WHERE WE STAND

Making the rounds a few years ago in pre-Katrina New Orleans, Kathryn Destreza of the Louisiana SPCA stopped at a house she’d been to many times before. Its former occupant, known for the prolific breeding of his unsterilized cats, had lived for years among his horde. But when Destreza and a fellow officer visited this time, they didn’t see any cats. In fact, they didn’t see any animals at all. But they did hear, coming from behind the house, the unmistakable sound of snarling dogs.
“We’ve busted people for animal fighting whose father and grandfather have been arrested for it.”

“So we go around the house, and there in the backyard are these two kids fighting their dogs,” says Destreza, now the director of humane law enforcement. “And our first thought is, *Save the dogs.* ... The kids take off running, and I start chasing one of the kids—running, running, running—kid gets away. ... So, later that year, New Orleans PD does this cockfighting bust, and everyone’s running, and one of the cops chases a guy and just reaches out at the right second and grabs the tail of his shirt. And bam—same kid.”

Interviewing the boy, Destreza found a child immersed in the world of animal fighting, an activity so embedded in parts of Louisiana culture that the rules for professional dogfights around the country have long been known as “Cajun rules.” The boy told her that his grandfather had taught his dad and his dad had in turn taught him—and that his family was well-known for cockfighting and dogfighting in the city; the “sport” made them feel connected to local history and traditions. “He’d grown up with it and was very proud of what he knew,” Destreza says.

Family ties to longstanding cultures of cruelty are not unique to Louisiana. Thousands of miles north in Boston, Scott Giacoppo, deputy director of advocacy for the Massachusetts SPCA, witnessed the same phenomenon during his years as a law enforcement officer for the organization. “We’ve busted people for animal fighting whose father and grandfather have been arrested for it,” he says. “They were taught it was OK.”

**A History of Violence**

The bloodsport that every year results in the rescue and seizure of thousands of scarred, bloodied, and torn dogs—mostly pit bulls—has a history that dates back to Roman times. Men, dogs, and
other animals were forced to fight to the death for spectators in the Coliseum. The peculiar enthusiasm for the activity continued through early modern times, and was exported to the United States by the British. It became so popular by the late 1880s that, according to Michigan State University's online Animal Legal and Historical Center, railroads were advertising special fares to a dogfight in Louisville, Kentucky.

Society eventually turned its back on dogfighting, outlawing it in every state by 1976. But proponents continue to celebrate old bloodlines, often putting dogs through sadistic forms of training to achieve "gameiness," the intangible combination of aggression, tenacity, and power that makes for a winning fighting dog.

looking at the animals who've experienced the brutality of the pit—their torn mouths, gaping body wounds, broken bones and teeth, the burns and scars inflicted on them by owners who were angry when they didn't perform—one might wonder if the folks who celebrate the history of dogfighting are also nostalgic for other bygone historical practices, like witch-burning and public stoning.

While some "dogmen" can trace the bloodlines of their animals through generations, the bloodsport of dogfighting doesn't take root only through direct instruction by longtime enthusiasts passing "the tradition" on to their descendants. In some areas, dogfighting springs up more loosely, a symptom of other social ills such as street gangs, illegal guns, and drugs. While Giacoppo has met dogfighters who come from a professional family tradition, he's also seen the variation of the bloodsport that has become most prevalent over the past few decades: street-fighting, a loose and spontaneous extension of the more organized rules- and contracts-driven professional form.

In the late 1990s, Giacoppo says, parts of Boston were in crisis from gang activity, and the dangerous dogs who belonged to the gang members were simply part and parcel... and the only thing separating the residents of the community from certain death by pit bull is this drug dealer holding a leash and whether or not he lets go, that's intimidating."

Dealers were even using the dogs as mini-drug traffickers, Giacoppo says. "If you have a collar with crack taped inside the collar or the harness," he says, "there's not a cop in the city that's going to pull down a pit bull, you know what I mean?"

Casual, street-level dogfighters are nothing new, says Eric Sakach, director of The HSUS's West Coast Regional Office, an animal fighting expert and investigator with nearly 30 years of experience. "There's always been an amateur faction... just the 'My dog's tougher than your dog' deal, and none of the conditioning, none of the rules. [It's been] the back alley sort of stuff," Sakach says. "But the phenomenon that has been most noticeable in the past 30 years in my experience has been the explosive growth in street-level fighting... It's still back alley, but it's also much more public in that a lot of the characters involved tend to operate with a degree of impunity. They feel that they're immune to being arrested by law enforcement."

