

FROM 1A

'Dog men' number in the thousands

Animal-rights activists all-too familiar with those who breed, raise pit bulls for fighting

BY PAUL DUGGAN
The Washington Post

It's a disturbing narrative, the 19-page indictment of football star Michael Vick and three of his friends. Perhaps the details shocked people unfamiliar with the secretive world of illegal dogfighting: The breeding and training of pit bulls for savage, high-stakes combat and the brutal executions of dogs that fail to measure up.

Dogs shot, hanged, drowned, beaten, electrocuted.

Yet to animal-welfare workers, the ugly particulars were far from surprising. They said the dogfighting subculture is deeply entrenched in the United States. And in that shadowy realm, they said, the sort of business allegedly conducted on property owned by Vick in rural Surry County, Va., has been going on for generations, especially in the rural South.

Vick, quarterback of the NFL's Atlanta Falcons and a former Virginia Tech all-American, filed his plea agreement in federal court



One of the dogs that was removed from the property owned by Michael Vick.

Friday, admitting to conspiracy in a dogfighting ring and helping kill pit bulls. He denied betting on the fights, only bankrolling them. In the plea agreement, the government committed to recommending a sentence on the low end of the federal sentencing guideline range of a year to 18 months. The NFL suspended Vick indefinitely. Nike announced Saturday that it terminated its contract with Vick.

His co-defendants, Tony Taylor, Purnell Peace and Quanis Phil-

lips, have pleaded guilty. Taylor said Vick financed the dogfighting ring's gambling and operations. Peace and Phillips disclosed that Vick joined them in killing dogs that did not perform well in test fights.

Secret networks

"Dog men," they call themselves, the untold numbers of breeders and fighters. With their pastime illegal everywhere in the country, they stay in touch through secret networks and underground magazines.

They say they love to compete. They tell themselves the pit bulls love it, too.

"The reason for the Michael Vick thing ... is because athletes have a keen insight into courage and determination, which is what pit bulls possess," said Bill Stewart, a breeder in Romance, Ark., who publishes the Pit Bull Reporter.

"Athletes understand better than anyone what dogfighting is about. It's about two highly conditioned athletes going at each other with



When Michael Vick was arraigned in July he pleaded not guilty. He has now admitted guilt to conspiracy in a dogfighting ring.

everything they have to try to win. It's the purest form of combat on earth."

To dog men, all dogs are curs except the American pit bull terrier, descended from canines used in English blood sports centuries ago.

Animal-protection workers and others who have infiltrated the underworld of pit bull fighting say dog men train their animals for weeks before bouts, perverting the dietary and fitness sciences to build ferocious canine maulers.

They perform unlicensed veterinary surgery on the grievously

wounded and stud their battle-scarred champs. A pit bull in its prime with a string of victories can fetch \$10,000 or more. Weaklings are destroyed, either painlessly or with a vengeance.

The illegal bouts, in carpeted, 16-by-16-foot pits surrounded by four-foot walls, are staged in hidden venues, usually with no more than a few dozen spectators allowed. Elaborate, decades-old rules are followed. Bets are posted in cash, sometimes five figures. Afterward, dog men tend to their pit bulls' injuries, provided the animals fought gamely. They won't tolerate dogs that quit.

Young pit bulls that survive training become "match dogs," weighing 35 to 55 pounds and fighting in weight classes. With a pile of cash riding on the outcome, a regulation match is officiated by a referee. A typical bout lasts 45 minutes to an hour, usually ending when one of the bloodied combatants is too torn and gouged to go on.

The pit bull fighting subculture encompasses not only dog men with their training kennels and scheduled matches; it also includes less organized dogfighting that frequently takes place in poor urban neighborhoods.

Although in both types of fight-

ing the dogs maul each other in a frenzy of blood and saliva, inner-city fights usually are spontaneous, so making arrests is difficult unless owners are caught in the act.

High stakes

Dog men have too much invested in their animals to let them fight to the death, so fatalities in the pit are rare.

"At the top level there are probably several thousand guys," said John Goodwin, the national Humane Society's manager of animal-fighting issues. "When you include the guys who are part of organized dogfighting but don't have quite as sophisticated an operation as we saw in Surry County, we're talking about upwards of 40,000."

Vick and the others are accused of running Bad Newz Kennels, a boot camp for fighting dogs on 15 acres near Vick's home town of Newport News, Va. Starting in 2001, officials said, the men entered pit bulls in more than two dozen fights in several states, with bets of up to \$13,000 per side. Officials said they seized 66 dogs, pit bull carcasses and training gear at the compound.

The Associated Press contributed to this report

Negative image haunts pit bulls

Owners, breeders say dogs make loving pets, but terrible guards

BY JESSICA JOHNSON
The Post and Courier

When Julie Monk of Summer-ville walks her family dog at the park, people take one look at her American Staffordshire terrier and head in the other direction.

The terrier is one of about 23 breeds of dog often referred to as a pit bull.

