

THE HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES

NEW ENGLAND ANIMAL FIGHTING TASK FORCE NEWSLETTER

Fall/Winter 2002

Workshops Provide Training To Put Animal Fighters On the Run

"How do I build a successful case against an animal fighter?"

"I suspect animal fighting but I don't know how to proceed with an investigation."

The HSUS New England Regional Office often fields these types of calls from animal control and law enforcement officers who sometimes feel ill-prepared to deal with this illegal and growing bloodsport. In response to this need, our office sponsored two day-long workshops entitled "Investigating Animal Fighting: Dogfighting & Cockfighting" that were held in New Hampshire and Connecticut this past fall. Co-sponsors for these workshops included the New England Animal Control/Humane Academy, the New Hampshire Federation of Humane Organizations, and the Connecticut Municipal Animal Control Officers Association.



Dogfighting expert Scott Giacoppo discusses equipment often associated with animal fighting.

The workshops featured presentations on an array of topics, from intelligence gathering and search warrants to the use of pit bulls by gangs. Nearly one hundred animal control and law enforcement officers from all six New England states participated in these training events. Local dogfighting expert Scott Giacoppo of the Massachusetts SPCA and veteran animal cruelty investigator Sandy Christiansen of the

HSUS Southeast Regional Office served as the instructors, and participants had an opportunity to view undercover footage of dogfighting and cockfighting, as well as to familiarize themselves with a variety of animal fighting implements seized in previous cases.

These workshops also provided an opportunity to discuss a regional animal fighting task force. It became clear from our roundtable dis-

cussions that in order to support a New England animal fighting task force, statewide task forces or coalitions would be an important next step. We are in the process of organizing meetings in New Hampshire, Connecticut, and Rhode Island; please contact our office at (802) 368-2790 for more details or if you would like to help coordinate a meeting in one of the other three New England states.

In addition to these workshops, the Rhode Island Animal Control Officers Association devoted the first half of its October conference to the topic of dogfighting. Coordinated through the HSUS New England Regional Office and funded by a generous grant from the Rhode Island Foundation, this presentation provided an overview of the investigation and prosecution of dogfighting and also addressed the growing trend of breed-specific bans. It was attended by approximately thirty animal control officers from throughout the state.

Given the positive feedback from evaluations and repeated requests for more time on this topic, it is clear that there is an ongoing need for comprehensive and up-to-date information that can be used in the field.

Our office will be organizing a "part two" that will consist of a Rhode Island animal fighting conference in the spring of 2003 designed to attract a broader audience of stakeholders, including veterinarians, prosecutors, legislators and others. Through these combined training efforts, we hope to encourage increased networking and cross-training, which will in turn support a more proactive response to the cruelty of animal fighting.



A display of seized animal fighting implements including weights, scales, veterinary supplies, and underground publications.

National Resources on Animal Fighting

HSUS Animal Sheltering Magazine

Dogfighting: Sheltering the Victims - This cover story in the July/August 1997 issue of *Animal Sheltering Magazine* provides guidelines for housing pit bulls used in fighting. The write-up covers medical problems common to fighting dogs, pit bull behavioral characteristics, recommendations to ensure the safety of both the dogs and shelter personnel, and the difficult issue of euthanasia. A full copy of the article can be downloaded at www.animalsheltering.org through the Shelter Library. Copies of the magazine can also be obtained through the HSUS New England Regional Office by calling (802) 368-2790.

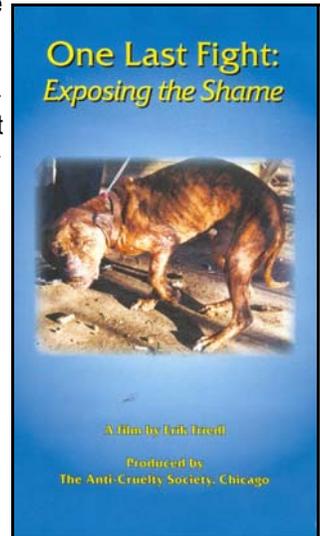
HSUS Animal Fighting Web Site

www.animalfighting.org - This web site offers quick and easy access to a variety of background materials on animal fighting. Highlighting the HSUS Final Round campaign, the site provides fact sheets, summaries of state laws, and sample letters to law enforcement agencies, prosecutors and judges. A number of Final Round materials can be downloaded in PDF format for high quality reproductions.

