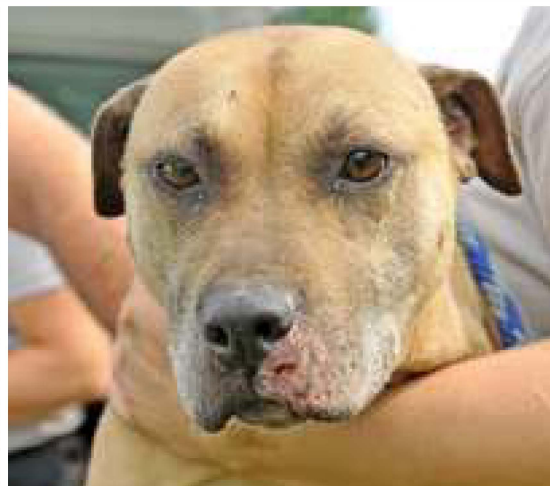




Kept outside in makeshift doghouses or on heavy chains, many of the dogs had fighting scars. Dogfighters use jerry-rigged treadmills to build the animals' strength and endurance.



LOCATION: Kearneysville, West Virginia

ANIMALS SAVED: 21 American pit bull terriers and one Rottweiler

THE DOGFIGHTING EVIDENCE on the rural West Virginia property was overwhelming: a treadmill for dog conditioning; a pole with chewed animal hide on the end for sharpening body/eye coordination; scales for keeping to-the-ounce track of each dog's weight, since inaccuracies mean automatic forfeit in scheduled fights.

The Jefferson County Sheriff's Office had called The HSUS in late 2014 for help investigating a lead on the dogfighter. "We'd been aware of this individual for years," says Janette Reever, HSUS deputy manager of animal fighting response. "Whenever we work with authorities on a case, we comb through evidence. His name came up in many search warrants, whether it was phone records, text messages or in contact lists of other dogfighters."

Reever met with the sheriff's office to start building a case. By June, they had enough evidence to search the property.

Outside, living alone in kennels or on chains so heavy they could haul a boat, were 21 muscle-bound dogs. Of those, 14 bore injuries and scars consistent with fighting. One young dog's face and front legs were covered in freshly healed wounds. "When two dogs are fighting, they go right at one another and start grabbing until they

get a good hold," Reever says, "whether it's on the face or legs."

The garage held a carpeted fighting pit. "The carpet gives the dogs traction when they're fighting," explains Reever, "especially as blood spills and mixes on the floor with their saliva and sweat." The suspect had tried to clean the area, but a forensic light glowed fluorescent blue where blood had splattered on the carpet and walls.

The dogs with no scars were either too young to fight or used only for breeding, like one old girl found alone in a kennel. "She was probably about 13 years old and had an eye infection," Reever says. "She was one of those dogs who would just melt when you came towards her, kind of get low in anticipation of being touched."

Her name was Annie, and it was obvious from her enlarged mammary area that she'd been bred repeatedly. At the temporary shelter, Annie's little white face and kind demeanor charmed everyone. "She came out of the transport kennel wagging her tail," Reever remembers, "just wanting to be petted."

The other dogs are also on the mend. "The staff is very familiar with these types of dogs as trauma victims," Reever says. Following the rescue, they received a consistent routine and quiet space to relax. Now they're being stepped through confidence- and trust-building exercises, with adoption as the final goal.

The dogfighter, on the other hand, is looking at 14 felony counts of animal fighting. "Each felony carries up to five years in jail and \$5,000 per count," Reever says. "He could be looking at up to 70 years behind bars."