With all the negative media attention pit bulls get these days, Monk's loving pet has turned into a guard dog.

"It's nice to some degree, having a big, mean-looking dog," Monk said.

Strangers would think twice before entering her home, not knowing that her pet wouldn't do any harm.

Stories about pit bulls attacking children and fighting each other to the death have made pit bulls both

a bad dog and a fad dog.

Marli Drum, superintendent for Columbia Animal Services, said she can remember when the city animal control would see one or two pit bulls a month. Now they receive a handful a day. Some are suspected of being used in dog-

fighting. Others have just been cast aside for not being the kind of dog owners thought they would be.

"It's the newest bad animal," Drum said. "This breed has become a fad."

Melissa Sanders, LowCountry Pit Bull Rescue president, said people often own the dogs for the wrong reasons. The dog is viewed as a symbol of dominance, and some people buy the animals thinking they will make good guard dogs.

"They make really bad guard dogs because they are too friendly," she said. "You have to train a pit bull to be aggressive if you want

it to be aggressive."

Monk's husband, who used to raise American Staffordshire terriers, was first attracted to the breed for its appearance.

"Pound for pound it is the most powerful canine species," Monk said. "They have massive power and they can do the damage other dogs cannot."

But as the Monks researched the breed they found that the dog's awesome power is matched with awesome loyalty, Monk said.

Monk said her dog is loving, but there are times that she doesn't mind strangers basing her dog's temperament on the pit bull's bad image.

Sanders said the negative pit bull image is the only thing that makes the dog a good protector. The people who own the dog for that reason often place the animal on a chain in the yard.

"When the pit bull is not mean to people," Sanders said owners "throw it, kick it and punch it and the dog ends up in the shelter."

The pit bull fad turned dog breeder Brad Nesmith of Charleston, off the breed.

Nesmith said it became increasingly difficult to find a responsible owner.

"You have to question people so much, and really listen to what they tell you," Nesmith said.

Potential owners sometimes asked Nesmith about his dog's fighting ability, and he said, he showed them the door.

The bloodlines and markings commonly associated with dogfighting were eliminated from the American Kennel Club's Staffordshire terrier definition in the 1930s, Nesmith said. Dogs with chocolate or liver coloring and red-nosed dogs weren't accepted in the breed,



Melissa Sanders, LowCountry Pit Bull Rescue president, is trying to find a home for Rocky, a 9-week-old pit bull, to keep him out of the hands of someone who might train the dog to fight.

he said. That coloration is typically associated with dogfighting lines and aggressive tendencies.

The American Kennel Club of late has readmitted the colors but strongly discourages them.

The changing definition and recent news stories about Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick make Nesmith feel as if efforts to better the loyal breed are futile.

The quarterback's prominence has led to a media frenzy, shocking people with the gruesome details of the blood sport.

"Michael Vick has undone all those years of work in one incident," Nesmith said.

Reach Jessica Johnson at 745-5860 or jjohnson@postandcourier.com.

Secretive dogfighting society pervasive

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said, calling it culling the pack.

"They've invested their time and money into a dog, and when it doesn't win, they simply move on to training the next dog."

There are also reports of using other animals as bait or sparring partners for training.

"These men are absolutely disgusting and cruel," McMaster said. "Every one of them needs to be in jail."

McMaster said the crime has increased in the state. An improved system of interstate highways and technology such as the Internet has fueled the spread.

"Dogfighters go from state to state," McMaster said. "It's quite the thing."

Underground magazines such as American Gamedog Times and Web sites detail matches and preserve dog pedigrees using a coded language.



McMaster

Sites and articles might say "Big Red bested Yellow dog in two hours and 15 minutes ending in a terminal conclusion."

"They never say 'fight,'" McMaster said, but area residents and animal control officers have discovered the aftermath.

On Aug. 17, a Charleston resident found two injured dogs on the side of River Road on Johns Island. The beagle and the boxer, both suspected bait animals, had bite marks across their bodies. The beagle also had suffered a broken palate, a puncture wound to its snout and an injured leg.

Roughly 10 years ago, Joy Davis of Lowcountry Animal Rescue of Dorchester County said she found Duke, a stolen pet boxer, with its mouth taped shut so it couldn't fight back.

Colleton County Animal & Environmental Control director Ricky Valentine said his officers have found dead and wounded dogs on secluded country roads.

The animals often have deep lacerations to their heads, and their legs are broken.

People have made anonymous tips to Animal Control about suspected dogfighting, but it's never enough information, Valentine said.

"They are in fear of the people," he said. "And they fear that law enforcement can't protect them."

SLED has designated undercover agents to break into the society, but the assignment has proven difficult. An undercover SLED agent who requested anonymity testified in the Maffei case that he had just four informants after a year of work.

Dogfighters fear that fellow fighters will steal their dogs almost as much as they fear being busted, he said.

"It was the most secretive Southern subculture there is. You just don't walk into this," the agent said.

In most cases, as in Vick's, investigators are looking for evidence of other crimes when they discover dogfighting operations.

