Volusia counties. After the initial scramble for permits, Hialeah and Tropical Park in Dade County emerged as the two South Florida competitors for patrons and racing dates until the introduction of a third track, Gulfstream Park, in 1944. On the west coast, the Tampa track avoided the battle for racing dates which continued into the 1990s.