

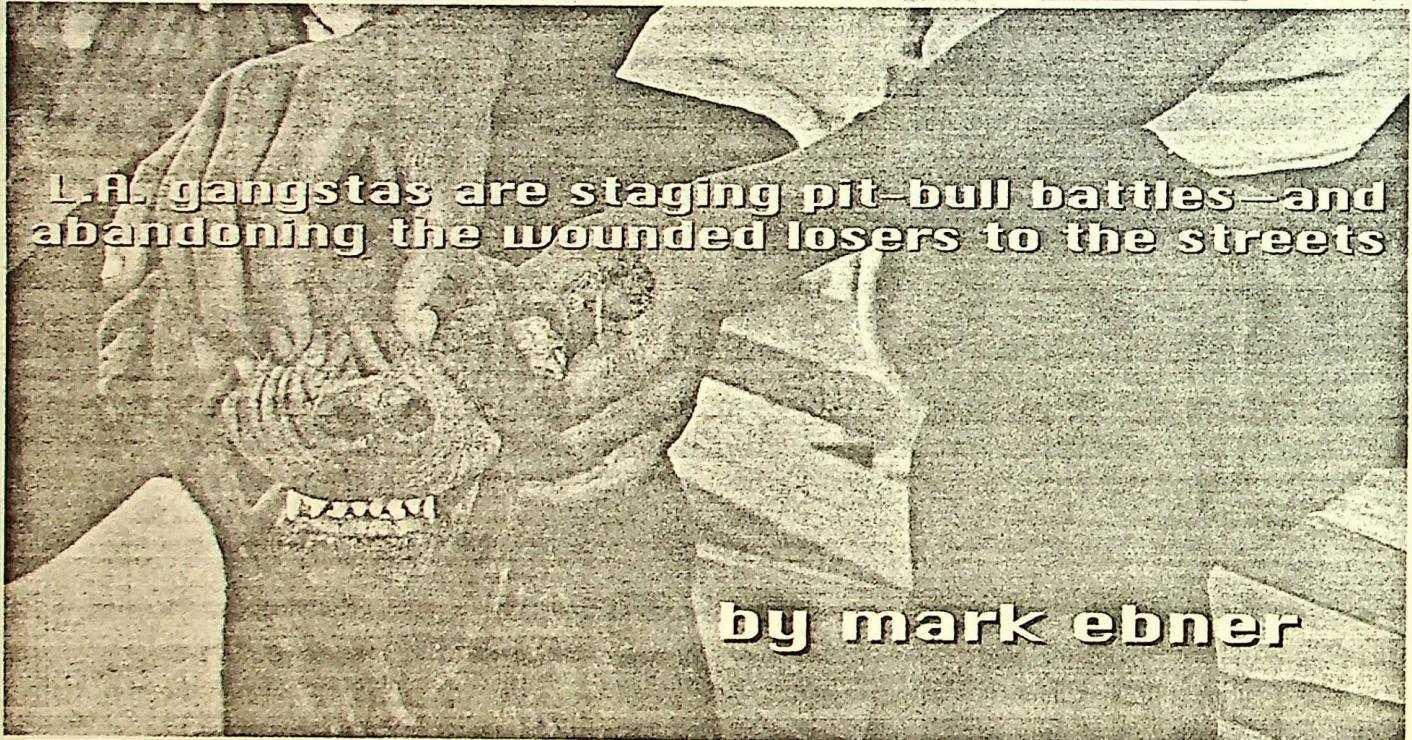
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# NewTimes

L O S A N G E L E S

## PIE



L.A. gangstas are staging pit-bull battles—and abandoning the wounded losers to the streets

by mark ebner

## BULLIES

Back by popular demand: Straight Dope and Weird

**Film: Mel Gibson holds Peter Rainer for Ransom**

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**Static: David Kronke meets Mr. Show, and it's love at first sight. Plus: The Tribble with Trek**



## L.A. gangstas are staging pit-bull battles—and abandoning the wounded losers to the streets

# PIT BULLS

**It's near midnight in Crips territory,** and a floodlight shines down on a dirt back yard where half a dozen Gs in low-slung chinos and starched white T-shirts are milling around. No one's flashing gang signs or guns; it's party time, Saturday night. Gangstas are puffing blunts, swigging beer, and passing paper money, saying, "Gimme five on Spanky"; "Ten on Titan."

Spanky and Titan aren't the ghetto's answer to *American Gladiators*. They're pit bulls—skinny, mangy, and battle-scarred. These thugs are banging dogs.