In these situations, dogfighting is often a mere sideshow to other illegal activities, a chance for gang
Bad Love

Street-level dogfighting has grown for a number of reasons, but many experts point a finger at the hip-hop industry. Certain gangsta rappers have driven dogfighting to the forefront of juvenile consciousness by glorifying the imagery of the dogfighting pit. Some would argue that their lyrics and imagery merely depict the reality of gang life, but the reflected sheen of the music industry's money makes that reality look sexier and more glamorous to many urban and suburban kids looking for models of popularity and respect.

Rappers like DMX and Jay-Z often glorify the image of fighting dogs.

The bad love conveyed by the image of a starved dog on the end of an "I love my pit bull" leash is reflected in many of the contradictory messages put forth by hip-hop. Those who've sheltered the canine victims of dogfighting might relate to this sentiment: "I don't really trust humans much these days / Fact of the matter is I trust dogs more than I trust humans." They might also be surprised to learn its source: DMX, whose album Grand Champ bore the image of a cropped, muscular, heavy-chained pit bull, whose tribute to his old dog is tattooed across his shoulders, whose autobiography includes proud stories of fighting that dog and teaching him to kill cats, whose neglect of 13 pit bulls led him to plead guilty to charges of animal cruelty in 2002, whose whole artistic persona exemplifies the contradictory love-hurt relationship many streetfighters have with their animals.

DMX identifies with the dogs he depicts. His delivery has a barking, staccato quality, and he often imitates actual barking in his raps. His autobiography contains an electronically manipulated photo in which his features are mixed with those of a pit bull. The violence and neglect he's inflicted on his pit bulls reflect his own experience; if biographies (including his own) are to be believed, the rapper's life is a perfect example of what kids may learn when the adults in their life are abusive or absent.

Raised in a home where his mother's boyfriends beat him, DMX found the second family many abused or neglected kids do: gangs, whose tough love and loyalties substitute for the tender ones they've never found with their families. The dogs used by these gangs for protection, intimidation, and fighting are often seen as extensions of the gang itself, canine soldiers who may be called on to represent their owner's own gameness and outlaw nature by fighting. For gang members and their dogs, life is often nasty, brutish, and short. The violent, neglectful affection these urban fighting dogs experience reflects the mistreatment many of their owners have suffered.

None of this background excuses the end result: two dogs tearing each other apart for onlookers' entertainment. But this bloodsport never takes place in a societal vacuum. Whether professional or street-level, whether rural or urban, whether dogfighting is passed on as a family tradition or stumbled upon as part of gang life, the problem has a common root: absent, inadequate, or distorted examples of how to live and how to care for other creatures.
A child who learns early that violence is OK may become desensitized and carry that lesson into his later relationships with both people and animals, becoming an abuser himself. If the people around a child present a clear message that the dogs enjoy it, that they're doing what is instinctive for them, that they don't feel pain—and if the child doesn't hear any other messages—the damage may be done. Like concrete that starts out malleable but becomes rigid and set, lessons learned in childhood quickly harden into beliefs.

The justifications and denials that seem so absurd to outsiders may seem rational to those who've never known another way. Chris Sanford, a special investigator with The HSUS who spent 26 years working for the Galt Police Department in California, compares dogfighters' rationalizations to those often presented by another group of abusers.

"In their minds, how they justify what they're doing, they're not doing anything wrong," Sanford says. "They're doing what's natural for the animal. It's kind of like what a pedophile will tell you about a kid—you know, I'm giving this kid the love they've never had."

Sanford leaves unsaid what has been indicated again and again: A molester who makes such claims may actually believe them, because he has probably been abused himself. And when the cycle started for him, no one stepped forward and said clearly and firmly, This Is wrong and it must stop.

**Breaking Up the Fights**

Parents, role models, and educators can reach kids early with that message. But animal advocates are taking action to ensure the message also resonates with people already entrenched in the dogfighting culture.

In 1997, when *Animal Sheltering* published a feature on caring for dogfighting victims, the crime was a felony in 43 states; that total is now up to 48. Only in Idaho and Wyoming does it remain a misdemeanor. Laws mandating stricter penalties for animal fighting not only ensure more severe consequences, be they higher fines or longer jail time; they can also persuade law enforcement officials with competing priorities to take the crime more seriously and devote more resources to fighting it.

Because the forms of dogfighting vary from one community to the next, the approaches to ending it must vary as well. Professional dogfighters are careful about whom they let into their circles, so gaining access to their operations can be a full-time job. But the long-term undercover work and investigations that have led to prosecution of professional fighters and fighting-dog breeders won't always work for streetfighting, which tends to be more spontaneous and is usually conducted by people who already spark fear in their fellow citizens. Even if people work up the nerve to report a fight in progress, the perpetrators have often dispersed by the time police arrive.

