



FATAL FIGHTS

DOGS FORCED INTO BATTLE

FOR ANIMALS...

ADVOCACY ▲ EDUCATION ► DISASTER AID
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By Brenda Shoss

Gypsy is found stumbling along Gaston County's main highway in North Carolina. Her right front leg is shredded. Flesh falls from her face, exposing teeth and gums in a perpetual bite. But the battered pit bull can no longer bite anyone. Her lips and nose have dissolved into pus.

This dog with no face is a familiar sight to Tri-County Animal Rescue staff who admit her in April 2005. She is dogfighter's garbage. Her moneymaking days are over.

Months later, three boys meet at a levy in Algiers, Louisiana. Their pit bulls display "gameness," the battle-till-death vigor dogfighters covet. The boys, ages 9 to 14, face two dogs nose to nose and release them. One sinks razor-sharp teeth into the other's throat and savagely shakes his head. Blood sprays as the losing dog howls. The boys jab both dogs and cheer them on.

A 100 yards away, Jeff Dorson crouches in shadows. The founder and executive director of Humane Society of Louisiana simultaneously flips on his video camera and dials 911. But the police never show. After 15 minutes, the boys yank their limping dogs away on heavy chains.

Dogfighting is illegal in 50 states and as of 2007, a felony nationwide. Still, American Pit Bull Terriers and other pit bull breeds are raised to compete on the underground circuit. Dogfighting statutes in 46 states forbid possession of fighting dogs and 48 states ban presence at matches.

Dogfighters play their dogs in plywood-walled arenas hastily erected in empty homes, garages and warehouses or remote parks and barns. "Dogmen" compete nationwide, attracting fans who bet as high as \$10,000 to \$50,000 on dogs honed in "hard bite, athleticism and gameness," reporter Eileen Loh-Harrist writes in *Fight Clubs* for the Gambit Weekly in New Orleans (2001). "Professional dogmen are akin to the Mafia, bestowing to the illicit activity a set of generally accepted rules."

During matches that last two or more hours, dogs paired by weight are situated behind "scratch lines" etched on either side of a soft-surface pit. A referee orders each handler to "face your dog." Upon the "let go" command,



1. & 2. Gypsy, pit bull dumped on Gaston County, North Carolina's main highway 4/11/05, pet-abuse.com/cases/4402

3. Dogfighting survivor. dannyyandronsrescue.com

4. Peoria Humane Society, <http://peoriahs.org>

5. Sandy, 8 weeks, turned up with her leg so mutilated it was amputated. pitbullsontheweb.com

dogs are freed to attack until one turns his head and shoulders away from his rival.

Trainers then align them for a repeat encounter. The dog who turned gets 10 seconds to cross the line and clamp down on his opponent (a scratch). "The match [ends] when one dog is too injured or unwilling to continue, jumps the pit, or is killed," Loh-Harrist explains.

Unlike career dogmen, hobbyists rarely vie beyond local levels. But they do adhere to the precepts of a refereed brawl. Street fighters ignore rules and bloodlines, preferring big fierce dogs symbolic of gang culture. Many are restless kids drawn to the thrill of an illegal blood sport.

Jeff Dorson knows them all. For the past 18 years, he's done the sitting-on-the-porch-drinking-lemonade thing

with scores of dogfighters. He logs their war stories as evidence for law enforcers.

In 1987, PETA hired the Midwest native to spearhead a campaign for monkeys removed from a Silver Spring, MD research laboratory after the conviction of psychologist Edward Taub on animal cruelty charges. The Silver Spring Monkeys were held at Tulane University in Louisiana.

After PETA's contract expired, Dorson formed League in Support of Animals (LISA) to lobby for stronger animal protection laws and track cruelty cases. LISA evolved to Humane Society of Louisiana with a dual mission to enforce state laws and rehabilitate/adopt abandoned animals.

Dorson focused on dogfighting in Louisiana, a state revered for its champion bloodlines and fight circles. The Boudreaux

dynasty, whose prized pups netted up to \$10,000 a head, ruled for half a century — even hosting hometown festivals with rural law officers in attendance. But the homage ended when state and federal agents raided their Broussard, Louisiana property in March 2005, booking “dogfighting don” Floyd and his son Guy for animal cruelty, illegal possession of steroids and a sawed-off shotgun, and 64 dogfighting counts. On 10/15/08 a state judge cleared both Boudreauxs of all charges.

