



PITTING ANIMALS AGAINST ANIMALS

PICTURE A HOT SUMMER NIGHT in a poor inner-city neighborhood. People make their way home along littered sidewalks, past decrepit newsstands and barricaded windows of “Mom and Pop” markets. The familiar cacophony of the streets is punctuated by loud bursts of bass from the radio of a parked car, where a group of about twenty youths has gathered. No dogs are permitted in this urban housing project, but barking almost drowns out what sounds like loud boasting. A pit bull is being held on a chain by one member of the group, while another young man emerges from the car with his own pit bull. The group follows the two dog handlers to a grassy area nearby. From inside a van, a police officer, an animal-control officer, and a humane investigator observe what appear to be exchanges of money. The two dogs strain on

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their leashes as their handlers bring them closer. Finally the dogs are allowed to fight in what is referred to as an on-the-chain roll. A crowd of spectators grows around the match as the watching officers radio for backup. Passersby hurriedly leave the area. As several police units converge on the scene, the crowd quickly disperses into the surrounding apartments and housing project grounds. The two dog handlers disappear with their dogs.

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In Mississippi, state police learn of an upcoming cockfight. Law enforcement officers request assistance from the Mississippi Animal Rescue League and The HSUS. On an icy cold Saturday evening, officials meet in a vacant parking lot; an undercover police officer and an informant have just scouted the fight location. They report that several dozen people are in a barn and fights are in progress. The barn is several hundred feet from the main road, and the only gate is guarded by a sentry with a CB radio and police scanner. The undercover agent gets a search warrant, and a team of officers quickly subdues the sentry and raids the fight. Inside the heated barn, the team finds nearly fifty people in possession of hundreds of dollars, three cockfighting arenas equipped with bleachers, and a dozen fighting cocks still alive.

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After more than a year of work with an informant, an HSUS investigator joins a raiding team consisting of Oregon state troopers, sheriff's deputies, and agents from the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). The team descends on a large cockfighting "derby" in progress in rural Oregon. The derby's armed guard is arrested quickly by undercover troopers before he can alert the organizers and attendees. The troopers apprehend more than 340 people in and around a large barn equipped with theater seating, concession stands, an announcer's box, and three cockfighting arenas. Many of the cockfighters had traveled across state lines to participate in the event and were given away by the out-of-state tags on their cars and trucks. Investigators find more than one thousand live

¹Arizona activists have begun initiative efforts and plan to present an initiative in 1998 to ban cockfighting.

²While Missouri's cockfighting law has been held to be unconstitutional, state officials warn that cockfighting violates Missouri's general animal-cruelty statutes. Activists in Missouri are still pushing for a change in law to make it specifically illegal.

gamefowl being kept on tie cords, in pens and carrying cases, and in cockhouses near the arenas. Some birds are suffering from severe injuries. Investigators find heaps of dead and dying gamefowl near the pit site and in trash bags scattered around the barn. By the end of the raid, the collection of seized evidence includes dozens of boxes containing illegal cockfighting implements, drugs and drug paraphernalia, weapons, and approximately \$90,000 in cash. In the months that follow, most of the defendants plead guilty or are found guilty in criminal trials. They receive fines ranging from several hundred dollars to more than a thousand dollars, but no jail time. Many of those from other states fail to appear for their court dates. There is overwhelming evidence that birds were transported across state lines for the purpose of fighting, a federal offense under the Animal Welfare Act (AWA) carrying penalties of up to \$5,000 and the possibility of imprisonment for the promoters and all those present. The USDA and federal prosecutors, however, do not prosecute a single case under the AWA. Because of the massive amount of evidence showing involvement in a continuing criminal enterprise, the Oregon Department of Justice brings a racketeering lawsuit against the property owner, seeking a \$250,000 fine for violations of Oregon's Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act. The case is settled out of court and the property owner pays a fine of \$62,500.

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After working with an informant for several months, HSUS investigators and deputies of a county sheriff's department prepare to raid a dogfight in a rural area of southeast Florida. Fifty deputies, two helicopter crews, half a dozen HSUS staff advisors, and a veterinarian assemble, while members of the sheriff's special response team make their way through a heavily wooded swamp and take up positions close to the suspected pit site. As night falls, the special response team silently watches as people arrive in caravans and pay their admission fees. Just as the fight is about to begin, a small aircraft flies overhead. Fearing they're being monitored, fight organizers cut the lights and wait for an hour before starting the first fight of the night. As soon as it begins, the special response team notifies the assembled deputies. Within minutes, officers encircle the site and round up fleeing spectators, with the help of helicopter floodlights. Once the area is

secured, officers begin handling the thirty seized dogs, cataloging evidence, and processing the nearly one hundred suspects. It will be sunrise before the last of the team leaves the site.

