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# Inside the Culture of Dogfighting

## From Blood Money to Bragging Rights, Dogfighting Is More Popular Than You Might Think

By **BRITTANY BACON**

**July 19, 2007** —

A makeshift ring is surrounded by dozens or even hundreds of screaming "fans" waving betting cash. Inside, two severely abused dogs tear each other literally limb from limb in a life-or-death battle that experts say is becoming disturbingly common in the United States.

Atlanta Falcon star quarterback Michael Vick's indictment for allegedly operating a dogfighting ring has shone a spotlight on one of the cruelest criminal "sports" in the United States.

Some have made a career out of dogfighting, which can be a lucrative pastime, with millions of dollars changing hands among the estimated 20,000 to 40,000 dogfight spectators and participants in the United States.

Others seem to be seeking an outlet for their own violent or antisocial behavior -- or they look to the dogs as status symbols or reflections of their own perceived toughness, experts say.

While dogfighting is a federal crime, many experts say that state laws, which are usually used to prosecute cases, are just not strict enough to shut the industry down.

Anti-animal cruelty advocates say that while the ongoing Vick investigation has called needed attention to a widespread problem, a number of factors contribute to the growing popularity of dogfighting -- including laws that vary in severity from state to state, the difficulty of investigating the crime, what some say is the media's under-reporting of this criminal activity, and an overall lack of education about the issue.

### A Dog Beats Dog World

P.J. Smith of the Atlanta Humane Society characterizes dogfighting as two canines, usually pitbulls, attacking each other inside a ring, with the outcome wagered on by spectators.

Anti-cruelty experts say the fights can last anywhere from 20 minutes to 10 hours, depending on how long it takes for one dog to die or become simply too weak to continue. At the lowest level, experts said \$50,000-\$60,000 is at stake, while a more sophisticated game has payoffs close to \$1 million.

The rearing process for fighting dogs seems about as ugly as the event itself.

The breeders, who have usually stolen the animals or adopted them from shelters, train the puppies to be aggressive and violent toward other dogs. They are kept chained and locked in crowded cages, far away enough not to kill each other, but close enough to put them in a constant state of agitation, said Smith.

Sometimes they use dolls to aggravate the dogs, or steal other people's dogs from their own backyards to use

as "bait" in the training, she said. The conditioning also includes steroid injections, and hours running on a treadmill or tied to the bumper of a moving car.

A life of dogfighting is grim even for the victorious dogs. Since they rarely take the animals to the vet, breeders will staple the dogs wounds themselves, pump them with antibiotics, or leave them in a ditch to die. As a result of both the severe physical and mental damage, veterinarian experts said that 9 out of 10 of these dogs are euthanized. The losing dog is often disposed of by electrocution, beating, or drowning, Smith said.

### **A Dogfighting Culture: Breeding Blood Money**

While Michael Vick's high-profile case brought dogfighting into the national spotlight, Pet-Abuse.com has documented more than 500 criminal dogfighting cases since 2000. Animal welfare experts said that this is no longer just a rural sport, but has become popular in urban areas nationwide.

Mike Roach of the Anti-Cruelty Society of Chicago, who helps police bust dogfighting rings and educates students about the issue, said that dogfighting breeders are largely unlicensed street fighters or gang members, professionals, and hobbyists.

He said that street fighters in particular try to promote their image and status through the dog, and are attracted to the profitable gambling and breeding aspect of the sport. While many rings originate in inner cities, Roach said that they often move out into more rural areas where there is more space for larger crowds and more lax law enforcement.

Though motives for engaging in the sport might differ, the social impact on the local community can be troublesome.

"They make people prisoners in their own communities," Roach said, noting that people are afraid to even walk outside to let their pets out to play in the backyard.

In addition to these aggressive dogs that often can't distinguish between another dog and a small child, the game breeds a subculture where illegal gambling, drug use and guns are common.

Young child spectators can grow up insensitive to animal cruelty, enthusiastic about violence, and disrespectful of the law, reported the National Humane Society. Roach said a survey of Chicago middle schoolers showed that 38-40 percent of the third to sixth graders had witnessed a dogfight. Even teenage girls are lured to the crowds where they hope to meet young men, he said.

### **Dogfighting Busted**

Congress recently passed the Animal Fighting Prohibition Enforcement Act, which provides for a three-year jail sentence and fines of up to \$250,000 for interstate animal fighting, according to Massachusetts veterinarian and author Nicholas Dodman.

But state laws vary, and the crime is only a misdemeanor in some states like Wyoming and Idaho.

In other states like Georgia, the law requires that police catch dogfighters in the act before they can make an arrest, making the prosecution of these crimes difficult and long, said Smith of the Humane Society. Experts said that fines and low jail times are just a slap on the wrist, and are written off as a minor cost of the highly lucrative industry.

Advocates and veterinarians alike agree that there is room for stricter and more consistent state laws against dogfighting, and a growing need for widespread education campaigns to combat this deadly pastime.

"While it's regrettable that it takes an Atlanta Falcons football star to draw national attention to the issue, we are hoping that the NFL and others will use this as an opportunity to show their support, change the law, and give these innocent animals a voice," said the Atlanta Humane Society.

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