In 2003, investigators who'd been tipped off in a drug investigation raided a rural Orangeburg County residence. They found 70 dogs, photographs and equipment used in a dogfighting operation. The pile of evidence is what pushed McMaster to fight back.

"We all saw the viciousness of the thing," McMaster said. "Dogs with their ears chewed off, faces cut off, legs broken, bite marks all over them. It is just a horrible thing."

McMaster said that dogfighters often deal drugs and participate in other crimes. In fact, the torture of the dogs could be a gateway to crimes of violence against people, he said.

"What professionals tell us is that most convicted murderers abused animals in their youth," McMaster said.

But that is just one reason people should care about stopping the crime, he said.

The cruelty to animals is barbaric, and dogfighting affects society at large, McMaster said.



RYAN STONE/WALTERBORO PRESS AND STANDARD

Phillip Maffei was convicted in July of felony dogfighting and animal torture.

"We can't live in a civilized society when we have this kind of brutality going on," he said.

The crime has spread from the rural countryside to the street. Drum said street dogfighting is less organized. Pit bull owners often compare one dog to another to fuel their pride by proving who has the better dog. Then they might meet up at some garage and let the dogs fight, she said.

"They are in it as a macho thing," Drum said.

People fighting on the street might move into more organized fighting, but the majority of people in that arena grow up with dogfighting in their family.

"It's something they learn from their parents, who learned from their parents," she said.

The serious dogfighters breed the dogs and become attached to a specific blood line and want to continue it, Drum said.

"They want to try to create an even better fighting dog," Drum said.

In July, a Colleton County jury convicted pit bull breeder Maffei of fighting dogs in the shed behind his home.

It was the task force's first case in which a jury returned a guilty verdict. In most other cases, people have pleaded guilty rather than have the evidence presented in court.

Maffei was found guilty of four felony counts related to dog and animal fighting. He has maintained his innocence, and his son,

A sadistic practice

Dogfighting, the pitting of two dogs bred and trained to fight against one another for the amusement of spectators, is illegal in the United States, but widely practiced.

Cruelty to animals

- Fight lasts until one of the dogs cannot or will not continue, sometimes up to two hours.
- Dogs often sustain severe or fatal injuries.
- Owners train fighters using smaller animals, such as cats, rabbits or small dogs, as bait.

Effect on community

- Young children are sometimes taken to the fights, which can promote insensitivity toward animals, disregard for the law.
- Illegal gambling occurs at fights.
- Dogs bred to fight might be dangerously aggressive to animals and people, especially children.

State by state

State laws regarding dogfighting:

Legal Misdemeanor Felony

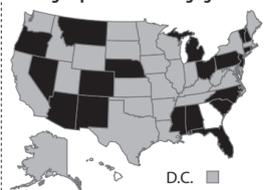
Dogfighting



Possession of dogs for fighting



Being a spectator at a dogfight



Pit bulls are intensely loyal, a trait that can be exploited to produce violent animals.

Is dogfighting in your neighborhood?

The Humane Society of the United States said to be on the lookout for the following signs:

- An inordinate number of dogs, often pit bulls, in one location, chained and unsocialized.
- Signs of or the obvious presence of a fighting pit.
- Dogs with scars on their faces, front legs, hind end and thighs.
- Dogfighting training equipment such as treadmills or tires hanging from trees.
- The remains of dead animals outside a suspicious location.
- A large number of missing pets. (Individuals involved in dogfighting are known to steal cats and smaller dogs for use in training.)
- Unusual foot traffic coming and going from a location at odd hours.

SOURCES: HUMANE SOCIETY OF THE UNITED STATES, AMERICAN SOCIETY FOR THE PREVENTION OF CRUELTY TO ANIMALS, UNITED KENNEL CLUB

MCT/STAFF

Phil Maffei Jr., who told investigators that his dad was fighting dogs, now says he made up the stories. The son did not testify in court. The elder Maffei's attorneys have filed an appeal.

Maffei was sentenced to serve three years in prison and three years' probation, because his sentences were to run at the same time rather than one after the other.

In one of the most notorious dogfighting cases, David Tant of North Charleston pleaded guilty to 41 counts of animal fighting and assault and battery of a high and

aggravated nature. He was sentenced to 40 years in prison, the harshest punishment so far.

In the cases tried since the task force's creation, about half of the defendants have received prison time.

McMaster said that, if it were up to him, he would ask for the harshest penalties for Vick when he is sentenced. Young boys look up to Vick and might think that being a dogfighter is what makes a man, he said.

"He's served as an enormously damaging role model for people," McMaster said. "He ought to have

his head examined."

Drum said the relatively light penalties doled out for dogfighting tell her that the public needs to be further educated on the subject.

"Vick's case is going to help there," she said.

McMaster wants to uncover more dogfighting cases, but he said he needs the public to report their suspicions.

"If you see something," he said, "say something."

Reach Jessica Johnson at 745-5860 or jjohnson@postandcourier.com.