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On a chilly morning in early spring, sheriff's deputies, humane investigators, and animal-control officers from eight agencies are briefed on dogfighting activities before executing search warrants at five San Francisco Bay area locations. From a remote breeding and training establishment and an East Oakland location, officials seize forty-four pit bulls along with stacks of underground dogfighting publications and dogfighting paraphernalia. Many of the dogs bear scars from fights and some have fresh wounds. Some dogs are in such poor physical condition that they must be euthanized. Bay area prosecutors indict three men for felonies; one had helped organize the West Coast Convention, a regional championship dogfight held the previous year in a San Francisco warehouse. San Francisco Animal Care and Control agents had raided the West Coast Convention. They arrested seventy-five people, some from other states, and confiscated more than \$50,000 in cash, dogfighting paraphernalia, and evidence connecting the organizers to regional dogfighting events held all across the country.

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Accounts such as these are not at all uncommon. Indications are that there has been a sharp rise in illegal cockfighting and dogfighting across the country and the world. In the spring of 1996, millions of viewers of the syndicated television show *Hard Copy* were shocked by a two-part exposé about dogfighting and the theft of pets to be used as bait by those involved in this contemptible activity. The syndicated show *Inside Edition* followed with its own in-depth report on the subject. Staff of the HSUS West Coast and Southeast regional offices worked closely with the producers of both shows. Their brutally accurate reporting left little to the viewer's imagination. Viewers of both shows continue to call The HSUS to voice their outrage over the cruelty involved and their disgust that these bloody contests continue to occur. Some even called to report information about fights.

The increase in illegal animal fighting is not in dispute, and the reasons for the increase are complex. It is not the lack of strong laws—The HSUS has led a decades-

long battle for better laws with stiffer penalties. As a result, dogfighting is illegal now in every state and a felony crime in forty-three of them. (Only seven states had felony provisions by 1981.) Cockfighting is now specifically outlawed in forty-five states, seventeen of which now carry felony penalties. (Cockfighting is still legal in Arizona,¹ Louisiana, Missouri,² New Mexico, and Oklahoma.) The HSUS also helped pass the AWA's Animal Fighting Ventures Prohibition, enacted in 1976.

Yet underground publications devoted to illegal bloodsports are flourishing—and making their way through the U.S. mail and other carrier services, in violation of the AWA. Too few judicial officials understand the serious nature of these crimes, and the penalties called for under existing laws aren't strong enough. Many law enforcement officials are uneducated about illegal animal fighting, or they are unwilling to conduct such investigations.

Even though most states prohibit cockfighting and dogfighting, mere illegality is not a sufficient deterrent. In some states the maximum penalties are absurdly low. In Alabama, for example, the maximum penalty for violating the cockfighting statute is a \$50 fine. Such small penalties discourage local law enforcement agencies from committing the resources necessary for an investigation. In some jurisdictions across the country, courts have levied very low fines because judges were apathetic. In Miami, Florida, a panel of judges is even considering dropping charges against all spectators apprehended at cockfights despite a state law that specifically outlaws being present during an animal fight.

The HSUS argued against charging the USDA with enforcement of the AWA's Animal Fighting Ventures Prohibition because of fears that have since been realized. Over the years HSUS investigators have provided useful information about animal fights and invited the active involvement of USDA agents in successful busts. Yet prosecution is virtually nonexistent because the USDA rarely pushes for it. As a result, animal-fight promoters regularly use mail and telephone service for interstate publicity and often transport animals across state lines for the purpose of fighting, both violations of the AWA.

Although staged fights between animals are popular to varying degrees in different parts of the world, no one ethnic group, culture, or socioeconomic class is responsible for that popularity. Cockfight-

ing and dogfighting exist largely because illegal gambling is involved and the sums of money wagered can be phenomenal. But many forms of gambling exist that do not involve the purposeful maiming and killing of animals. The fact that supposedly civilized people are fascinated by watching animals killing each other is a condemnation of any society—"civilized" or not. In many cases, children are exposed to and encouraged to participate in such activities by their parents or peers—especially disturbing given what is now acknowledged about the connections between cruelty to animals and violence directed at people (see the Fall 1996 HSUS News).

The HSUS is committed to increasing training for law enforcement agencies, prosecutors, and judges. We offer certified courses in animal-fighting investigation. (The next certificate course will be held at Animal Care Expo '97 in Orlando, Florida, in February—see back cover.) A new animal-fighting investigation manual has been developed for use by law enforcement personnel, local humane societies, and animal-control agencies. The HSUS is establishing several regional animal-fighting task forces consisting of federal, state, and local law enforcement and animal-protection agencies that want to end animal-fighting contests. We are working also toward the enactment of new state and federal laws to make penalties tougher for those involved in animal fighting, investigations and prosecutions less burdensome for law enforcement officials, and prohibitions on animal fighting stronger.

The nineteenth-century German poet and novelist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe wrote, "The character of a man is shown in nothing more clearly than in what he thinks laughable." The character of a society shows in its entertainments as well. The continued existence and increasing popularity of archaic and brutal animal-fighting activities is a disquieting reminder that, not so long ago, crowds flocked to coliseums to cheer sanctioned bloodsports. While it may be too much to expect that we can completely eradicate animal fighting anytime soon, The HSUS is convinced that we can reverse the trend through renewed efforts on educational, legislative, and legal investigative fronts. ■

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