



THE COSTS OF  
Bridging





## Special Report////////////////////

In the aftermath of Michael Vick's indictment last July, gory descriptions of dogfighting culture shocked a nation unaccustomed to seeing what animal shelter employees and humane officers witness every day. Cruelty investigators and kennel care staff plagued by the bloodsport's aftermath suddenly found themselves thrust into the spotlight. But even now, many of the true costs of dogfighting remain obscured from the public. Here's a look at the burdens borne by shelters and law enforcement agencies around the country—and at what community activists and organizations like The Humane Society of the United States are doing to stop a crime that not only hurts dogs but infects communities.

BY NANCY LAWSON

PHOTOS BY MICHELLE RILEY



**Humane agent Jennifer Kulina seized Rita and four other animals the week Michael Vick was indicted.**

**R**ita leaps across the sofa and gnaws the arm of a chair before plopping onto Jennifer Kulina's lap for a belly rub. "How could you ever fight this dog?" Kulina asks, recalling the blood that flowed from the brown pit bull's chin after her rescue from a property in Columbus, Ohio.

Though most of Rita's wounds have healed three weeks later, an abscess beneath her eye still oozes. But away from the Capital Area Humane Society kennel where she bangs her stainless steel food bowl around with her jaws for attention, Rita isn't focused on the nickel-sized chunk of flesh missing from her ear or the scars dotting her legs, chest, and face. She's too busy playing in the shelter's get-acquainted room, running from the Frisbee to the rope toy and back again.

The thought of Rita being forced to fight is one Kulina can barely stomach, she says, but "if you don't think about it, then you can't do anything about it. Dogfighting is my number-one thing I want to end."

A humane agent for the last seven years, Kulina seized Rita and four other dogs from a property with a treadmill, a bottle of injectable antibiotics, and a garage spring hanging from a tree for use as a training device. She filed five counts of animal cruelty against Rita's owner on July 17, the same day Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick was indicted on felony dogfighting charges. A table at Kulina's shelter bears evidence from Rita's case and many others—heavy logging chains used as leashes and tethers, certificates listing champion bloodlines, a "keep journal" detailing treadmill regimens and fight statistics, and a calendar recording breeding dogs' heat cycles along with paydays and birthdays.

"They have no voice," says Kulina of the pit bulls in her community. "I have a chance to be a voice for them. ... It's scary, but it's an honor."

Not much else seems to scare Kulina. One of her friends and partners in crime-fighting, Sgt. David Hunt of the Franklin County Sheriff's Office, calls her "fearless." Suited up each day in a bulletproof vest, Kulina prowls the back alleys and mean streets in search of animals in distress. Many are pit bulls with chewed-up faces, fighting scars, and open wounds. Some she can help, but for others, it's too late.

### A National Epidemic

Central Ohio seems an unlikely hotbed of dogfighting. Home to the nation's largest college campus, Ohio State University, Columbus has fewer than 800,000 residents. Its compact homes with A-frame roofs are typical of a small Midwestern town. But since 2002, the Franklin County Sheriff's Office has served more than 40 dogfighting-related search warrants and secured more than 50 convictions.

Pick a spot anywhere in the United States and you'll find a similar story: If you're not in dogfighting territory, you're not far from it. While Kulina was nursing Rita's wounds, Oregon prosecutors prepared an 11-count indictment of a suspected Portland dogfighter. Police in Florida seized drugs, fighting paraphernalia, and 32 dogs from a Tallahassee property. An animal control officer in Nebraska interrupted a pit-bull street fight staged by teenage boys.

That's just the tip of the iceberg. Though the Vick case has thrust dogfighting into the national spotlight and the conscience of a horrified public, shelter staff around the country know it's hardly a new phenomenon. Once a clandestine activity confined to rural areas of the South, it has spread to inner cities after being embraced as a macho symbol of urban hip-hop culture. While some 40,000 people participate in organized rings with high-stakes betting, The HSUS estimates that at least another 100,000 fight dogs informally for the chance to win a few bucks and bragging rights.



The problem is so widespread that law enforcement officials from South Carolina to New Mexico have established task forces to combat it. Police in Baltimore, Md., are devoting new resources to investigating it. And police in Chicago have nearly doubled their animal abuse investigations capacity by forming a nine-person Animal Crimes Unit that, according to one officer's estimates, spends nearly 75 percent of its time on calls related to dogfighting.

The consequences for local animal shelters are staggering. Nationwide, pit bulls and pit bull mixes comprise up to a third of dog intake; in city facilities, that figure can be as high as 70 percent. Although most animal welfare organizations agree that euthanasia is the safest and most humane option for dogs bred and raised to fight, many shelters must hold them for months until owners are stripped of legal custody.

## The Cost to Shelters

Holding them safely and humanely comes at a high price: Last year, the Houston Humane Society in Texas spent \$133,000 to care for pit bulls seized from a single property. Taxpayers in Franklin County have footed a nearly \$520,000 bill to house dogfighting victims since 2002. And the Montgomery County Animal Resource Center in nearby Dayton has spent \$120,000 on dogs seized in 2006.