Overall, however, there's much to celebrate. Police are taking the crime more seriously, and animal advocates have developed effective ways to fight back. In Boston in the late '90s, officers from the Massachusetts SPCA teamed up with police to develop a new community policing approach that made a significant difference in certain neighborhoods in the city. Other activities in recent years have produced major busts of professional dogfighters in Louisiana, Texas, and Florida. And a great team effort in 2003 took down the notorious *Sporting Dog Journal,* a magazine that fighters once used to share information and post dogfighting match results. James Frinchione, the publisher, was charged with

In 1997, when *Animal Sheltering* published a feature on caring for dogfighting victims, the crime was a felony in 43 states; that total is now up to 48. Only in Idaho and Wyoming does it remain a misdemeanor.
dogfighters have also adjusted their methods after major arrests, learning from the tactics law enforcement uses. Christiansen, who worked his first case involving Internet evidence in 1999, says that though the Web still has good information and computers should be included on any search warrant for a dogfighting case, fighters have become more cautious. They’ve figured out that information on the Internet is likely sent wagered money to a third party prior to the fight; the third party holds the money of both opponents as a way of guaranteeing each shows up to defend his stake. But that system is changing, said the dogfighter Lewis interviewed. “He told me that after they took the Journal down, they don’t do as many contracts because they don’t fight people they don’t already know and trust,” Lewis says.

hard to get rid of, that macho postings on game-dog message boards can be used against them, and that written documents can become compelling evidence.

On a recent bust, Belinda Lewis of Fort Wayne Animal Care and Control was surprised not to find any “keep records” (the paperwork that has traditionally detailed a dog’s training and conditioning prior to a fight). One of the fighters charged by the Indiana agency told Lewis that professionals have increasingly limited or avoided written documentation, including contracts, since the closure of Sporting Dog Journal. In the contract system used for arranging matches, fighters have historical-

Just as we learn their game, dogfighters can learn ours. The only way to combat this ever-shifting crime is to be ready to shift with it. Involve the community. Involve the police. Involve the schools. Use the methods that work best for you, and then be prepared to try something new if you stop getting results.

The best thing that could happen for pit bull-type dogs—not just individual dogs but the breed as a whole—is the elimination of dogfighting. If dogfighting disappears, the breeding of pit bulls would not only decrease, but some breeders’ efforts to produce animals who appeal to people seeking the dog’s “tough” image would decrease as well. Those who continue to breed pit bulls would be more focused on selling good companion animals than on creating competitors. The dogfighter’s rationale—that game-bred pit bulls are doing what comes naturally to them—is the bane of those who truly love the breed and have long been trying to persuade people that pit bulls aren’t naturally aggressive. These people are trying to win a battle against those who would change the pit bull’s nature through bad nurture.

We’ve made progress, Sakach says, but we have a long way to go. And some of today’s trends make him fear the situation will get worse before it gets better. For every humane, reasonable voice crying out in the wilderness, there often seems to be a din of violent voices raised above it. You can see the trend on television, Sakach says. “There are all these exhibitions of violence that didn’t used to be allowed—extreme fighting, bare knuckle boxing and such. Violent, staged fights between people makes staged fights between animals second nature—cage-fighting, these no-holds-barred sorts of deals where they allow kicking, severe beating, and they’re really unabashed about it,” Sakach says.

It would be nice to think the human race has progressed morally since the time of the gladiators, but sometimes the days of fight-to-the-death bloodsports in the Roman Coliseum don’t seem so far away. Against the mainstreaming of such a flood of violent imagery, all the humane field can do is continue to model and work for a different way. Dogfighting is a problem that never seems to go away permanently. “Unless you have a high degree of diligence as an agency and you’ve got an ongoing community education program and you keep everybody involved, I think the problem just creeps back in,” Sakach says. “We’re just not at the end of this yet.”
BRANDISHING THE LONG ARM OF THE LAW: WORKING WITH POLICE TO END DOGFIGHTING

Before 2001, when dogfighting finally became a felony in the District of Columbia, gangbangers caught fighting their pit bulls in the parks and back alleys of the nation's capital occasionally encountered surprising treatment at the hands of the police.

It wasn't excessive force or harassment; it wasn't a matter of racial profiling. It wasn't any of the complaints that often turn up in negative stories about law enforcement. These were good cops who just didn't know what to do.