After pocketing the cash, the host shouts, "Go!" The two animals leap from their handlers' hands and dash toward each other. It's a crucial moment, and Spanky, the smaller of the two pits, balks. He skids to a halt and looks back at his owner for encourage-

ment. "Aw, shit, you punk-ass motherfucker!" the gangster screams. Before Spanky knows what's happened, he's lost the fight. In one swipe, Titan rips off half of Spanky's left ear. When Spanky tries to spin away, Titan lunges again—this time grabbing Spanky by the neck. Haunches straining, Titan furiously shakes his helpless opponent back and forth, then pins him to the ground. The gangstas whoop and shout. Titan has won.

Both handlers move in and grab their dogs from behind, trying to pull them apart. "Release!" commands Titan's owner, jamming a tree branch between the dog's jaws. The branch snaps. Without hesitation, the man pulls out a cigarette lighter and fires it up beneath his dog's already blackened testicles. Titan instantly lets go of Spanky and then bends around to nurse his scorched balls.

Spanky lies bleeding from his torn ear and neck. His 250-pound owner lumbers over, grabs the dog by the skin of his back, and with both hands slams him into a chain-link fence. Spanky bounces off and lands in the dirt where he curls up, whimpering and pissing in fear. The man then rams a work-booted foot into the dog's rib cage, and Spanky lies motionless.

"Punk," mutters his owner.

**A pit-bull fight isn't hard to find in L.A.** It took all of two minutes on a Saturday afternoon at a randomly chosen liquor store on Avalon Boulevard and a C-note pressed into a loitering thug's palm for this white-boy reporter to gain access to the dark world of dogfighting. Muscular pits short-leashed to posts outside

many homes in South-Central indicate that this ugly blood sport is common in the area. But it isn't confined to black neighborhoods. It's found where Latino gangsters congregate too. And it's also in Anglo sections of the Westside, where so-called "hobbyists"—whose ranks include doctors, lawyers, and bankers—drop large amounts of cash during clandestine basement matches.

The fights aren't limited to the city, according to Mike Burns, a former supervisor for the Los Angeles Department of Animal Regulation. They're also held in remote rural areas of Southern California, such as national forests or tribal reservations, where hundreds of enthusiasts can turn up at "conventions" advertised in underground newspapers like *The Pit Bull Gazette* and *Sporting Dog News*. In June, Kern County sheriff's

**Continued on page 14**

by mark ebner

# JLLIES

photos by anne fishbein

## Pit Bulls

Continued from page 13

deputies and animal control officers broke up a pit-fighting ring involving at least 50 dogs together worth more than \$250,000. Authorities also found home kennels housing mangled dogs, equipment to train fighting dogs, and a mass canine grave outside Bakersfield in which scores of losing dogs had been dumped.

Fights at conventions follow strict rules. They're staged in makeshift arenas measuring about 20 feet square and enclosed by plywood walls three feet high. A coin toss determines which dog gets which corner in the pit. The toss also decides which dog will be washed first to cleanse it of poisonous substances it may have been coated with to weaken an opposing dog. Washings are carefully supervised by a judge.

Next, the dogs are dried off and carried by their handlers to their corners. A referee orders the dogs "faced," or squared off. The ref then yells, "Let go!" and the fight begins. It continues until one of the dogs "turns," or cowers, from its opponent. Then both animals are taken back to their corners and faced and released again, with the dog that turned given a head start to see if it will "scratch," or attack, the other dog. If it attacks, the dogs keep fighting in "turn" and "scratch" rotation until one is either killed or rendered helpless by injuries.

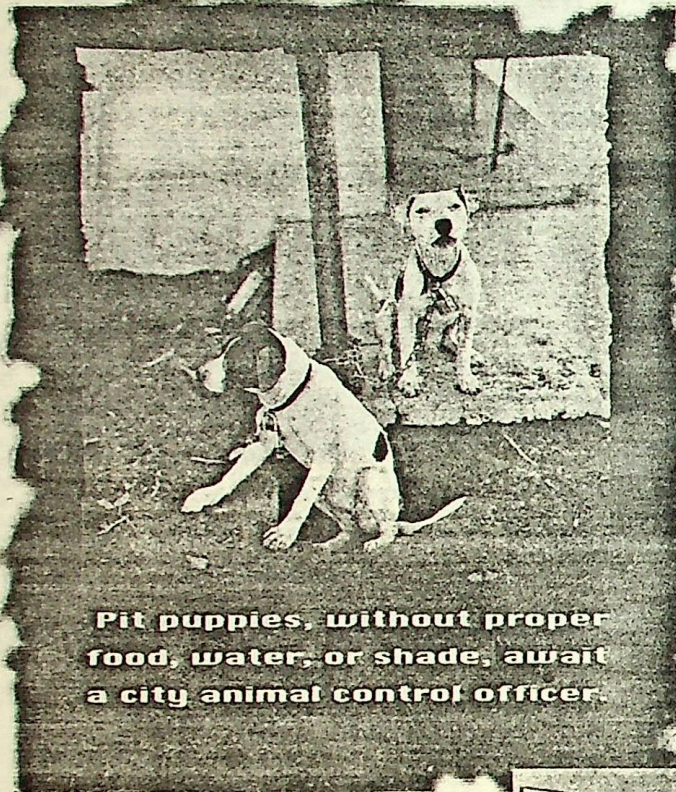
Fights can last from several minutes to several hours, depending on the physical condition of the dogs and how closely they're matched. (Some owners train their animals relentlessly, putting them on treadmills and in swim tanks to increase their endurance.) Owners inflict all manner of cruelties on the animals to make them mean, including mixing cocaine and gunpowder in their feed. Perhaps the best thing that can happen to a dog that turns is to be shot on the spot. A dog unlucky enough to cower and survive is thrown away like so much garbage.

