

# A violent blood sport that breeds big bucks

Though illegal, dog fighting is well-organized, say experts

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An expert in illegal dog fighting said it's likely the 17 adult pit bulls seized March 30 in East Greenwich Township were being trained to take part in organized dog fights.

"Where there are numerous scarred dogs, kept in rural situations, that's a very good clue it could be organized," said Sandy Rowland, director of the Great Lakes Regional Office of the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) in Bowling Green, Ohio.

Her organization has, in the past, conducted intensive undercover investigations into dog fighting and has prepared a manual to help law enforcement officers conduct investigations.

East Greenwich Township police and Gloucester County animal control officers

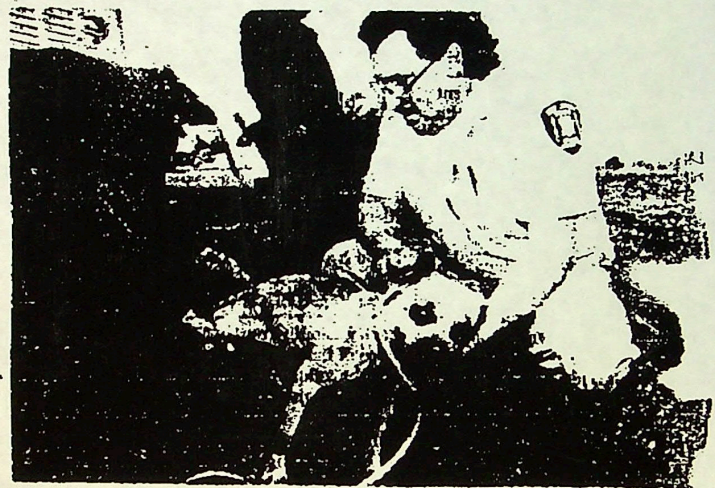
seized 17 adult pit bulls and five puppies from property owned by professional football player Todd McNair on West Cohawkin Road. McNair faces numerous counts of animal cruelty charges, as well as the indictable charge of having animals for the purpose of fighting.

McNair, who was a running back/kick returner for the NFL Houston Oilers last season, has denied the charges in an interview with a Houston TV station.

Many of the seized dogs were seriously scarred and some had fresh, bleeding wounds when they were found. The dogs were secured with thick, auto tow chains in a marshy spot on the property.

Police last week said there was evidence that some fights had been staged inside a house on McNair's property.

The 22 animals were taken to the Gloucester County Animal Shelter in Clayton. (See DOGS, Page A-7)



Staff photo by Christopher Ben...

Agatha Abruzzo (left), head of the county SPCA, and county Animal Control Officer Bill Lombardi examine the damaged leg of one of the seized pit bulls.

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Since each animal had to be put in a separate cage, several dogs already there were euthanized to make room for them. One confidential source reported that even the 8-week-old puppies have exhibited aggressiveness; one of the pups had its teeth sunk into the throat of another and had drawn blood while the younger dogs were still being kept together.

Rowland said taking care of fighting dogs can, itself, be a problem.

"These dogs will kill another animal if they get the chance. They will most definitely cause some physical damage to the shelter. And they put the human beings at the shelter in grave jeopardy," she said.

When HSUS has had fighting dogs in its shelter, she said, the dogs were given 16-pound bowling balls to play with and often would bite the bowling balls and toss them effortlessly into the air.

Rowland said HSUS feeds pit bulls from paper plates because they often would eat their food and keep chewing, ripping stainless steel bowls into small pieces and, on occasion, ingesting the pieces of jagged metal.

The dogs will be kept until court action on the charges against McNair have been resolved. If he is found guilty of the charges, the dogs would be killed.

Dog fighting may not be something most people are familiar with, but there are increasing signs that it has become popular in spots as close as Camden.

Marion Churchill, president of a humane organization called "Compassion for Camden," said dog fighting has become so commonplace in that city that many people believe it is a legal activity.

"It goes on everywhere in Camden, in broad daylight, at all hours of the day and night, just about everywhere," Churchill said.

"Last summer, they were so bold, they were posting signs: 'Fights and drugs, this way,'" she said.

Churchill said the Camden dog fights are at all levels of sophistication, from kids fighting their dogs to see which will win to "Philadelphia mobsters coming over in limos and having their

bodyguards stand on the tops of the building with machine guns."

The blood sport is indicative of human feelings becoming "numbed," she said.

"Nothing means anything anymore in Camden," Churchill said.

Dog fighting can mean big bucks.

"Participants sign contracts several months before a fight, agreeing on a date for the fight and, just as with boxers, what weight the dogs will be for the fight," Rowland said Friday.

The fights are almost never held where the training takes place. Pre-fight betting often involves large amounts of money, thousands of dollars, she said.

The sub-culture has its own publications, one of which is called "Sporting Dog Journal."

According to HSUS, one dog fighter uses the motto, "Breed the best and bury the rest," but not all dog fights are to the death.

"The fights often take place in a 14-by-14-foot enclosure with walls 20 to 24 inches high," explained Rowland.

The dogs face off and are released by their handlers.

"During the course of the fight, sometimes bones are broken, there is excessive blood loss and some dogs go into shock, lungs get punctured, sometimes there is fanging," which is when a dog's incisors pierce its own jowls and get caught, said Rowland.

Handlers sometimes must use a breaking stick or parting stick to pry the dogs apart; the stick is a short, wedge-shaped stick that is slipped into a gap pit bulls have in their teeth and twisted to force the dog's jaws apart.

"The winner is the dog that can still go at it," she said. "It's not normally a fight to the death, but that does not mean the loser — and the winner — might not succumb to injuries received in the fight," Rowland said.

The fight can take from 10 minutes to three hours, she said, although generally they last between 45 and 60 minutes.

"Good champions go a long time," she said. In the world of dog fighting, a champion is a dog that has won three contract fights and a grand champion is an animal that has won five contract fights.

"Then they have value," said Rowland.

Yet, in spite of the value these dogs now have as breeding stock, owners still fight them, she said. Rowland said fighting dogs can be sold for between \$1,000 and \$25,000.

In many cases, while the trained pit bulls are extremely aggressive toward other dogs, they are not as aggressive to human beings. When the pit bulls were seized in East Greenwich Township, however, police reported that some of the dogs

whimpered and seemed frightened and others strained at the heavy metal chains and tried to attack the officers.

As described in the HSUS publication, serious dog fighters may own a dozen or more dogs—sometimes groups of people jointly own the animals, hoping to find some protection from prosecution in that arrangement.

Trainers often keep only those puppies which exhibit the most

aggressive behavior. The animals that survive 16 to 18 months of "culling" become "prospects" and are "schooled." Test fights during this time are usually against opponents considered not too rough.

Rowland said the site for highly organized fights is a closely guarded secret. Sometimes spectators, who pay a fee just to watch the fights, are sent to one location and led, in caravan, to the actual fight loca-

tion. In one case, she said, the organizers had spectators and bettors meet at a motel. From there, they were taken, via a bus rented from a local church, to a remote farm, where bleachers had been set up around a fight pit and food was being served from the kitchen.

Rowland said dog fighting crosses culture lines, involving anyone from "doctors and dentists to factory workers. anyone, they all come together."