Words alone—no matter how descriptive—cannot adequately portray the sickening reality of the sport of dogfighting. The sounds, the smells, the unforgettable sights of this degrading, bizarre spectacle are enough to revolt all but the most degenerate members of the human race.

How can anyone derive satisfaction from watching two dogs tear each other apart? How can anyone sit for hours, not only watching but cheering every wound, every broken leg or mangled eye?

We can only guess the answers to such questions. What we do know is that every weekend, hundreds of men, women, and children attend dogfights, enjoying the blood and excitement of dogs matched to the death and even wagering on the outcome. Virtually anyplace—a vacant garage, warehouse, apartment building basement, or city park—can house a dog pit. A picturesque farmhouse or barn may hold hundreds of spectators brought out in cold or heat or dead of night for a marathon of blood, gore, and misery.

...His face is a mass of deep cuts, as are his shoulders and neck. Both of his front legs have been broken, but Billy Bear isn't ready to quit. At the referee's signal, his master releases him, and unable to support himself on his front legs, he slides on his chest across the blood- and urine-stained carpet, propelled by his good hind legs toward the opponent who rushes to meet him. Driven by instinct, intensive training and love for the owner who has brought him to this moment, Billy Bear drives himself painfully into the other dog's charge....Less than 20 minutes later, rendered useless by the other dog, Billy Bear lies spent beside his master, his stomach constricted with pain. He turns his head back toward the ring, his glazed eyes searching for a last look at the other dog as he receives a bullet in his brain.

—Craig M. Brown
Atlanta Magazine
Exposé on Dogfighting
For years, Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) investigators have conducted undercover operations in an effort to infiltrate dogfight rings, and many have witnessed this illegal activity firsthand. The cruelties they've reported have been unpeachable—dogs with ears, lips, and genitals dangling from their bodies; coats splattered with blood; and faces so swollen victims could neither breathe properly nor open their eyes. Despite their own heroic efforts to save injured dogs, investigators recall in all-too-vivid detail those animals that have bled to death before their very eyes. Those images, like the faces of cheering dogfight spectators, are burned into investigators' memories and serve as impetus for their tireless efforts to wipe out this repugnant sport and lock away all those involved.

In addition, HSUS investigators have repeatedly testified before state legislatures, imploring lawmakers to upgrade penalties for this crime. We believe that felony laws accompanied by stiff fines and lengthy prison terms are the only effective deterrents to participation in this sadistic sport. The result: since 1975, 29 state legislatures have declared dogfighting a felony offense. Despite even this, however, some dogfight participants seem determined, at any cost, to continue fighting man's best friend to the bloody end.

Anatomy of a Dogfight

While the American Pit Bull Terrier—the most commonly fought breed—averages only about 40-50 pounds, its jaws are extraordinarily muscular and are capable of breaking an opponent's leg in a matter of seconds. Due to generations of selective breeding for a combative disposition, along with a grueling training regimen that cultivates the animal's blood instincts, it's virtually impossible to keep fighting dogs from attacking each other once they have eyed an opponent. To begin a contest, both dogs are carried into a makeshift pit—a 20-foot-square plywood ring with 2½-foot-high walls—and placed in their respective corners. On the referee's command of "Face your dogs," the animals are turned toward each other, and with the words "Let 'er go!" are released to square off in what's often a fight to the death.

Once an animal has a firm hold on another, jaws lock in place. As the dog holds the hold savagely tears and shakes its competitor, blood and urine spatter everywhere, staining pit walls, carpet, even the referee's clothing. Despite serious injuries incurred early on in the match—puncture wounds, large gashes, broken bones, and internal injuries—these animals will continue to grapple with each other, often until they collapse. Injured dogs are dragged out of the pit.

Aashamed of a losing dog, an owner may destroy his animal with a bullet to the brain or a knife to the throat. "Sometimes, the owner's just stoned on drugs," says HSUS North Central Regional director Frantz Damdiler, "but more often it's a breeder trying to establish a reputation for selling quality dogs. He doesn't want anyone to think he'll be selling the puppies of a loser."

The fact is, losers aren't the only ones that die. According to insiders, more than 50 percent of all dogs involved in a match die within days or weeks of a fight from the injuries they've sustained. That's not surprising, however, considering the fact that dogfighters can't run to the vet with battered animals for fear of being turned over to authorities. Instead, using tape or cat gut to close up gaping wounds, owners do the jobs themselves. According to one dogfighter interviewed by the Los Angeles Times, "We carry all the equipment and can stitch them up right there. If they're bleeding alot," he said, "we put pepper or coffee grounds on the wound."

a fight, dogs are maintained on rigid diets and pushed to their endurance limits. Some animals may walk 20 miles a day (their owners drive, of course), while others do hours of grueling roadwork on treadmills. Extremely popular among trainers is the "catmill," a wheel-like device that resembles a miniature horse walker. A dog is chained to one spoke, frantically chases a cat fastened to a spoke just out of its reach. After hours of pursuing the bait, the dog receives it as a reward.

Puppies and adult dogs used as bait or sparring partners are often adopted from pounds under false pretenses or simply stolen from owners' backyards. On several occasions, such pets have been recovered—some dead, others alive. Their bodies scars attest to their ordeals.