And in South-Central, these abandoned and wounded pit bulls—roaming the streets in packs in search of food and shelter—number "in the thousands," says Capt. David Haverd of the Los Angeles Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

"I would say [pit bulls], being the most popular dog out there right now, represent the highest proportion of strays on the streets, particularly in South-Central," he says. "Running loose, hungry, and in packs, they do present a threat to people. They've had a lot of attacks in South-Central, and [the city Department of] Animal Regulation doesn't have the personnel to patrol at night. People are afraid to go out at night because of these packs of strays running the streets."

**The pit bull's ancestry can be traced back to**

**roughly the Twelfth Century**, when European hunters cross-bred the molossus, an early mastiff, with the Bellenbeiser, or bull-biter. The rugged creature that resulted—which became known as the bulldog—was used to attack dangerous game animals. With their powerful jaws, bulldogs could penetrate a tough hide, slash muscle, crush bone, and grip like a vise. While other dogs could track wild boar and bear, only the bulldog had the mettle to clamp its jaws on the larger animal's nose and hold it, allowing the hunter to move in for the kill.



**Pit puppies, without proper food, water, or shade, await a city animal control officer.**

After such hunting declined in the late Middle Ages, the bulldog was adapted to work with cattle, gripping them in place as they were butchered. Bulldogs were widely used in Britain, where savage contests developed to see who had the most ferocious animal. During the early Industrial Age, the dogs were pitted against chained bulls to satisfy spectators' need for gory entertainment. But even in those raw times, "bull-baiting" repulsed many people, and Parliament banned it in 1835.

The prohibition didn't end bull-baiting and dogfighting; it merely drove them underground. British breeders began to cross bulldogs with fierce terriers to produce better fighters. Near the beginning of the Twentieth Century, heavy emigration from England brought this new breed, the pit bull or Staffordshire terrier, to the United States. In an era when the bare-fisted boxing champ John L. Sullivan was a national icon, dogfighting became as popular in America as it had once been in Western Europe.

The United States was then a young nation that revered Indian fighters and justed to expand its military power, and the pit bull became a public favorite, developing an image of roguish lovability. Teddy Roosevelt kept a pit at the White House. In the '30s and '40s, pit bulls were widely adopted as

pets. The Little Rascals' popular companion was a pit, as was Pete in the *Our Gang* television series. Buster Brown's comic-strip companion, Tige, was a pit bull too.

As with most other breeds, there are aggressive pit bulls and friendly ones; some are even a little shy. The dogs are loyal by nature, so they take direction well from their masters. They're prized for a quality called gameness, or heart, meaning they won't give up on a commanded task no matter how difficult or dangerous. Pits can be so gentle that they are sometimes used as companion pets at nursing homes and as service dogs for the disabled. Because they are so intelligent and versatile, they're also used by search-and-rescue teams and by police to track criminal suspects. In 1993, a pit bull named Weela was named Ken-L Ration's Dog Hero of the Year for saving the lives of 30 people, 29 dogs, 13 horses, and a cat by carrying food to them and leading them safely through floodwaters in Malibu.