A year later, 36 of those dogs—along with 10 more from a neighboring shelter already filled to capacity—still occupy a third of the kennels in Dayton. Until receiving approval to euthanize the others for health and behavior reasons, the agency held 72 dogs seized from fighters for five months; nearly 60 stayed for nine.

"Welcome to the other side of the world," says director Mark Kumpf as he leaves behind a sunny lobby filled with cats lounging in colony rooms and enters the pit-bull housing area. This space is not dark, but it is distinctly different. Vinyl window coverings have been mounted to thwart dogfighters searching for their own confiscated dogs or new ones to steal. Vision-restriction panels between kennels prevent neighboring dogs from attacking each other. Hard plastic beds are frayed like the fringe of a scarf, and a wire that once operated a door pulley has been gnawed in two.

"We had to go back and re-engineer our housing because the dogs were able to literally pull apart the cages," Kumpf says. "They were able to get through the stainless steel guillotine doors because the doors were not large enough and heavy enough to prevent it. They were able to fence-fight by jumping four-plus feet in the air to fight with the dog on the other side of the bars. ... They eat the resting mats, they eat the fiberglass panels, they eat the water bowls off the wall."



**Dogfighters sometimes force their pit bulls to bear heavy burdens around their necks, like these two 10-pound weights seized by Capital Area Humane Society agents.**

Compounding the financial burdens are expenses for 24-hour security, overtime, and loss of labor due to injuries. "I have witnessed ... the friendliest dog in there actually turn around and attack two employees," says Elizabeth Loikoc, a crew leader for the animal care providers at the facility. One employee, she reports, was bitten repeatedly.

Before the conclusion of both its 2006 cases, Montgomery County will have spent more than \$300,000 to shelter the victimized dogs, Kumpf predicts. The emotional toll can be even more draining, he says: "More often than not, [the dogs] end up being euthanized by the very same people who have dedicated a year or more of their lives to taking care of them."

The greatest cost is to the animals themselves. Though shelter workers provide exercise and toys, dogs living in solitary conditions eventually deteriorate. Long-term housing is hard on any animal, but even more so on those born and raised in environments designed to increase their anxiety and aggression. Kennelled for long periods, they become as physically vulnerable as nursing home patients, says Kumpf. Their immune systems are compromised, their muscles can atrophy, and they often develop lick granulomas—a condition Kumpf likens to bed sores.

"I really like pit bulls. They're wonderful dogs. They're very loyal; they have wonderful personalities," he says. "But they are just being absolutely corrupted

The Montgomery County Animal Resource Center in Dayton, Ohio, will spend more than \$300,000 on housing dogs seized in two fighting cases last year, predicts director Mark Kumpf (pictured).



and destroyed by these people in the fighting industry, and then we in the shelter are left to care for them in a situation that turns them into victims a second time."

### The Impact on Law Enforcement

Back in Kumpf's office is a copy of the "The Final Round," an HSUS video used to educate prosecutors, judges, and police. Nationwide, HSUS experts train law enforcement personnel, advocate for stronger penalties, and assist local, state, and federal investigators.

"A lot of what we do, we're treading new ground," says Officer Jim Conlan of Chicago's Animal Crimes Unit, which works closely with The HSUS. Dogfighters know no boundaries—as Conlan says, "it is international, it is interracial, it is inter-economic"—so police and cruelty investigators need to form networks of their own to catch them.

Seventy percent of people arrested for crimes against animals have also been arrested for other felonies, according to a study by the Chicago Police Department. The connection to other violent offenses means that cracking down on a dogfighter can help police "take out a whole miniature crime syndicate," says Hunt, who first contacted The HSUS after spotting dogfighting paraphernalia during a 2002 narcotics raid. "It's like one-stop shopping."

As a deputy sheriff in Franklin County, Hunt is a pioneer in a field that's only just beginning to treat dogfighting as a serious crime. Though hesitant to say so on record, some police and animal control officers handling animal abuse investigations have faced scorn from judges, prosecutors, and superiors. While the Vick case has helped underscore the need for training in enforcement of animal laws, many jurisdictions still don't provide it. Hunt helps where he can: Though his caseload includes gambling and child pornography investigations, he has joined The HSUS in training other law enforcement agencies, taught investigators for the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), and testified in Congress in support of the felony animal fighting law enacted last May.

Without assistance from investigators like Hunt, those animal control agencies with no arrest authority are powerless to pursue cases. As director Bob Anderson of the Baltimore Bureau of Animal Control says, "In your heart you may suspect dogfighting, but your heart doesn't hold up in court." Over the years, Anderson has identified patterns of cruelty possibly linked to fighting: pit bulls set on fire and thrown in dumpsters; dogs abandoned in vacant houses with bags of food; dogs entering the shelter with fighting scars. Once helpless to do anything, Anderson celebrates the recent decision to devote police manpower to dogfight-

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ing investigations as “one of the best things to ever happen to animal control.”

