

ASPCA Dog fighting Backgrounder/ FAQ's

Q. When and how did dog fighting come to America?

A. Although there are historical accounts of dog fights going back to the 1750's, widespread activity emerged after the Civil War, with professional pits proliferating in the 1860's, mainly in the Northeast. Many of the animals were brought from England and Ireland, where dog fighting had begun to flourish after bull-baiting and bear-baiting became illegal in the 1830's. Ironically, it was a common entertainment for police officers and firemen, and the "Police Gazette" served as a major source of information on dog fighting for many years. Although many laws were passed outlawing the activity, dog fighting continued to expand throughout the 20th century.

Q. What has been the role of the ASPCA in combating dog fighting over the years? How does it do so today?

A. Henry Bergh, founder of the ASPCA, was particularly repulsed by the brutality of the dog fighting he saw in New York and elsewhere. His 1867 revision of the state's animal cruelty law made **all** forms of animal fighting illegal for the first time, including bull, bear, dog and cock fighting. The involvement of regular police in dog fighting activity was one of the reasons Bergh sought and received authority for the ASPCA to have arrest powers for his own humane law enforcement agents to enforce these tough new laws.

One year later ASPCA agents arrested Kit Burns, proprietor of "Sportmen's Hall," one of the largest dog fighting pits in New York. Burns said, "... if Bergh persists in interfering with dog-fighting, it will dig the grave of his Society." Eventually Burns had to rent out the Hall for prayer meetings.



Figure 1: The arrest of Kit Burns by ASPCA officers, May 8, 1868

Throughout its history, the ASPCA has fought for stronger laws against all forms of animal cruelty. A 1981 report commissioned by the ASPCA entitled “Dog fighting in America: A National Overview,” concluded that dog fighting was more widespread than the public or law enforcement imagined and that stronger laws at the state and federal level were needed.

Today, the ASPCA incorporates information on blood sports in the animal cruelty trainings it provides in New York’s police academies as well as in police officer trainings around the country. It also provides training on a national level to animal control officers and veterinarians on how to identify the signs of animal cruelty, as well as in crime scene investigation (CSI). In addition, the ASPCA regularly provides training and assistance to prosecutors on how to build an effective case against those charged with these crimes, and its experts often serve as witnesses in many such cases. In fact, several ASPCA staff have published educational and reference books on animal cruelty investigation and prosecution, which are widely referred to all around the country.

Q. Who is involved in dog fighting?

A. Most law enforcement experts divide dogfight activity into three categories: street fighting, hobbyist fighting and professional activity:

- **“Street”** fighters engage in dog fights that are informal, street corner, back alley and playground activities. Stripped of the rules and formality of the traditional pit fight, these are spontaneous events triggered by insults, turf invasions or the simple taunt, “My dog can kill yours.” Many of these participants lack even a semblance of respect for the animals they fight, forcing them to train while wearing heavy chains to build stamina, and picking street fights in which they could get seriously hurt. Many of the dogs are bred to be a threat not only to other dogs, but to people as well—with tragic consequences.

“Street” fights are frequently associated with gang activities. The fights may be conducted with money, drugs or bragging rights as the primary payoff. There is often no attempt to care for animals injured in the fight and police or animal control officers frequently encounter dead or dying animals in the aftermath of such fights. This activity is very difficult to respond to unless it is reported immediately.

“Professional” fighters and “hobbyists” decry the techniques and results of these newcomers to the “sport.”

- **“Hobbyist”** fighters are more organized, with one or more dogs participating in several organized fights a year as a sideline for both “entertainment” and to attempt to supplement income. They pay more attention to care and breeding of the dogs and are more likely to be traveling across state lines for events.
- **“Professional”** dog fighters often have large numbers of animals (often 50 or more) and earn money from breeding, selling and fighting dogs at a central location and on the road. They often pay particular attention to promoting established winning bloodlines and to long-term conditioning of animals. They regularly dispose of animals that are not successful fighters or breeders using a variety of methods,

including shooting and blunt force trauma. Unlike “professional” dog fighters of the past, both “professionals” and “hobbyists” of today may dispose of dogs that are too human-aggressive for the pit by selling them to “street” fighters or others who are simply looking for an aggressive dog—thus contributing to the dog bite problem.