Unfortunately, pit bulls are far better known for their occasional attacks on people. Of the 109 fatal dog attacks reported in the United States from 1989 to 1994, pit bulls were responsible for 24—more than any other breed, according to a June article in the medical jour-

nal *Pediatrics* (rottweilers were next, with 16 fatalities, and German shepherds were third, with 10). Canine experts say pits don't come by their combativeness instinctively; irresponsible and cruel owners train them to be mean, usually by first siccing them on cats and small animals. "Even lions do not fight to the death," says Lyssa Noble, a Santa Monica pit-bull trainer and animal behaviorist who has worked with UCLA's Neuropsychiatric Institute. "But man has created the pit bull to fight to the death, which is totally unnatural." Moreover, pit bulls—like huskies and malamutes—have sometimes mistaken infants and toddlers for small animals, experts say. Diane Jessup, director of the nonprofit Canine Aggression Research Center in Olympia, Washington, says pit bulls are only one of several breeds that have fallen victim to cycles of fad ownership that eventually place many of them in the hands of what she politely calls "high-risk" owners. Every decade or so, she says, certain breeds, especially guard dogs, become popular with the public. But as inexperienced owners fail to exercise proper control, the dogs inevitably become involved in highly publicized attacks on humans.

In the 1940s, says Jessup, the "tough" dog to own was the Doberman pinscher, after news of its wartime exploits with the Marine Corps filtered back to the home front. Dobermans gave way in the 1960s to German shepherds, whose reputation for viciousness may have come from TV coverage of Southern cops unleashing them on civil-rights demonstrators. Even the normally gentle Saint Bernard didn't escape the adverse effects of fad popularity, becoming involved in so many maulings and fatalities in the '60s that the august *Journal of the American Medical Association* called for a ban on the breed.

As more and more people acquired pit bulls in the 1980s, Jessup says, the dogs became involved in a rash of biting incidents, which heightened their reputation for ferocity. And with each new media account of an attack, the breed became more attractive to gangsters, drug dealers, and other would-be tough guys, who use pits to intimidate other people on the street.

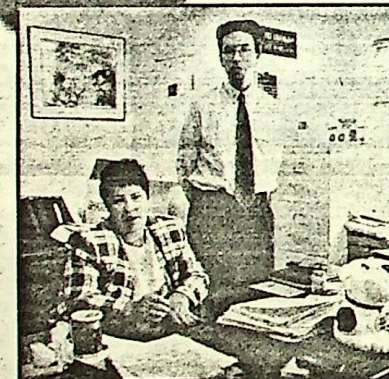
The flames have been fanned by people like Richard Stratton, a San Diego author and leading proponent of dogfighting as sport. Stratton—who also cofounded a national piranha-breeding association—claims the dogs rarely die when they fight, a blatant untruth. Stratton and other so-called "dog men" argue that pit bulls don't really feel pain as they tear each other apart.

"As for my statement that most pit-dog men really care about their dogs, I meant that they have a love for them and do care about their welfare," writes Stratton in *The Truth About the American Pit Bull Terrier*. "It's true that they do match them in a contest that endangers their lives, but everything is relative.... Good dog men match their dogs, care for them afterward, and if the worst should happen, they mourn for them. I've seen many a 'hardened' pit-dog man administering to his dog with tears streaming down his face when he was worried about losing him."

Jessup says the pit bull has recently lost some of its appeal among social deviants to the rottweiler, and her statistics indicate that the latter breed is replacing the pit as the dog most often involved in fatal attacks on humans. In 1994, for instance, rottweilers killed five people in this country, while just one death was attributed to a pit bull.

But the parade of pit bulls on the Venice boardwalk on any weekend is evidence that the pit's allure among so-called "high-risk" owners remains strong.

**Stroll from Rose Avenue toward the Muscle Beach training area, and you'll find escalating levels of macho posturing among the boyz-to-men whose pets seem to be emblems of what they**



**Dog squadders: Linda Gordon and Peter Parsic**

own *Pediatrics* (rottweilers were next, with 16 fatalities, and German shepherds were third, with 10).

Canine experts say pits don't come by their combativeness instinctively; irresponsible and cruel owners train them to be mean, usually by first siccing them on cats and small animals. "Even lions do not fight to the death," says Lyssa Noble, a Santa Monica pit-bull trainer and animal behaviorist who has worked with UCLA's Neuropsychiatric Institute. "But man has created the

are not: courageous.

Paul, a teenager from Valencia, sits on the grass playing with a pretty black pit-bull pup. He claims he wants to keep the animal as a pet, but he's keenly aware of frequent pit fights in the nearby Antelope Valley, on the edge of the Mojave Desert, and is clearly intrigued.

His sidekick, Steve, pipes up when asked if he's ever seen pit-bull combat: "No, but I'd like to. It'd be nice, it'd be cool." Would he like to watch a fight to the death? "I don't care. Whatever happens. Who cares? It's only a dog." Does he think the dogs feel pain? "Of course they feel pain," he retorts.