The "Bloodsport Underground"

For years, the large, underground network of dogfighters—devotes in virtually every state and social stratum—has gone to extremes to keep its activities tightly under wraps. In fact, so cautious are fight organizers that, until the last possible moment, even attendees are kept in the dark as to the fight's whereabouts. Only minutes before a fight is scheduled to begin are patrons rounded up from various obscure meeting places and conveyed to the site. There, they must go through a series of security checks, and once inside, no one is permitted to leave until the fights are over, for fear the authorities will be tipped off.

"Consequently, it takes months of undercover investigations to raid one of these fights," says HSUS investigator Bob Baker. "It's for this reason that police officers have been reluctant to become involved. Also, law enforcement agencies feel it isn't worth the kind of time and manpower to infiltrate fights if a judge was just going to slap offenders with a $50 fine and let them off the hook."

Not only do misdemeanor penalties fail to provide incentives for police officers to crack down on fighters, they don't serve as deterrents for dogfight participants either. A fine of $25 or $50 dollars are bet at these fights," says Baker, explaining that a recent Arkansas raid resulted in a quantity of a million dollars in cash, along with the largest cache of illegal weapons and drugs ever seized in that state. "The promoters, dogfighting is a big, money-making business. To them, a $50 fine is nothing more than an inconvenience."

There are the very reasons The HSUS has been working to take dogfighting out of the backwoods and warehouses and bring it to the attention of state legislators. Only by upgrading the penalties for this violent crime have we been able to spur law enforcement agencies into taking aggressive action against dogfighters.

"In those states where dogfighting is now a felony offense," says HSUS Southeast Regional director Marc Paulhus, "police officers and vice squads are often called to bust dogfighting. What's most amazing," he continues, "is that instead of us bringing law enforcement agencies for their assistance, now they're coming to us with leads."
And cooperative efforts between authorities and The HSUS are paying off. With our help, police departments have begun pursuing dogfighters aggressively; during the last five years, we’ve seen a dramatic rise in the number of raids, arrests, and convictions of both fighters and spectators.

Unfortunately, just because we’ve prompted authorities to do their jobs doesn’t mean that ours is complete. America’s dogfighters, now fearful of the consequences a dogfight conviction can bring (in some states, it’s up to five years in prison; in others, it’s a $50,000 fine), have retreated further underground, making it more difficult than ever for outsiders to penetrate their rings. What’s more, due to the unprecedented popularity of pit bulls, we’ve seen a dramatic increase in the number of unorganized, impromptu street fights. Dogfighting, which used to be a backwoods affair, is now taking place in the heart of major metropolitan areas. In fact, fifty spectators were recently apprehended while cheering and betting on a dogfight in a Brooklyn, New York park!

For these reasons, HSUS investigators are continuing their efforts to infiltrate dogfight rings. Undercover operations have proven to be exceedingly dangerous; our investigators have been threatened, followed, and even shot at! Yet such operations have enabled them to provide law enforcement agencies with invaluable information that, time and again, has lead to subsequent raids.

HSUS investigators have also been crisscrossing the country, conducting training seminars to provide local and state authorities with information on how to combat dogfighting in their areas. Our agents recently assisted the city of Chicago in devising a manual to help police officers tackle this growing problem. It’s the first time a major metropolitan city has taken an active interest in pursuing dogfighters.

Because there’s been an influx of dogfighters into states where the activity remains a misdemeanor, HSUS investigators continue to travel from state to state testifying for tougher penalties. And, time and again, they’ve served as expert witnesses in the courtroom to ensure that dogfighters receive their just punishments. Thanks to the recent testimony of regional director Marc Paulhus, three of the country’s most notorious dogfighters nabbed in a Georgia raid received the longest prison sentences on record for their offenses.

Finally, The HSUS is offering a reward of up to $1,000 to anyone providing information leading to the arrest and conviction of dogfight participants. In the past, such rewards have proven to be extremely effective in apprehending these criminals.

The HSUS has been intimately involved in this battle every step of the way. Already, we’ve had a significant impact on legislation affecting dogfighters, but our investigators must continue in their exhaustive efforts to eradicate this cold-blooded cruelty. After all, thousands of loyal pit bull terriers, and even more innocent kittens and puppies used as bait, are depending on us to end their suffering.

Contact your state legislators to find out if dogfighting is a felony offense in your state. If not, join forces with others in your area to initiate a campaign to toughen penalties for this crime. Distribute HSUS dogfighting fact sheets to state legislators to educate them to the atrocities of this activity. Send $1.00 for 25 fact sheets, or $1.50 for 50, with the enclosed coupon to The HSUS.

Educate local and state law enforcement officials to the seriousness of this problem. Encourage them to become actively involved in enforcing laws to wipe out such blatant cruelty. Inform them that The HSUS can provide materials and recommendations to help them combat this problem in their areas.

Finally, help The HSUS end this depravity and the ruthless exploitation of pets for human amusement. Your tax-deductible contribution will enable our investigators to continue infiltrating dogfight rings, training law enforcers, and fighting for tougher penalties in those states where participation in this vile sport is not yet a felony. Please use the enclosed postage-paid envelope to send your contribution today.

Not all pit bulls are as lucky as this one. For thousands of loyal pets each year, dogfighting spells a bitter and bloody conclusion.