Don't forget that the HSUS New England Regional Office can be a helpful resource during an animal fighting investigation. Even if you haven't obtained detailed leads, our office welcomes calls and requests, and we may be able to provide assistance. The HSUS New England Regional Office can be reached at (802) 368-2790 or via fax at (802) 368-2756. Our email address is nero@hsus.org.

Training Video

One Final Fight: Exposing the Shame - Produced by The Anti-Cruelty Society of Chicago through a grant from the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, this 15-minute video explores the social and criminal issues associated with dogfighting as discussed by a humane investigator and a third grade teacher who was exposed to dogfighting as a child. The video addresses ways to help stop dogfighting and emphasizes the impact that this illegal activity has on communities as a whole. It also includes a section with safety tips for children who encounter potentially dangerous dogs. The filmmakers recommend this video for children ages 12 and older. "One Last Fight" can also be a great tool for educating adults. If you are interested in obtaining a copy, contact The Anti-Cruelty Society at (312) 644-8338 x312 or via email at education@anticruelty.org.



New Hampshire Man Receives Precedent-Setting Sentence For Dogfighting Charges

In our first issue of this newsletter, we described a major dogfighting case that was pending in the Granite State ("New Hampshire Dogfighting Bust Prompts Renewed Attention to Cruel Bloodsport"). Christopher DeVito has since pleaded guilty to 23 of the 37 charges of exhibition of fighting animals that were brought against him under the animal cruelty statute. Judge Gillian Anderson sentenced him to two to five years in state prison on the first charge, with suspended sentences of two to four years for each of the remaining 22 charges.

DeVito was also ordered to pay \$63,000 to the town of Newton, New Hampshire in restitution for the boarding and care of the 43 seized pit bulls. In addition, DeVito was prohibited from owning any animals. And the case doesn't end there.

Shortly after local police raided DeVito's home last January, the federal government seized much of the defendant's property under a United States drug forfeiture law. Through the close collaboration of

the Drug Enforcement Agency, the Internal Revenue Service and the U.S. Attorney's Office, additional charges were filed, and in October DeVito pleaded guilty to federal charges that he laundered money made from the sale of marijuana to Massachusetts dealers. According to court documents, the government had information that DeVito

was transporting large quantities of marijuana from Arizona to New Hampshire and storing the drugs in a building behind his house.

DeVito now faces up to a 20-year federal prison sentence, in addition to his state prison term.

As animal advocates and pit bull owners breathe a sigh of relief at seeing DeVito off the streets, this case highlights the fact that animal fighting often occurs in conjunction with other illegal activity and requires a coordinated and sustained response by multiple agencies. Our thanks go out to everyone who was involved in seeing this case through to a successful conclusion.

"You are possibly the most publicly reviled defendant that I have ever seen in my days on the bench."

-Judge Gillian Anderson at the sentencing of Christopher DeVito

Congress Continues to Advance Measures to Combat Animal Fighting

Although most of the animal protection measures included in the federal 2002 farm bill were stripped by the conference committee, important legislation to ban the interstate shipment and export of fighting birds remained intact and was voted into law earlier this year. The passage of this legislation represents an important step in stemming the spate of illegal, underground cockfighting rings that thrive across the country.

Now, a new federal bill goes one step further. S. 3118, introduced in the Senate during the month of October by Senators John Ensign (R-NV), Wayne Allard (R-CO), and Maria Cantwell (D-WA), is a companion bill to H.R. 5268, introduced in the House in August by Reps. Robert Andrews (D-NJ) and Roscoe Bartlett (R-MD). S. 3118 and H. R. 5268 will amend the federal Animal Welfare Act to:

- 1) Authorize felony-level jail time (up to 2 years) for violations of federal animal fighting law;
- 2) Prohibit the interstate shipment of cockfighting implements, such as razor-sharp knives or gaffs; and
- 3) Update language regarding the seizure and disposition of fighting animals.

The felony provision is especially important because prosecutors are often not motivated to pursue prosecution of misdemeanor offenses. Since 1976, the federal government has pursued only three dogfighting cases and no cockfighting cases, despite countless tips from informants and requests to assist with state and local prosecutions.

To help increase support for this bill, you can contact your U.S. Representative and request that he or she sign on to cosponsor H.R. 5268. To identify your representative, visit www.congress.org or call the HSUS New England Regional Office at (802) 368-2790. All representatives can also be reached by calling the U.S. Capitol switchboard: (202) 224-3131.