Paul chimes in that he too would like to see a fight: "My buddy fights pits," he says. "He's got like four locked up in his back yard. All my friends have pits, so I'd just like to see it. It'd be cool."

Farther down the boardwalk is the older, streetwise Pete, with his huge pit bull, Raccoon. Pete, who's from Venice, breeds pits. Does he fight his dogs? "Don't talk about dat." Is he aware that dogfighting is a felony in California? "I don't know. You shouldn't talk about dat." Does he keep his dogs as pets? "I breed them to sell." How's business? "Real good." Does he keep a bitch at home? "Man, I got two bitches at home. Yeah, you



**Demon dog: Scary-looking pits like this one, named Demon, are a common weekend sight along the Venice boardwalk.**

know, everybody in this breed got more than one dog, man. Don't ever think they only got one dog. It's just a gig, man. Breeding dogs is just a job."

He bristles when asked if he loves Raccoon,

Man, I wouldn't have it if I didn't love it." But there's something else Pete loves about his pet. "I love the money he bring me. I'm not gonna be stupid about that. He bring me money all year round." Pete eagerly explains competition among dog breeders, likening it to that among breeders of champion racehorses. "Every year there's a better dog coming," he says. "It's just like everything else. You gotta update your stock, man."

Not far away, Matt and Raymond from San Fernando are showing off the biggest pit on the boardwalk—a rare gray one named Demon, for whom Matt paid \$700. Demon doesn't take part in organized fights, claims Matt. But he's proud of the animal's aggressiveness: "He jumped the fence and whipped [Matt's other dog's] ass. I grabbed him by the sac and twisted it, and no releasing. He locked on my other pit for about an hour. I cracked him, I hit him with a pipe. The more I tried to get him off, the more he ripped the other dog's face."

Matt has friends who fight dogs, and both he and Raymond, who are in their 20s, have seen fights. "A homeboy of mine has a dog that's 18-0 last time I checked with him. It's a very, very evil dog—a very, very coura-

geous dog." Matt believes pit-bull fighting is legitimate if done "correctly." "If you're gonna do it, do it by the rules," he says. "None of that back-yard shit."

Farther down the way is Jeff Wettach, a Vietnam vet and prolific pit-bull breeder from Venice. Wettach's fierce-looking Creole friend, Roman, stands with his pit bull, Dingo, on a chain. Roman's just getting started in breeding, but Wettach has been breeding pits for years and can be found at this spot most weekends with his stud dogs, Tank and the legendary Hurricane.

"Hurricane has about a thousand puppies in the L.A. area, not counting Europe and the rest of the United States," he boasts. So, business is good? "Obviously," snorts Wettach, who plans soon to open "the first pit-bull shop in Los Angeles, West Coast Pit Bulls. It will be on La Tijera between Sepulveda and Manchester." Conveniently close to the hood.

Most breeders, it appears, turn a blind eye to the fate that awaits many of their "champion" dogs. They claim they screen buyers, but how can anyone possibly ensure that more than 1,000 pit-bull puppies wind up in safe, nonabusive homes? And the city ordinance that limits breeders to one litter per year is largely ignored by breeders and rarely enforced by animal-control officials.

The illegal breeding and sale of pits is apparently made easier by the city's largest newspaper, the *Los Angeles Times*, which fails to insist that breeders comply with a city law by listing their license number in classified ads. A *Times* ad-sales representative named Mona (who wouldn't give her last name) responds, "We are supposed to remind breeders of the requirement. I don't know if everyone does; sometimes they may

**Continued on page 16**

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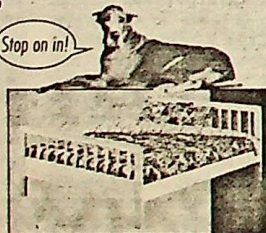
TWIN SLEIGH DAYBEDS



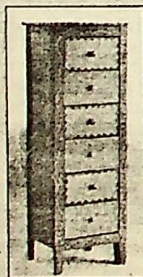
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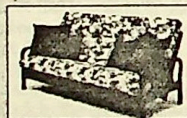
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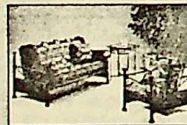
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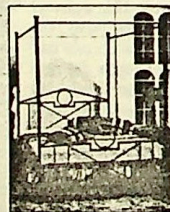
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## Pit Bulls

**Continued from page 15**  
forget. The responsibility is on [the breeder], though....If they don't supply the license number, we'll run the ad anyway." Adds Jerry Bluestein of the *Times* classified-ads department: "The *Times* does not wish to become an enforcement agency for the City of Los Angeles."