In recent years a fourth category of dog fighters seems to be emerging, with some wealthier individuals from the sports and entertainment worlds allegedly using their financial resources to promote “professional” dog fighting enterprises, which essentially use the philosophy and training techniques usually associated with street fighting.

Q. How widespread is dog fighting in America?

A. As with any other illegal underground activity, it is impossible to determine how many people may be involved in dog fighting. Estimates based on fight reports in underground dog fighting publications, and on animals entering shelters with evidence of fighting, suggest that the number of people involved in dog fighting in the U.S. is in the tens of thousands.

While organized dog fighting activity seemed to decline in the 1990’s, many law enforcement and animal control officials feel that it has rebounded in recent years. Street fighting has reportedly continued to grow as a significant component of urban crime. The Internet has also made it easier for dog fighters to rapidly exchange information about animals and fights.

Dog fighting has been reported in urban, suburban and rural settings in all regions of the country. Fighters were traditionally attracted to states with weaker penalties for dog fighting and animal cruelty, many in the South—but these laws have generally been made stronger throughout the country. As a result, this activity is no longer limited to any single area, but it is more likely to thrive wherever enforcement of these laws is weak.

Q. What types of people are involved in dog fighting?

A. Just as dog fighting cuts across many regions of the country, participants and spectators at dogfights are a diverse group. While some might typify dog fighting as a symptom of urban decay, not every dog fighter is economically disadvantaged. There are people who promote or participate in dog fighting from every community and background. Audiences contain lawyers, judges and teachers drawn in by the excitement and thrill of the blood sport.

Although many people associate dog fighting themes and images with “hip-hop” or “rap” culture, this is a relatively recent addition to an enterprise that has been active for more than a century and half. Ironically, some of this change is related to attempts to ban pit bulls. Whenever pit bulls are outlawed, the ownership of the breed and association with dog fighting can become an “outlaw” status symbol.

Q. What other crimes are associated with dog fighting?

A. Many of the practices associated with the raising and training of fighting dogs can be prosecuted separately as animal abuse or neglect. In addition, dog fighting, by its very

nature, involves illegal gambling. Dog fighters often face additional charges related to drug, alcohol and weapons violations as well as probation violations. Arguments over dog fights have also resulted in incidents that have led to charges of assault and even homicide. Other charges might include conspiracy, corruption of minors, money laundering, as well as several others.

Q. Why do people get involved in dog fighting?

A. There are many reasons people are attracted to dog fighting. The most basic is greed. Major dog fight raids have resulted in seizures of more than \$500,000, and it is not unusual for \$20,000 - \$30,000 to change hands in a single fight. Stud fees and the sale of pups from promising bloodlines can also bring in thousands of dollars. For others, the attraction lies in using the animals as an extension of themselves to fight their battles for them, and demonstrate their strength and prowess. However, when a dog loses, this can cause the owner of the dog to lose not only money, but status, and may lead to brutal actions against the dog. For many, the appeal simply seems to come from the sadistic enjoyment of a brutal spectacle.

Q. What dogs are used in dog fighting?

A. Although there are many breeds of dogs used for fighting worldwide, the dog of choice for fighting in America is the American Pit Bull Terrier. In addition, Boxers and Presa Canarios have also been used in this blood sport. Occasionally Doberman Pinschers or German Shepherds are reportedly used in street fights, or as “bait dogs” to train fighting dogs. “Professional” fighters and many “hobby” fighters seek dogs from known and proven fighting bloodlines. Other fighters unfortunately have a readily available supply of pit bulls of unknown origins and experience.