Oklahoma Roundly Rejects Cockfighting Through State Ballot Initiative



Although cockfighting in Oklahoma was banned during the latter part of the 19th century, in 1963 an Oklahoma Court of Appeals judge declared that chickens are not animals and thereby determined that these creatures were not covered under the state prohibition on animal fighting. On November 5, 2002, citizens in Oklahoma had an opportunity to decide for themselves via a ballot initiative whether to outlaw cockfighting. The result? Voters approved State Question 687 by a 56.2% majority and made Oklahoma the 48th state to ban cockfighting, despite continuous challenges from the gamefowl industry.

Citizens had originally gathered signatures in the fall of 1999 to place S.Q. 687 on the statewide ballot for a vote of the people. Cockfighters responded by spending hundreds of thousands of dollars on legal action to prevent the measure from appearing on the ballot. However, in early 2002 the Oklahoma Supreme Court ruled unani- mously that the initiative petition to ban cockfighting met all of the standards for ballot placement.

Oklahoma Governor Frank Keating endorsed this ballot question without reservation, stating, "Cockfighting is cruel, it promotes illegal gambling and it is simply embarrassing to Oklahoma to be seen as one of only a tiny handful of locations outside of the third world where this activity is legal." S.Q. 687 also received support from numerous humane advocates, religious groups, law enforcement agencies and others.

The counter-offensive by cockfighters included the introduction of a measure to amend the Oklahoma Constitution by almost doubling the number of signatures needed to qualify an initiative to promote the welfare of animals. Decried by several of the state's largest newspapers as arbitrary and unfair, State Question 698 was defeated by 54%.

The passage of State Question 687 restores the state's long-established policy of criminalizing the instigation of fights between animals for amusement or illegal gambling purposes, and cockfighting is now considered a felony in Oklahoma. It remains to be seen how this new law will be interpreted, enforced and prosecuted in a state that still has 42 major cockfighting pits and thousands of active cockfighters, but one thing is clear: the voters have spoken.

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First Meeting of National Task Force Held

For the past several years, the HSUS Field Services section has been promoting the development of a National Illegal Animal Fighting Task Force. The task force has consisted of a loosely knit group of law enforcement and government officials, animal control officers, prosecutors and judges throughout the United States who receive regular updates about animal fighting activity and who are able to draw upon the knowledge and expertise of other colleagues. As the list of participants has grown, so too has the impetus to launch a more formal task force.

Fortunately, this effort recently received a boost from an HSUS supporter who provided grant money to hold several animal fighting forums in different areas of the country during 2002 and 2003. The purpose of these forums is to generate discussion between current and prospective members of the National Illegal Animal Fighting Task Force about issues and challenges in their respective jurisdictions, as well as to refine the structure and scope of the task force.

The first of these meetings was held on October 8th in Gaithersburg, Maryland. This followed a day-long workshop on the investigation of animal fighting that drew attendees from Virginia, Maryland, Delaware, Pennsylvania and beyond. Staff from the HSUS New England Regional Office attended the National Illegal Animal Fighting Task Force meeting, along with Scott Giacoppo of the Massachusetts SPCA. Moderated by HSUS animal fighting expert Eric Sakach, the meeting served as a working forum in which participants were

charged with finding ways to address specific challenges. Each group was asked to brainstorm solutions to issues surrounding confidentiality and protection of informants and witnesses, effective outreach to prosecutors and judges, and the sheltering and euthanasia of fighting animals.

This event also provided an opportunity for participants to share success stories. Scott Giacoppo described a Boston-based initiative called Operation Dog Tag. As a joint collaboration between the Massachusetts SPCA, the Animal Rescue League of Boston, Boston Animal Control, and the Boston Police Department that was begun in the mid 1990's, Operation Dog Tag served as a way to address the growing problem of dangerous dogs, street fighting, and gang use of pit bulls to intimidate entire neighborhoods. Operation Dog Tag took an aggressive approach to the enforcement of animal control laws and, through teamwork and shared information, significantly reduced the number of complaints while improving quality of life for Boston residents.

The first animal fighting forum of the National Illegal Animal Fighting Task Force was a strong success, and future roundtable discussions will continue to support this important opportunity to network and generate shared goals. If you are interested in joining the National Illegal Animal Fighting Task Force, contact the HSUS Field Services section via email at pwagner@hsus.org.