With no checks on pit-bull-puppies being overbred and easily sold, they flow into the hands of gangsters. And then into blood-soaked fighting rings. And finally, wounded and abandoned, onto the streets.

**At a defunct burger stand on the corner of Gage Avenue and Avalon Boulevard in South-Central,** Carol Ebel rolls to a stop in her Ford pickup not long after midnight. She steps from the cab wearing a T-shirt that reads, I AM IN FAVOR OF ANIMAL RIGHTS AS WELL AS HUMAN RIGHTS. THAT IS THE WAY OF THE WHOLE HUMAN BEING — ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

As Ebel walks to the back of her truck, a dozen pit bulls suddenly appear—from around corners, from out of alleys—and amble toward her. A tiger-striped pit bull lurks shyly, eyeing her. A black pit limps over from 69th Street. Ebel dumps dry dog food on the ground, and the famished pack digs in. She fills a huge bowl full of water, and they drink like there's no tomorrow.

Ebel, 55, is an industrial pipe fitter from Bellflower who has been rescuing and feeding abandoned pit bulls only a few months. "I just got roped into it," she says, sighing. "I found a dog that had absolutely given up. He was so skinny, so sick, and so mangy that he just laid there and couldn't walk. And that started it." She pauses. "Oh, shit." She has spotted a horribly desiccated pit bull approaching.

The scarred ex-fighter has lost nearly all his hair. His body is covered with pustules, and his pus-filled eyes are sunken. Ebel caresses him, quietly cooing, "Oh, my baby, oh, my darlin'..." She hoists the 50-pound animal into the cab of her truck. Ebel later takes the dog home, medicates him, feeds him, and gives him a soft bed. He gets one comfortable night before she turns him over to a city shelter, where he'll be deemed unadoptable, then put down.

Ebel isn't the only angel who prowls the streets of South-Central looking for abandoned dogs to care for. Fellow rescuer Ann Barnhart says most of them are "little old ladies in tennis shoes" like herself. She isn't exactly little, nor is she particularly old. She is 55 and stands 5 foot 11½ inches tall. A secretary born in Britain, she patrols South-Central and Compton by night, often snatching dogs and cats and getting them spayed and neutered.

"During the course of the 'trips through Hell,' as I like to call them, I come across stray, starving, beaten, scarred leftovers from pit-bull fighting," she says. "I find them in the gutter, I find them in empty lots, I find them everywhere. I've gone in on a Sunday morning to find somebody just dumped a pit bull—bleeding, gashed open—and you know that Saturday night, the dog was a loser in a pit-bull fight."

Barnhart, who suffers a bad shoulder from lifting heavy dogs, took up animal rescuing

after coming across an old deaf and blind stray on Wilshire Boulevard. She characterizes the gangsters who fight and later abandon dogs as scumbags, who figure, "Hey, I'll have this dog; I'll have control of it, and everybody will be scared shitless of me." And once the thugs have reinforced their "manhood" with a fierce-looking dog on a chain, cash registers ring in their heads, she says. They'll never turn a healthy pit bull in to a shelter, because they can fight it for money, or at least sell it.

Barnhart has zero faith in humane groups, let alone government animal-control authorities, to conduct rescue missions, because she believes most of their officers "are absolutely scared to go in [to South-

pits pose a serious threat to people on the street. She and other animal-rights advocates say the dogs usually are too sick, weak, or frightened to attack people, nor are they trained to do that.

"[Even] when they are beaten and burned, their instinct is still to be loyal to whatever human comes into their life....I would say that 90 percent of the strays out there are sweet, cowering, gentle dogs.

"If there was a population of a thousand pit bulls out there where the majority of those dogs were attacking people, it would be like a horror movie," she says. "We would have to call out the National Guard or the Marines. This is clearly not going on. The occasional incident of one of these dogs attacking some-

whelping, is tied to another post out of reach of her babies. The temperature is about 95 degrees, and there's no water, food, or shade available for the dogs. Flies feed off their coats.

Phyllis Daugherty figures it's time to call the Department of Animal Regulation. She is a five-foot-tall redheaded firebrand who spends much of her time away from her job as a clerical worker reporting dogfights and other abuses to the city.

Daugherty rushes to a pay phone to call Gary Olsen, the general manager of Animal Regulation, and describes the situation. An hour passes before a diminutive animal-control cop, Miguel Gonzalez, arrives. A woman emerges from the apartment outside which the dogs are chained. After a lengthy argument, Gonzalez demands that she summon the dog's owner. The six-foot owner, angry at being called away from his job at the African American Community Center, arrives about 20 minutes later, and Gonzalez lectures him briefly on tethering and dog-licensing laws, then hands him a warning slip.

