HSUS Helps Bust Cruel Dogfights

Thirty-Eight Arrested in Raids in Georgia and Ohio

For the 100 or so men, women, and children who gathered in an unused barn near Augusta, Georgia, it was going to be just another Saturday night's entertainment. They’d planned to have a good time; eating, drinking, and betting on and watching dogfights—brutal battles between dogs which had been painstakingly bred and trained to try to kill one another.

The crowd cheered wildly as two American Pit Bull Terriers savagely tore at each other. The last thing they expected was a raid. But near 1:00 a.m., Georgia Bureau of Investigation (GBI) agents, assisted by HSUS Director of Field Service and Investigations Frantz Dantzler, surrounded the barn, and put an end to the cruel Saturday night “fun.” The raid was made possible by a tip Dantzler provided seven months earlier.

When it was all over, 18 people had been arrested, not only for dogfighting, but also on a variety of other charges, ranging from selling unlicensed beer to cocaine possession. Several were charged with cruelty to animals, which is a misdemeanor in Georgia, despite the fact that it is probably the most brutal of the so-called blood sports.

The Georgia raid was only one of several recent successes in the fight to put an end to dogfighting. Last spring, Dantzler testified before a state legislative committee in Ohio that was considering a bill to upgrade dogfighting from a misdemeanor to a felony. According to Dantzler, the bill which passed and became law in June of 1980 is one of the nation’s best.

It didn’t take long to demonstrate the new law’s effectiveness. An investigation planned jointly by The HSUS Great Lakes Regional Office and several local animal welfare and law enforcement agencies enabled an undercover investigator to penetrate that state’s underground dogfighting fraternity.

Testimony provided by the investigator last fall resulted in the handing down of forty indictments against twenty people in five counties and the confiscation of 39 dogs. By spring, 1981, the seventeen trials conducted under the new law had produced seventeen convictions, and the best documented cases had not even come to trial yet!
A typical dogfight "convention" (a schedule of several matches) takes weeks or months of planning by promoters and participants and often involves dogs from several states or even other countries. The primary way dogfighters communicate with each other is through the several magazines and newsletters which contain articles of interest to dogfighters and advertisements for dogfighting paraphernalia. Dogs available for sale or at stud, as well as dogs who are "open to match,"" are advertised. Dogs are matched by weight and sex, and contracts are drawn up and signed. Most matches are arranged by telephone.

Conventions are typically held on weekends, often in remote locales. Security is tight, and spectators must go through several security checks before they are led to the site, which may not be decided on until shortly before the convention is scheduled to begin.

Dogfighting is an expensive pastime, both for spectators and participants. The average admission fee is $35, which usually buys a no-frills seat on a bleacher. Betting is vigorous, and the stakes are very high. At the Georgia raid, authorities confiscated more than $40,000, and that was only a shake of the head, a "turn" is called and the dogs are parted with a stick and returned to their corners so the blood can be sponged away. The dog on whom the turn was called must then attack the other dog (called "scratching") for the fight to resume. This continues until one of the dogs loses because it cannot or will not scratch to its opponent. Frequently a pit bull, carefully bred for aggressiveness, will continue to try to fight until it passes out or dies. Even dogs who win fights often die days or weeks later from their injuries. Dantzler estimates that few dogs ever engage in more than three fights during their "careers." Many die after a single encounter.

What Are The Laws? How Do They Work?

Despite the fact that dogfighting is illegal in all fifty states and under federal law, most dogfighters don't get caught, and those that do get off easily. After the Georgia raid, all animal cruelty charges against those arrested were dropped, despite the overwhelming evidence found at the premises, including the mangled dogs themselves. Penalties are too lenient to act as an effective deterrent in Georgia. The laws governing dogfighting vary widely from state to state, and enforcement varies even more widely. The Federal Animal Welfare Act was amended in 1976 to specifically outlaw dogfighting, including making it illegal to use the U.S. Postal Service to promote animal fighting ventures, but federal enforcement of the provisions has been virtually nonexistent. Last year, The HSUS sued the government for failure to enforce the law. A pre-trial ruling in the government's favor is being appealed. The key to ending dogfighting, according to Dantzler, is not only passing good laws, but seeing to it they are effectively enforced. "The best law is no good without good enforcement," he said. "Dogfighting is a big business in this country. It's going on all the time, and encouraged by lax law enforcement, it's spreading."

What Is A Dogfight?

Dogfights are sadistic contests that fans vehemently defend as sport. Because dogfighting is illegal, dogfighters are understandably secretive about their activities. In fact, they are so successful at being secretive that most Americans don't even know the activity exists. "Too many of those who do know about it," Dantzler says, "are under the impression that it's an activity that's dying out." Nothing could be further from the truth. Dantzler says that not only is dogfighting growing in popularity here in the U.S., but also in Japan, Germany, Canada, England, and parts of South America.

In the U.S., dogfights are most prevalent in the Southeast, Southwest, Great Lakes region, and California. However, HSUS investigators have information documenting dogfights in practically every state in the U.S.
fighting fraternity. It is often information that only we are interested in providing that enables dogfighters to be caught and arrested.

It is clear that our work is paying off. In the last year alone, we have assisted in putting together successful raids in at least five states, resulting in more than 100 arrests and eighteen convictions, including the first conviction under the federal Animal Welfare Act. Many others arrested at the dogfights have yet to come to trial.

As part of our efforts to end dogfighting, The HSUS is also:
• Conducting law enforcement seminars for local animal welfare agencies, animal control departments, and police departments, explaining how to conduct investigations and successful raids;
• Working with law enforcement agencies developing information on specific fights;
• Testifying before state legislatures trying to upgrade laws; and
• Working to expose this abomination to the American public through the media and mailings like this one.

Last year when the Lou Grant Show did an episode on dogfighting, with technical assistance provided by an HSUS investigator, millions of viewers were made aware of this barbaric activity.

What You Can Do To Help...

Because The HSUS is one of the few national organizations investing significant amounts of time and money to combat dogfighting, we desperately need the help of our members and others concerned with the welfare of animals. It is likely that dogfights occur in your state or even your community. Here are a few suggestions for how you can help us end this cruel enterprise:

• Find out what the laws pertaining to dogfighting are in your area. If you hear of a dogfighting arrest near you, write to your state's Attorney General to urge stiff penalties for those convicted of participating in this outrageous activity.

• If you hear of a dogfight planned for your area or one that's already happened, let us know. Remember that weapons, drugs, and violence go hand in hand with dogfighting, so it's better to leave investigations and raids to trained professionals.

• Help spread the word about cruel dogfighting. Use the information in this report to write letters to local officials and law enforcement agencies. Start your own dogfighting awareness campaign.

• Finally, support HSUS's efforts to end dogfighting by sending a tax-deductible contribution today. Your help is critical if we are to continue our exhaustive and often expensive investigations into this barbaric activity. Please use the enclosed postage-paid envelope to send your gift to help The HSUS help the animals!