In the early days of dog fighting, the Bull Terrier was the dog of choice for this brutal blood sport, but it was replaced in the early 20th century by the American Pit Bull Terrier. One of the most popular dogs of the time, the American Pit Bull Terrier was noted for its strength, intelligence and devotion to its master. Responsible breeders who breed pit bulls as pets have generally selected **against** the high degree of aggression to other animals seen in fighting lines, while preserving the many desirable qualities of the breed. Dog fighters, on the other hand, have exploited these good qualities while placing the emphasis on “gameness,” or the willingness to engage in prolonged combat.

Q. Can all dogs be trained to fight?

A. No; it is important to understand that not just any dog can be trained to fight. Much like herding dogs, trailing dogs and other breeds selected for particular roles, fighting dogs are born ready for the training that will prepare them to succeed in the pit.

Staged fights are not the same as the flare-ups seen in dog runs or sometimes among dogs in the same home. Much like the fights among their wolf ancestors, most fights among dogs end quickly, with one submitting to the other. The winner typically accepts the submission signal of rolling over, and ends the encounter with no further violence. Subsequent encounters between these two dogs frequently involve no more than a highly

stylized ballet of positions and expressions that reconfirm their relationship of dominant and subordinate.

To breed successful fighting dogs, this aspect of their behavior had to be eliminated. Fighting dogs will continue to attack, regardless of the submission signals of an opponent. Similarly, these dogs will continue to fight even though badly injured.

“Gameness”—a dog’s willingness or desire to fight—is the most admired trait in fighting dogs. Great attention is paid to sires and dams that are game and, more importantly, are able to pass this quality on to their progeny. The owner of a grand champion—a dog that has won five contests—can sell the dog’s pups for at least \$1,500 apiece. The serious dog fighter is as familiar with the bloodlines of dogs as any equine aficionado is of thoroughbred horses that are Triple Crown contenders.

Because of the high degree of dog-to-dog aggression in them, it can be difficult to have fighting dogs mate. Many breeders employ an apparatus to restrain the female during mating to prevent injury to either dog. This is commonly referred to as a “rape stand,” which is a stand used to strap and immobilize female dogs for breeding purposes.

Q. How are fighting dogs raised and trained?

A. Fighting dogs must be kept isolated from other dogs, so they spend most of their lives on short heavy chains, often just out of reach of other dogs. They are usually poorly socialized to any other dogs and to most people. Many “professional” fighters invest much time and money in conditioning their animals. They are often given quality nutrition, basic veterinary care and exercised under controlled conditions where they will have limited contact with other dogs, such as on a treadmill or “jenny.” The bodies or hides of cats or other small animals may be used to encourage the dog to run on such apparatus. However, more often than not, these bait animals are alive, and given to the fighting dog at the end of the exercise period to kill as a reward.

Fighting dogs used by all types of fighters usually have their ears cropped and tails docked close to their bodies. This serves two purposes. First, it limits the number of areas of the body that another dog might grab onto in a fight, and second, it makes it more difficult for other dogs to read the animal’s mood and intentions through the normal body language cues most non-fighting dogs would use to reduce the need for aggressive encounters. Many fighters perform this cropping/docking themselves, using crude and inhumane techniques. This can lead them to face additional charges related to animal cruelty and/or the illegal practice of veterinary medicine.

The conditioning of fighting dogs may also make use of a variety of legal and illegal drugs, often including anabolic steroids to enhance muscle mass and encourage aggressiveness. Narcotic drugs may also be used to increase the dogs’ aggression and mask pain during a fight. Dog fighters also often accumulate a large assortment of veterinary supplies for pain control and wound management, so that they can avoid trips to a veterinarian. Veterinarians in several states are specifically mandated to report suspected dogfight activity that comes to their attention through treating such animals.

One of the ASPCA's most recent contributions to the field is the recently-published "Veterinary Forensics," by Dr. Melinda Merck, forensic veterinarian with the ASPCA, which educates veterinarians on how to look for signs of cruelty to the animals brought to their practices.

