



Captured 7/1/2010

# Vick case sheds light on dark world of dogfighting

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By Tom Weir, USA TODAY



By Joe Fudge, The (Newport News, Va.,) Daily Press via AP

One of three dogs removed from a house owned by Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick shown on May 22. Officials say the Vick case is a "textbook example" of how law enforcement often stumbles into a dogfighting investigation.



Law enforcement officials say the scenes uncovered at sites where they've investigated dogfighting operations is often gruesome. "You'll find a couple of dog corpses or a pit full of blood," says Louisiana state trooper Mack Dickinson. "We'll open up their kennels, where they'll put dogs after they've fought, and they'll have blood all over the walls."

By Steve Helber, AP

No matter how [Michael Vick's indictment on charges](#)

of operating a dogfighting ring is resolved in court, allegations against the NFL star have forced mainstream America to confront the grisly image of canine death matches.

Law enforcement and animal-protection advocates who have participated in raids on the type of enterprises that the Atlanta Falcons quarterback and three other men are accused of running say the reality of the dogfighting underworld is even worse than most people can imagine.

They say seized dogs inevitably are euthanized, the plywood walls of the typical fighting ring are splattered with blood, and cruelty shrouds every aspect of the dog's life.

"When you go to where these fights have happened, you'll find a couple of dog corpses or a pit full of blood," says Mack Dickinson, a Louisiana state trooper who heads that state's dogfighting investigations. "We'll open up their kennels, where they'll put dogs after they've fought, and they'll have blood all over the walls."

Diane Jessup, a former Washington state animal control officer, says, "With dogs that don't win, it's not uncommon for them to be electrocuted, shot, hung or burned." But what troubles her even more is "the way the dogs are maintained, kept out in the mud on a short chain, a lifetime of that. To me, that's crueller than the fighting."

**VIDEO:** [Coverage from Gannett station WXIA-TV in Atlanta](#)

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Kathryn Destreza, who as director of humane law enforcement for the Louisiana SPCA has been on about 30 raids in the last three years, says the animals' owners "will file the dog's canine teeth into a sharp point, or they'll put ground-up glass in their fur" before a fight.

At some raids where spectators have fled into the woods as police invaded, Destreza says, abandoned toddler-sized chairs and nearby milk and cookies suggest some people consider dogfighting family entertainment.

More often, law enforcement officials say, the sweeps net drugs, weapons and gambling money.

Of the 65 dogfighting arrests he's made in the last five years, Sgt. David Hunt of the Franklin County (Ohio) Sheriff's Office says, "There's only been one where we didn't find drugs."

Hunt testified before Congress last year at a hearing that led to legislation making dogfighting a federal felony. That, Hunt says, has increased the efforts of federal law enforcement.

#### Practice growing in cities

Vick's indictment was handed up Tuesday in Richmond, Va., in federal district court. He faces charges of transporting fighting dogs across state lines and engaging in dogfighting. Conviction could mean a six-year prison term and a \$350,000 fine.

Vick and the three other men are scheduled to have a bond hearing and arraignment July 26, the day the Falcons begin training camp.

After a meeting involving NFL commissioner Roger Goodell and the Falcons, the league will let Vick keep playing, the Associated Press reported. The AP reported that a person with knowledge of the meeting, who requested anonymity so the case would not be influenced, said the NFL would stick to that position for the foreseeable future, despite its new personal-conduct policy.

Vick's case doesn't include drug or weapon charges, but Hunt says it is a "textbook example" of how law enforcement often stumbles into a dogfighting investigation.

In Vick's case, a drug-related investigation by local police of a Vick family member took place at the Surry County, Va., property owned by Vick. Law enforcement took note of the presence of numerous dogs, further searches were conducted and 55 pit bulls were seized.

Eric Sakach, West Coast regional office director for the Humane Society of the United States, has been investigating dogfighting for about 30 years and estimates 40,000 people may be involved in the blood sport nationwide.

