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A fight to save urban youth from dogfighting

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By **Sharon L. Peters**, Special for USA TODAY



By John Zich, USA TODAY

Reformed dogfighters Sean Moore, 37, left, with his dog Jigga, and George Brent, 18, with Red, now work with the Humane Society on obedience training.

The vast majority of dogfighters are not rich and famous like former football star Michael Vick or as organized as the pit masters who schedule high-stakes blood battles that rake in thousands of dollars a night.

The most active and numerous dogfighters, experts say, are 13 or 14 or 17 years old — inner-city youths who have trained their pit bulls to fight other dogs in the neighborhood.

"There are at least 100,000 young kids fighting their dogs under the radar in America," estimates Chicago-based anti-violence advocate Tio Hardiman, who built his estimate on conversations with young dogfighters and authorities in 35 states he has visited. In contrast, about 40,000 adults are involved in organized dogfighting, according to the Humane Society of the United States.

Hardiman, who is a special consultant to the

Humane Society and has launched an anti-dogfighting program in Chicago, says large numbers of youngsters are conducting street dogfights "in almost every urban inner city," and the numbers are growing. Among the cities he lists: Chicago; St. Louis; New York; Atlanta; Memphis; Detroit; Jackson, Miss.; Los Angeles; New Orleans; Milwaukee; Baltimore; Charlotte; and Newark.

"The kids are getting younger and younger," says Randy Grim, executive director of Stray Rescue of St. Louis. He roams the worst streets rescuing dogs, most of them scarred-up fight-trained pit bulls discarded because they weren't vicious enough. "I saw a kid in a park, he was probably 8 or 9 years old, training and strengthening his pit bull by having him tread water in a creek."

It's not about the dog

Getting and fighting a pit bull has become a way for inner-city youth to "show their toughness," "develop a reputation in the neighborhood" and "make some money," says Kelly Daley, who led a recent University of Chicago Survey Lab study on dogfighting. Urban kids see dogfighting as a stature builder, and they give no thought to what the animals endure, she says. "This kind of stuff doesn't have anything at all to do with the dog."

Reformed Chicago dogfighter Kione Ford, 16, fits the description. Dogfighting "made me kind of popular," he says. And each time one of his dogs got hurt, "I'd think, 'Well, next time he'll win.' "

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Most dogfighting by young people is not the sort described during the Vick episode — big-money events held in well-constructed pits for large audiences. Youth dogfights are usually forced skirmishes between leashed pit bulls on the sidewalks or alleys, or low-stakes unleashed contests in backyards and basements. The results, however, are similar to organized matches: dogs maimed or dying by the thousands every year, enough cash or veneration bestowed on winners to keep them committed, and owners — teens and pre-teens in this case — growing increasingly non-empathetic and violence-prone.

"We've got a whole new generation of criminals coming up as a result of all this," Grim says. Although dogfighting by inner-city kids has been reported for two decades, he says, it is now more prevalent, more enmeshed in the fabric of communities and more appealing to a broader circle of urban youth.

Making dogs fight is "not something that's a thought process at all, it's just something they do" as part of the intertwined activities of violence, says Cynthia Bathurst of Safe Humane Chicago, a coalition aimed at ending inner-city violence against humans and animals. Hardiman agrees: "Violence against dogs doesn't even register."

Life expectancy: 18 months

The Vick case hasn't deterred young urban tough guys. "It actually generated more interest among urban youth," Grim says. Suddenly, kids who had believed dogfighting was only a ghetto or rural Southern sport saw rich role models were involved. "They thought, if (Vick) does it, it's cool."

The fact that Vick got prison time and that dogfighting is a felony doesn't stop them because they reject both as establishment punishment leveled against the disenfranchised, Grim says.

Kids get drawn in at an early age, says Hardiman, motivated by the "glamorization" of dogfighting by rap and hip-hop music and by neighborhood values that prize machismo. They give little value to animals and assert that pit bulls "were born to fight."

"We discovered (in St. Louis) a group that held a dogfight for a church fundraiser, and that sends a pretty strong message to children," Grim says.

A kid gets a pit bull from a breeder who churns out litters in backyards or abandoned buildings, or from a pet store known to have a non-public cache of pit puppies, or they steal animals chained out in a yard or on a fire escape.

The youngster learns from friends or uncles how to turn the animal into a fighter, often starting by setting it against smaller dogs or cats referred to as "pit bait," creatures that almost never survive the encounters. Most kids also do torturous things to their dogs to make them meaner, more pain tolerant, more likely to go the extra mile in battle, says Robert Missari of Rescue Ink, which scours the boroughs of New York for abused animals.

"These kids may make some money on fights," Missari says, "but it's equally about the whole macho thing and security thing of being able to say, 'My dog is the toughest on the block, my pit bull can kill your pit bull.'"

Dogs that are decent fighters may survive several bouts before being mauled so badly they die or are killed. "The life expectancy of an inner-city pit bull is 18 months," says Hardiman. Dogs that won't fight or don't fight well are regarded as "not worthy," and they're shot, hanged or set loose.

Authorities sometimes take a dog away from its owner, but these can be tough cases. There are few witnesses, kids claim they don't know who owns a mauled dog, and there has been a pattern of pleading down cases to misdemeanors, experts say.

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Kids can quit

Ultimately, the mind-set of young dogfighters must be changed, Hardiman says. Later this year, he'll take to Atlanta and Charlotte his Campaign to End Dogfighting, which rechannels kids and their dogs to more constructive agility and obedience competitions. He's bolstered by apparent successes that include Ford, who vows he'll never make a dog fight again, and George Brent, 18, who fought his dog Red for months, then hooked up with Hardiman's team. Red earned the American Kennel Club Canine Good Citizenship certification.

Tamaris Jones, 17, says he won't fight again. He and dog Trouble have spent months of Saturdays in Hardiman's program. "They explained to me that it wasn't right to fight him," Jones says. "I would be mad at (Trouble) when he lost, and I'd hug him when he won. Now he's not a fighter no more. I can hug him all the time."

The Humane Society of the United States also is working on other ways to de-romanticize dogfighting, including public service announcements from messengers these kids respect, people who speak their language and understand their lives. Music mogul Russell Simmons has signed on; other like-thinking rappers and sports figures are being contacted.

Grim plans a humane-education camp next summer that will address dogfighting; Rescue Ink is going into the schools this fall with the message; and B athurst has joined Best Friends Animal Society to spread the anti-violence word in several cities.

"We're creating a movement around seeing these animals in a different way," Hardiman says.

While he insists "80% of inner-city youths love their dogs and don't fight them," he acknowledges that reversing the other 20% is tough. "I get a kid for a few hours, and the rest of the time he's living where he's living, and they're not reinforcing my message, they're doing what they do ... fighting dogs."

But he knows some are strong enough to leave fighting forever. His evidence is Sean Moore, 37, who works with him to steer kids onto a different path. Moore was a revered dogfighter from age 13 to 18. Fifteen of his dogs died in fights or he killed them to end their agony after hideous injuries.

"I apologize every day for what I did back then," Moore says.

He left that life when he realized "I didn't want to be a killer no more. It was an ego trip. I sometimes made some money. But I'm just not a killer."

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