Young animals are often trained or tested by allowing them to fight with other dogs while muzzled or leashed in well-controlled "rolls." Those that show little inclination to fight may be discarded or killed at an early age. Additional experience is gained through fights with other dogs. Some fighters will use inexperienced "bait dogs" as sparring partners, often using stolen pets. "Professional" fighters claim to abhor this practice since it does not provide the animal with experience that is useful against another experienced fighting dog.

Although there are many other common techniques used in the training and testing of dogs, these methods vary widely among different fighters and may range from systematic to haphazard. "Street" fighters usually make little investment in conditioning their animals, relying on "quick fixes" to produce aggression. These might include starvation, physical abuse, and use of stimulants or other drugs to excite the dogs.

Q. What goes on in a dog fight?

A. As noted above, fights can take place in a variety of locations and at any time. They may be impromptu events in a back alley, or carefully planned and staged enterprises in a location specially designed and maintained for the purpose.

Usually the fight takes place in a pit that is between 14 and 20 feet square, with sides that may be plywood, hay bales, chain link or anything else that can contain the animals. The flooring may be dirt, wood, carpet or sawdust. The pit has "scratch lines" marked in opposite corners, where the dogs will face each other 12 to 14 feet apart.

In a more organized fight, the dogs will be weighed to make sure they are approximately the same weight. Handlers will often wash and examine the opponent's dog to remove any toxic substances that may have been placed on the fur in an attempt to harm the opposing dog.

At the start of the fight, the dogs are released from their corners and usually meet in the middle, seeking to get a hold on the opponent, often shaking and tearing to maximize damage. Handlers are not permitted to touch the dogs except when told to do so by the referee. This can happen if dogs become "fanged," with the tooth of one dog embedded in the skin of its opponent. Becoming "fanged" may require the use of a "breaking stick" (also called a "bite stick") to pry the animals apart.

If the action slows or if a dog turns away from his opponent without renewing his attack, the referee may call a "turn," and require that the dogs be returned to the corners and released after 20-30 seconds. If the dog that committed the "turn" fails to cross the pit and grip his opponent, the match is over and the other dog is the winner. A draw may occur if both dogs fail to "scratch" several times in succession, i.e. repeatedly fail to cross the "scratch lines" and re-engage in the fight. This is generally a rare and unpopular end for those involved.

Fights can last several hours. Both animals may suffer injuries ranging from puncture wounds, lacerations and blood loss to dehydration, crushing injuries and/or broken bones. Although fights are not technically fought to the death, many dogs succumb to their injuries. Losing dogs are often discarded, killed or left untreated, unless they have had a good history of past performance or come from valuable bloodlines. If the losing dog is perceived to be a particular embarrassment to the reputation or status of its owner, it may be executed in a particularly brutal fashion as part of the “entertainment.”

Q. What are the laws relating to dog fighting?

A. Dog fighting is illegal in all 50 states and the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the Virgin Islands. As of 2007, dog fighting is a felony in all states except Idaho and Wyoming, where it is a misdemeanor. In most states, the possession of dogs for the purpose of fighting is also a felony offense. Being a spectator at a dogfight is currently a felony in 20 states, a misdemeanor in 28 and legal only in Georgia and Hawaii.

The federal Animal Welfare Act also prohibits the interstate transport of animals for the purposes of fighting. When federal animal fighting laws were initially enacted in 1976, no states made animal fighting a felony and federal law considered dog fighting activities to be a misdemeanor with a maximum sentence of one year. For this reason it was very rare that federal authorities were involved in the investigation or prosecution of dog fighting unless other crimes were associated with it, such as drug trafficking, alcohol or firearms violations, or financial crimes.

