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History of Dog Fighting

For centuries, humans have deliberately pitted dog-aggressive dogs in staged fights against one another. Why are animal welfare advocates no closer to ending this brutal blood sport?

The crowd's roar dulled to a hum as the next two fighters appeared. The previous match had been short, as one contestant quickly outmatched his opponent, mauling him badly and tearing off an ear. But this final fight matched two skilled and highly respected combatants. They eyed each other eagerly from across the pit, muscles tensed in anticipation. Spectators came to the edge of their seats. Fathers lifted children to their shoulders for a better view as the referee stepped to the center, called the dogs to their scratch lines and yelled, "Let go!" A cheer arose as the dogs charged across the pit and slammed into each other, teeth flashing as they sought a vulnerable target. After half an hour of fighting, the brindle looked beaten. Wounded and panting, he turned away from his opponent. The referee called the turn, and, when neither dog had a hold on the other, the handlers picked them up. The dogs were returned to their scratch lines and held. Both were breathing hard and bleeding from their bite wounds. Because he made the turn, the brindle would be released first. If he failed to attack now, he would lose. "Let go," the judge called again. The brindle was exhausted and badly hurt—but he was a game dog. Responding to an impulse bred into him over generations and nurtured through training, he stumbled across his scratch line toward his opponent. The other dog's handler released him with the encouragement, "Finish him off, Bo." Bo knocked the brindle to the ground, seeking a hold on his throat. Though getting the worst of the fight, the brindle managed to grab Bo's right front leg in his powerful jaws. As he bit down hard and twisted, the snap of breaking bone was heard. Bo lurched backward and then turned away from the brindle. Now it was Bo's turn to scratch. Barely able to stand in his corner, the brindle strained against his handler's arms, eager to continue the fight. But when he was released, Bo would not cross the pit. The referee called, "One... Two... Time!" The crowd cheered for the brindle. He would die from his injuries an hour later, but he had won his fight. Bo's handler spit on the ground. He had a lot of money on this match. Muttering, "Worthless cur," he dragged Bo out of the barn and toward his truck, where a shotgun waited.

THE DOGS

This fight could have occurred in any state, in a barn or a city warehouse. The participants might have been Caucasian, African American or Hispanic, and the year could have been 1897 or 2007.

The development of modern dogfighting as practiced in Europe, North America and South America can be clearly traced to 1835, when bull-baiting was banned in England. After the ban, the owners of "bulldogs"—used up until then to bait bulls, bears and other animals—turned to staging fights between their dogs to satisfy their blood lust. The large, heavy bull dogs were eventually crossed with small, more agile terriers to produce the "bull terriers" that became the fountainhead of today's prominent fighting breeds. Staffordshire Bull Terriers, American Staffordshire Terriers and American Pit Bull Terriers all hail from this ancestry. Commonly, dogs falling into this broad class are identified as pit bulls.

It's important to understand that not just any dog can be trained for pit fighting. Much like herding dogs, hunting dogs and other breeds designed for particular roles, fighting dogs have been genetically engineered to be receptive to the training that will prepare them to succeed in the pit. Staged fights are not the same as the scuffles seen in dog runs or between dogs in the same home. Most fights among pet dogs end quickly, with one individual submitting to the other, and they rarely result in serious injuries. The winner typically accepts the submission signals of the loser and ends the encounter with no further aggression.

To produce successful fighting dogs, certain aspects of normal dog behavior had to be altered. Most fighting dogs will continue to attack, regardless of whether their opponent gives up or not. In addition, a "game" fighting dog will continue to do battle even though badly injured. Gameness—a dog's willingness to persevere despite great adversity—is the most admired trait in fighting dogs. Great attention is paid to breeding only sires and dams that pass this quality on to their progeny. In fact, the owner of a Grand Champion—a dog that has won five contests—can sell the dog's pups for as much as \$20,000 apiece. The serious dogfighter is as familiar with the bloodlines of champion fighting dogs as any thoroughbred aficionado is of Triple Crown contenders.

With the high level of aggression that some pit bulls show toward other dogs, it may seem a contradiction that they also are described as loyal and gentle companion animals. However, these seemingly conflicting characteristics are hallmarks of a well-bred fighting dog. Before each fight, the dogs are washed, usually by the other dog's handler, to ensure that no foreign

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