Dogfighting traditionally is associated with rural settings, but Sakach says the biggest growth is at the "street level," in cities.

Hunt agrees, saying at a recent seminar with Chicago police that he was told gangs are increasingly engaging in dogfighting. "Instead of those guys getting in a fight and police getting called, they'll fight their dogs instead," Hunt says.

Typically, dogfighting cases are not resolved quickly in court. One of the most publicized cases in recent years goes to trial next month — 2 years and 5 months after the alleged breeding center of Floyd Boudreaux and his son Guy in Broussard, La., was raided.

Louisiana state trooper Dickinson led that raid in March 2005 and alleges that Boudreaux-bred pit bull puppies sell for as much as \$5,000. Dickinson also says he has raided two dogfighting operations

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in the last week but rarely is able to break up events in mid-fight.

"They never disclose the location until an hour or two before," Dickinson says. "It may be in a field or a warehouse. They might fight four dogs, then go to another location."

During the 20-some raids he has conducted the last three years, Dickinson says, "We've seized AK-47s, explosive devices, a kilo of crack. The drugs and weapons associated with this sport are unbelievable."

Until Vick's indictment, perhaps the most prominent dogfighting case involved the New York state prosecution of James Fricchione, known to authorities as the "Al Capone" of dogfighting.

Former Orange County prosecutor David Hoovler described the 2003 raid on Fricchione's property as entering a "Spartacus for puppies" where authorities found 18 animals. Many were severely wounded. The compound included treadmills where dogs were trained for stamina, a fighting ring and an electrocution chamber.

Fricchione was later convicted of animal cruelty charges and sentenced to between two and seven years in prison.

Three years after the conviction, Hoovler, now a federal prosecutor, still remembers the scene he encountered April 23, 2003.

He says one of the 18 dogs was missing half of a jaw and another suffered from about 70 open wounds. Still another had scar tissue covering about 75% of its body. At least 13 of the 18 animals were injured.

"I had been to a number of murder scenes," Hoovler says, "but I was appalled."

Fricchione's *The Sporting Dog Journal* was considered the ultimate authority on dogfighting and was circulated to about 3,000 subscribers. Police say copies of the magazine commonly are found at raid sites because it tracked breeding lines and performances in 1,500-2,000 fights a year.

**Fight sites 'more organized'**

Another major conviction came in November 2004 in Charleston County, S.C., when David Tant received a 40-year sentence after at least 40 pit bulls were seized on his property.

That investigation began after a state surveyor tripped a booby-trapped shotgun on Tant's property and was shot, according to Mark Plowden, spokesman for the South Carolina attorney general's office.

Tant was regarded as one of the world's top breeders of fighting dogs. "His name has been found in underground publications as far away as eastern Germany," Plowden says.

Plowden says South Carolina formed a task force on dogfighting in 2003 only after the SPCA made a presentation to Attorney General Henry McMaster.

"People are just generally unfamiliar with the extent of the problem," Plowden says.

Sandy Christiansen, president of the Spartanburg (S.C.) Humane Society, consults with law enforcement in several states, has been on about 30 dogfighting raids and also has served as an expert government witness at trials.

"Increasingly, they're getting more and more secure," Christiansen says of those who stage dogfights. "Recently I've heard they'll take away cellphones and they may not allow people to come and go. We're definitely talking about more organized people."

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The typical fighting ring, Christiansen says, is a 16-foot square of plywood, with a 2- to 3-foot-high wall. "The fight is anywhere you can put the pit," Christiansen says. "Inside abandoned houses, a basement. For a garage, it's simple — just black out the windows."

Christiansen says it's up to communities to develop awareness of what might be happening in those hidden battlegrounds.

"You've got to have a pretty violent streak in you to sit and watch man's best friend rip another one to shreds so someone can make money," he says.

*Contributing: Kevin Johnson*

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