In 1999, Title 18, Section 48 was added to the U.S. Code, making it a federal crime to “knowingly create, sell or possess a depiction of animal cruelty with the intention of placing that depiction in interstate or foreign commerce for commercial gain.” The term “depiction of animal cruelty” means **any** visual or auditory depiction, including any photograph, motion-picture film, video recording, electronic image, or sound recording of conduct in which a living animal is intentionally maimed, mutilated, tortured, wounded, or killed—if such conduct is illegal under federal law or the law of the state in which the creation, sale, or possession takes place, **regardless of whether the maiming, mutilation, torture, wounding, or killing took place in the state.** This law was specifically enacted to address the proliferation of Internet sales of “crush videos” in which various small animals were shown being stepped on or otherwise killed. Despite its originally narrow focus, the law was used in 2005 to successfully prosecute a Virginia man charged with selling and mailing videotapes of fighting pit bulls.

In 2007, Congress passed the Animal Fighting Prohibition Enforcement Act with strong bipartisan support. The Act became law in May 2007, and provides for felony penalties for interstate commerce, import and export relating to commerce in fighting dogs, fighting cocks and cock fighting paraphernalia. Each violation can result in up to three years in jail and a \$250,000 fine.

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Q. What happens to dogs that are seized from dog fight operations? Can they be rehabilitated?

A. Fighting dogs have been bred and trained to inflict injuries on other animals. They are difficult to house and care for. They are often relatively friendly to people, primarily adult males, since such people have been the only source of food and attention—but they can be unpredictable around people and any other animals. Confiscated fighting dogs are also at high risk of being stolen from shelters, foster care or other placements and returned to the fight trade.

Concerns about liability, public safety and other risks mean that most animals seized from such operations are not adoptable, meaning they cannot be considered candidates for successful placement, and often have to be euthanized. Exceptions are sometimes made for puppies or other animals who show no signs of training or use in fighting, and who do not exhibit tendencies of aggression towards other animals or people. However, such animals must be carefully evaluated by trained animal behavior professionals, such as Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists, and their placement must be monitored over the long term. Too often, animal control officers and animal welfare professionals are the only ones who show kindness and compassion to these animals, but it is too late to rehabilitate them—and then all they can do is give them a kind and peaceful end.

Q. If dog fighting is so widespread, why don't more cases come to light?

A. Dog fighting is a violent and highly secretive enterprise, which is extremely difficult for law enforcement and investigative professionals to infiltrate. A dog fight investigation requires many of the same skills and resources as a major undercover narcotics investigation, and challenges the resources of any agency that seeks to respond to it. An additional complication is that the evidence likely to be seized includes living creatures, who must be taken care of and maintained while the judicial process unfolds. Most prosecutors would be happy to take on every dog fight case they could, but they are limited by the human and animal care resources available to them.

Q. What can communities do to combat dog fighting?

A. The first step in combating dog fighting is for individuals to alert the authorities to any suspected or actual dog fighting activities in their area—identification of the problem is the first step to a solution.

In addition, the ASPCA recommends the formation of local or state task forces to address dog fighting. These groups should include members from all the major stakeholders in that community: law enforcement, prosecutors, animal control, animal welfare groups, veterinarians, public health officials, housing authorities, the neighborhood watch and others. The group should identify the nature of the problems in the area, the laws that could be applied to these problems, and the resources that are available. Dog fighting is most effectively addressed by a collaborative approach to this heinous crime.

Q. What can citizens do?

A. The enforcement of animal cruelty laws begins with the individual. If you see something, please say something—notify your local police and/or humane law enforcement of any suspicious activities that suggest dog fighting is taking place in your community. For more tips on staying alert to signs of animal cruelty, [click here](#).

Conclusion

The conclusions reached by the 1981 ASPCA report more than a quarter of a century ago are as true today as they were then:

“Dog fighting represents a new challenge in law enforcement requiring special investigatory skills and persistence. As this ‘sport’ becomes more familiar to both the public and particularly to those who have law enforcement powers, the camouflage surrounding dog fighting will increasingly disappear...”

We hope those predictions come true.