When law enforcement gets involved, dogfighters pay attention. A few months ago, Hunt’s agency followed two Columbus men south toward the Kentucky border. “When they came back, we arrested them,” says Hunt. “And when I was interviewing them, I said, ‘Listen, both you guys are from Columbus. Why’d you go all the way down to Jackson County to fight?’ And they both looked at me and said, ‘Well, it’s to get away from you. We didn’t think you’d go that far.’”

### Changing the Culture

Not all dogfighters are so mobile. While professional fighters in organized rings enjoy middle-class lifestyles and gamble thousands of dollars on their animals, many streetfighters grow up in a world of poverty, guns, and drugs. Trapped in a lifelong cycle of violence, they have few role models beyond the gang members whose dogfighting activities are glorified by hip-hop artists like Jay-Z and DMX.

Many children growing up in such circumstances don’t envision living past their 20s, says Elliott Serrano, a community outreach specialist for the Anti-Cruelty Society in Chicago. Their pessimism is not unreasonable: one participant in Serrano’s anti-dogfighting



workshop at a youth correctional facility was killed by a rival gang member the day he was paroled.

“You’re talking about kids who have very few options in life,” says Serrano. “They don’t know that there’s something beyond this. They are being brought up in an environment where they can be killed any time.”

An Anti-Cruelty Society survey found that one in five children in Chicago has seen a dogfight. Other estimates put that number at four out of five. The figures seem impossibly high—until you see battle-scarred pit bulls cruising the streets of cities across America at the heels of kids young enough to be in grade school. “I took two half-dead pits from 10-year-olds walking in the neighborhood,” says Debra Boswell of the Mississippi Animal Rescue League in Jackson. “One was so weak it was staggering and the back end was going out from under it. ... It is an epidemic here.”

**This dog was seized in Franklin County, Ohio, where the sheriff’s office has secured more than 50 dogfighting-related convictions since 2002.**



Pit bulls are a commodity on the streets of Chicago: Violence interrupter Antonio Pickett (shown far right with friend Leslie Harris) often has to deflect offers from people wanting to buy or breed the three-month-old puppy he rescued.



One participant in Elliott Serrano's anti-dogfighting workshop was killed by a rival gang member the day he was paroled. A community outreach specialist at the Anti-Cruelty Society in Chicago, Serrano (above) presents the workshop at area schools and a youth correctional facility.

Children wrap ropes and belts around pit bulls' necks before heading off in search of fights, says Michael Cox, a "violence interrupter" recently hired by HSUS consultant Tio Hardiman to change attitudes toward dogfighting in Chicago. A symbol of strength and status, the dogs become accessories, often forced to wear heavy chains because, as one young Columbus man with a scarred pit bull explains, "it's the kind of collar you would put on a bully dog. It looks good."

Pit bulls are a kind of currency in the dogfighting world, their value assessed by how much cash their jaws or genes will earn. Peddling puppies can prove as lucrative as dealing drugs; one Ohio dogfighter traded selling cocaine for breeding pit bulls, recalls Franklin County deputy dog warden Rob Lambert, because the profits were higher. Young dogs are attention-getters in the inner city: Making his rounds one night with a dog he'd rescued, violence interrupter Antonio Pickett had to fend off drive-by offers from young men intent on buying or breeding the three-month-old puppy. The solicitations weren't unusual in Chicago's 15th District, Pickett noted; earlier in the day, five or six people had tried to buy the dog from his fiancée.

Natives of the area, Pickett and Cox have both had their share of troubles with the law and understand the motivations of their longtime neighbors. Now they are spreading the gospel of reform—one person, one dog, one community at a time. “I try to show them that the drug dealer or the gangbanger is not the only role model,” says Cox, a substance abuse counselor. “You can become successful doing other things ... and living legitimately and not being involved in a life of crime.”

In their new role on the streets, the violence interrupters have already piqued children’s interests in dog behavior training and other humane alternatives to fighting. “They [need] something else to do with their dogs ...” Pickett says. “They’re always asking, ‘When are you going to bring the trainer?’”

Children accustomed to seeing pit bulls used as “loaded guns,” as Cox puts it, are leery of dogs and unlikely to view them in another light. But a pilot program started by the Dog Advisory Work Group (D.A.W.G.) offers hope. Working with Chicago police and local ministers, D.A.W.G. is holding sessions that teach kids about humane treatment and demonstrate dog agility. Initially scared, children clamor to pet the dogs by session’s end, says Cynthia Bathurst, executive director and court advocacy chair of the Chicago nonprofit.

Ending dogfighting requires not just strong penalties but social remedies. In a nation of haves and have-nots where Americans spend billions each year on their pets, many children and animals languish in the streets without help or hope. Pit bulls represent status, style, and instant gratification. It is too easy to look away, but humane officers, police, community activists, and organizations like The HSUS are confronting the problem head-on.

“This is about stopping the violence,” says Bathurst. “When you understand how all of this violence is interconnected and how it has to do with respect in some ways for oneself and for other living beings, then you can get the whole community engaged.” **AS**

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