At least there was a case. Usually “two bloody pit bulls are not high on police radar,” Dorson contends. “Even with detailed documentation, New Orleans police simply call Animal Control to come euthanize the dogs.”

Animal fighting arrests are tricky. Most law enforcers lack resources or know-how to nail dogfighters at the scene. By the time they act, the match has disbanded. But in late 2004, Louisiana State Police arrested over 125 dogfighters and seized 680 dogs in 16 months. Dorson credits the dramatic spike to new Superintendent Henry L. Whitehorn’s preemptive-strike approach: Officers talk to alleged dogfighters, tape the transaction, acquire a search warrant, and return to book them.

Acting upon Dorson’s addresses and accounts, an initial sting landed three criminals, 10 dogs, weapons and narcotics. “[Since then] state police have dismantled enormous dogfighting structures throughout Louisiana. They function as a military Special Ops unit, informed about dogfighting and ready to move quickly,” Dorson says.

Once cops know what to look for, a dogfighter’s autograph is clear. Between fights, dogs are tethered on thick logging chains in yards cluttered in feces, ant-infested kibble and rusty water pails. A few rickety structures offer shelter. Dogfighters live by the credo: The meaner you treat a dog, the meaner he’ll perform in the ring.

Dog compounds are outfitted with restraining tables, treadmills, and wooden ramps. Serious trainers follow a hard-line regimen of forced daily runs, hand-walks, and treadmill exercises to pump dogs from chain weight to fight weight. Dogs are fed steroids and hormones typically acquired on the black market. “These guys aren’t real bright,” Dorson says. “Sometimes they mix gunpowder in dog food, assuming it will give dogs explosive energy.”

Most use “bait” animals to arouse aggression. Cats, rabbits, small dogs, or chickens are strung to a pole and twirled like toys until fatally mauled. Sometimes a caged chicken or rabbit is placed in front of a dog on a treadmill as incentive to chase. For a practice fight, or “roll,” trainers mismatch a submissive animal with an aggressor. “No bait animal survives training,” Dorson says.

Dogfighters commonly steal companion animals to use for bait, as the Pima County Sheriff’s Department learned after years of unearthing the gnawed remains of lost pets in the Arizona desert.

In National Geographic’s *U.S. Dogfighting Rings Steal Pets for Bait* (2004), Detective Mike Duffey, co-chair of the Animal Cruelty Task Force of Southern Arizona, claimed 50% of 3,396 missing animals over a 6-month span were likely stolen. Though there aren’t statistics on animals annually snatched for bait, the sheriff’s department noted a parallel between a rise in dogfight rings and pet theft.

Stealers may be bored urban teens who use tough dogs to elevate their status. Sgt. Steve Brownstein, a Chicago police veteran who investigates animal abuse on a high-crime beat, has found a pit pup with a split open stomach. He’s seen a Rottweiler mix with skin slashed off her face and a shepherd mix whose penis was in fragments.

If dogs don’t succumb to internal trauma, blood loss, shock, dehydration, collapse or infection, they live with wounds and abscesses on their heads, throats, shoulders and legs. Ears are bloody stubs and some faces are so lacerated dogs can hardly breathe.

Once a dog’s “game” is gone, he’s a liability. Dogfighters discard him in trash heaps or barren buildings to starve. Sgt. Brownstein has found dogs burned alive as punishment. Dogs abandoned on the streets are at the mercy of humane societies and animal control. “You can’t un-train a true fighting dog,” Dorson says. Most are euthanized.

For each dog at the end of a short chain, life is a mix of arduous training and gory scrimmages. Still, dogs seem little more than props in an underworld linked with gambling, auto theft, drug trafficking, arms smuggling, money laundering, and violence.