That's it.

Gonzalez was empowered to take stronger action to protect the dogs, but he appeared intimidated by the owner.

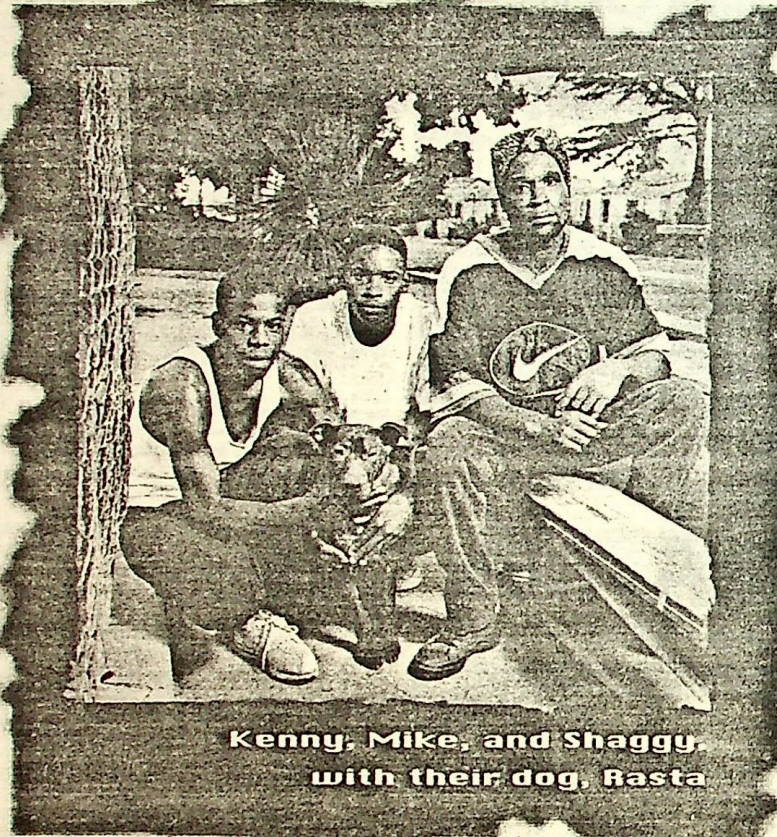
City animal-control officers are charged with making sure that animals are properly cared for before the officer leaves the scene. If violations are not corrected, the officer can take an abused or neglected animal away from its owner. Moreover, the city Housing Authority prohibits the keeping of dogs in any public housing units unless they are service dogs for the disabled or companion dogs for the elderly. Yet Gonzalez departed after only slapping the owner's wrist.

In an interview, Linda Gordon, a senior management analyst in the Animal Regulation Department, said Gonzalez's action at the housing project "sounds like an error, I don't know." Asked if any discipline would be imposed on him, she said, "We would like to...have an investigation, and take an appropriate action. I'm not thoroughly versed in what the appropriate action is at this moment in time." During the interview, Peter Persic, the department's chief of public information, asked Gordon, "Are there laws about tethering and shade and that sort of thing?" Although neither official seemed to know it, there are.

An 18-year veteran of Animal Regulation, Gordon said she was part of "a task force that dealt with dogfighting" in the 1980s. But she couldn't remember exactly when it existed, why or when it was disbanded, or even its name. Questioned about how many dogfights or fighting rings the department has broken up in recent years, Gordon said she "wouldn't be able to give an estimate on that." The reason: The department doesn't record cases of dogfighting separately from other investigations. (Animal Regulation undertook 6,782 investigations in the 1995-96 fiscal year.)

Angry at the way the department operates, animal-rights activists are joining forces to sue it. The legal effort is spearheaded by Michael Bell, an actor who performs voiceovers for animal characters in animated films, and Lois Newman, director of a group called Cat and Dog Rescue.

The planned lawsuit, says Bell, will allege



**Kenny, Mike, and Shaggy with their dog, Rasta**

Central], because you're not just talking pit-bull fighting, you're talking guns and drugs as well. We're talking violent criminals." Barnhart has so far been spared all but verbal abuse in the mean streets she haunts. She has been called a "fucking white bitch" and ordered to "get the fuck out of our neighborhood." But such threats seem to roll off her broad shoulders.

Another veteran dog rescuer is Venice screenwriter Kate Lanier, 34, whose credits include *What's Love Got to Do with It?* and the just-released *Set It Off*. Half a dozen dogs live with her and her husband, Jimmy. The latest addition to the family is Lucy—an ex-fighting pit who came to Lanier with her ears burned to stumps by gang kids who poured battery acid on them in a mindless effort to turn the dog mean.