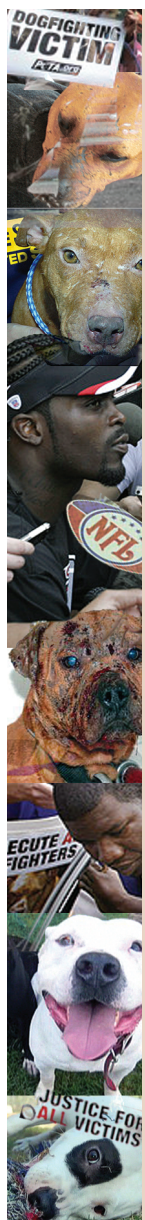
Children, who often take part as spectators, fighters, or “runners” for the betting operation, are desensitized to animal suffering and criminality. A fifth grader by his uncle’s side at a dogfight told Sgt. Brownstein he was the only bystander who didn’t “explode with laughter” when a defeated dog urinated and defecated upon himself before dying.

“The danger is that [children] will emulate the violence around them,” Brownstein says. “I know of a group that swung a puppy around by a rope, snapping its neck.”

Some question the validity of eradicating dogfighters in a world plagued with “bigger problems.” Brownstein counters with a simple question: “What kind of society do we become if our children lose their humanity?”

TAKE ACTION:

1. VICTORY! May 3, 2007: The Animal Fighting Prohibition Enforcement Act is signed into law. Dogfighting and cockfighting blood sports are now federal felony offenses.
2. If your state has weak dogfighting penalties, urge STATE legislators to enforce felony dogfighting penalties. Search animal fighting laws by state: www.animallaw.com



FALLEN NFL STAR MICHAEL VICK EXPOSES DOGFIGHTS THE BLOODSPORT GAINS MAINSTREAM ATTENTION

- **EARLY JUNE, 2007: Massive K-9 grave with 36 dog carcasses is found on Michael Vick's Virginia property.** Once story breaks, it dominates national media for months, including graphic footage and information about dogfighting rings.
- **7/17/07: Former Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick, along with Tony Taylor, Purnell Peace and Quanis Phillips, is indicted for conspiracy to travel in interstate commerce in aid of unlawful activities and to sponsor a dog in an animal-fighting venture.** Vick's indictment exposes horrific cruelty: Dogs who'd lost their "game" were "sometimes put to death by drowning, strangulation, hanging, gun shot, electrocution, or some other method." At least one dog was slammed against the ground until dead. The killer conferred with Vick before "wetting [another] dog down with water and electrocuting the animal." At Vick's Virginia home officials uncovered over 50 pit bulls, along with fight tools...a "rape stand" for forced breeding, treadmills, drugs to amplify aggression, and a bloody fight pit.
- **11/30/07: Codefendants Purnell Peace and Quanis Phillips are sentenced to 18 and 21 months in prison** on charges related to "Bad Newz Kennels" in Virginia. They can't "own" dogs during 3 years probation following release from prison.
- **12/4/07: 47 surviving pit bulls are placed with rescue groups** — rather than euthanized, which is usually the verdict for fight dogs — with many eligible for future public adoptions. Best Friends Animal Society, Kanab, Utah (22 dogs) • BAD RAP, Oakland, CA (10 dogs) • Richmond Animal League, Richmond VA (4 dogs) • Georgia S.P.C.A., Suwanee, GA (3 dogs) • SPCA of Monterey County, CA (3 dogs) • Recycled Love, Inc., Baltimore, MD (3 dogs) • Animal Rescue of Tidewater, Chesapeake, VA (1 dog) • Our Pack, Inc. (1 dog)
- **12/10/07, FEDERAL: U.S. District Judge Henry E. Hudson gives Michael Vick 23 months in prison** for funding a dogfighting ring and for his part in killing pit bulls who didn't fight aggressively. Vick also gets 3 years' probation. Prosecutor Michael Gill says Vick "did more than fund it. He was in this thing up to his neck."
- **11/25/08, VIRGINIA: Vick pleads guilty to a state dogfighting charge — and under plea agreement, gets a 3-year suspended prison term** and \$2,500 fine on a charge of attending, sponsoring and participating in dogfights. A charge of cruelty to animals with prejudice is dropped. He also gets 4 years' probation. He'd faced a possible 10-year prison term. Will the Falcons re-hire him?