Lucy developed gangrene and had to undergo three surgeries on her ears. But after she was showered with care and proper training, the dog is able to play gently with Lanier's cat.

Lanier questions the notion that abandoned

one is clearly not large-scale enough; otherwise it would be like a national disaster."

Indeed, asked to cite examples to support his claim that ditched pit bulls have committed "a lot of attacks in South-Central," Captain Haverd of the SPCA could recall only one such attack in the entire city—a female animal-control officer who was badly bitten nine years ago in the Mount Washington area. (City animal-regulation officials don't record dog bites by individual breed.)

**Outside an apartment at the Pueblo del Rio public housing project on 53rd Street near Compton Boulevard,** two pit-bull puppies are tethered to a post by chains tangled to less than two feet long. Heavy padlocks dangle from the collars of both animals—a clear sign they are being trained for fighting (the weight of the padlocks strengthens a dog's neck). The mother pit, with extended teats indicating recent



**Dog rescuer Carol Ebel,  
with a nearly hairless pit bull**

### Pit Bulls

Continued from page 16

that animal-control officers are not getting proper training and are ignorant of laws governing their duties. The Gonzalez incident, he says, illustrates how officers are not protecting animals: "That officer had a mandate to see that those pit-bull puppies were placed out of harm's way, or he had the right to impound them on the spot."

Gordon argues that the department is doing its job, saying it impounded 800 stray dogs in a recent monthlong period. But that figure doesn't mean much because a single stud pit bull can produce more than a thousand puppies, and thousands of abandoned pits are breeding like mad in the streets every day. Plus, Animal Control is far more likely to "go up to Beachwood Canyon and yank out a dog that barks too much" than grapple with inner-city problems, says Chris DeRose, president of Last Chance for Animals, an animal-protection organization.

**At a park near the Slauson Avenue Recreation Center in South-Central,** three young males amble over for an interview, bringing with them a pit bull named Rasta.

Their names are Kenny, Mike, and Shaggy. Kenny, 16, wants to be a pro football player if he grows up; so does 19-year-old Mike. Shaggy, 22, describes himself as a "retired" gangbanger. He is unemployed and coping with fatherhood.

Rasta can't be more than eight or nine months old, but these guys say he fights about three times a week and usually wins. In fact, they view the dog's tender age as an asset. "He be wantin' to be fightin' quicker," remarks Shaggy, adding that the dog is "thrown down" to battle in the street either for money or for plain entertainment. Kenny calls the fights "a big ol' party," where people "come in from everywhere."

Explains Mike: "Usually somebody call us

up, like, 'Oh, we got a fight comin', we got two people comin' down wanna see a fight.' And they put their bet up on a dog." A fight to the death? "Man, they just fight till it's over," says Shaggy. Meaning? "They almost always fight to kill," says Kenny.

The rules of dogfighting, gangsta style, are a model of Darwinian ruthlessness: "When a dog loses but doesn't die, 'He got to run off on his own,'" says Shaggy. If the animal can't do so, it's shot on the spot. "Then you call the city," says Kenny, and the corpse is carted off.

The trio honestly believe pit bulls are born to fight, not conditioned. "Yeah, man," says Shaggy, "that's why they keep going like that. They have it in them. All it takes is a little tick, and it's on." Adds Mike: "They're territorial too. It's just like gangs. Pit bulls got a little gangbanger in them."

The mentality of these guys and others who fight dogs seems to be exacerbated by the violence and drug abuse to which they are exposed on a daily basis—which seems to snuff out any sense of empathy or compassion they might feel toward the animals they turn into savage combatants.

Kate Lanier knows this. A board member with the Humane Animal Rescue Team, she is using her personal funds and donations to develop a curriculum for schools and youth clubs to use in teaching inner-city youths to care for animals. She also has created a program through her nonprofit Parsifal Institute (so named for a pelican that Albert Schweitzer rescued and adopted) that helps at-risk kids adopt dogs about to be killed at animal shelters.

Her reasoning is simple: "If a child knows and understands that he's saved a life, that's a very empowering thing," she says. "By teaching someone to care for and value the life of another, you're giving that person a starting point for the rest of their lives. If we see animals as weaker and lower than we are, and in this way justify our violence toward them, then we will act in the same way toward people." ■

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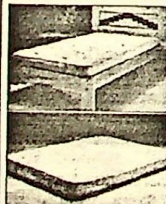
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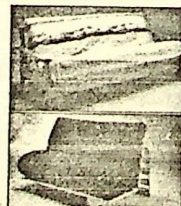
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