When Adam Parascandola started working at the Washington Humane Society, he and fellow animal control officers often arrived on the scene of dogfighting calls to find that police had simply broken up the fight and sent the people and dogs on their way—sometimes without even as much as an official warning.

The police just didn't know how to handle the situation, says Parascandola, now the shelter's chief operating officer. Some didn't even recognize that they were seeing a criminal act. It took years of persistence to get local law enforcement to understand that dogfighting is a serious crime, that it's often accompanied by other crimes, and—most importantly—that Washington Humane had resources to help deal with the problem in a more satisfying and effective way.

"We did a lot of education with the police about the law," says Parascandola. Humane Society staff approached the police department's second-in-command to address a number of ongoing issues and clearly impart their main message: If you come across an animal situation that you don't understand or can't handle, call us.

It made a difference, Parascandola says, as did the District's elevation of dogfighting to a felony-level crime in 2001. "Now sometimes they will actually arrest the person," he says, "but normally they'll hold everybody there and call us and kind of consult with us."

Offering training to local law enforcement agencies is one of the best ways to improve the relationship, says Chris Sanford, a special investigator with The HSUS who worked for the Galt Police Department in California for 26 years. While most police have a real soft spot for children and animals, Sanford says, they don't always know how best to help them—or how to recognize when they are in danger or being abused.

Just as most animal advocates would have no idea how to effectively document and gather evidence at the scene of a homicide or burglary—watching multiple episodes of Law & Order or CSI doesn't make one an expert—most police have received little or no training on how to handle animals or recognize signs of dogfighting, whether those signs are wounded animals or paraphernalia such as treadmills and veterinary drugs.
Mind the Knowledge Gap
Sanford recalls the scant information he received as a police trainee decades ago. “When I went to the police academy, we talked about animal cruelty, but animal fighting never came up,” he says. “As a patrolman, I used to work in a rural area of Sacramento County, and I would see cockfighting all the time, but we really didn’t do anything with it. Our attitude was, ‘We’ll call animal control; that’s something for them to deal with.’ Of course, animal control, when it comes to a case like that and with the amount of people at a cockfight, they don’t have the resources to deal with that. And there’s also a safety issue because most of the people that attend cockfights and dogfights are criminals—they carry weapons, they’re going to have narcotics.”

Mutual recognition by animal control and police that they each have services to offer the other can change both the tenor of the relationship and the nature of the response. Instead of looking at the dogfighting issue as the other agency’s problem, progressive departments identify gaps in service and areas of overlap to learn what each agency can bring to the table.

When the Boston Police Department’s youth violence and anti-gang units were having problems with dangerous dogs during their investigations, Scott Giacoppo of the Massachusetts SPCA saw the need for partnerships firsthand. The situation had spiraled out of control: Kids were walking around with attack-trained pit bulls, dog attacks were a topic on the nightly news, and police were encountering trained pit bulls standing guard on the properties of drug dealers they needed to arrest.

“I started working with them and went to their meetings and noticed that on their lists of people they were interested in talking to about gang activity, those were all the people I was looking at for dogfighting activity,” says Giacoppo, a former MSPCA law enforcement officer who is now the shelter’s deputy director of advocacy.

One eye-opening list provided to Giacoppo at a police intelligence meeting included names of people already under investigation. “I was like, ‘Well, I know that guy, he keeps dogs over here, and this guy’s got a really mean pit bull in his basement because I was just over there on a cruelty complaint.’ And they’re like, ‘You were there on a cruelty complaint? That guy deals drugs and guns!’ ”

The partnership progressed naturally, Giacoppo says, once the police recognized that their bad guys were his bad guys, too.

Help from the MSPCA made the job much easier for police, especially when they were issuing arrest warrants at homes protected by fighting dogs. “Before we came on board, the officers’ only option was to shoot the dog,” Giacoppo says. “That broke their silent entry because everyone in the house...
would wake up when they heard gunshots and the dog howling, and also the police didn’t want to do that because they identified this dog as a victim, as being a living creature that didn’t deserve to die because of this jerk.”

Once the MSPCA started providing backup and using catchpots to remove dogs, arrests went more smoothly, animal victims even treated humanely, and the public was much happier.

The Louisiana SPCA has developed a similar relationship in New Orleans, says Kathryn Destreza, the director of humane law enforcement at the shelter. The help the organization has given the police in dealing with dangerous dogs has led to more interest in animal control cases; one police officer even serves as a liaison to the LA/SPCA.

“As we educated them more, the local police department here would go out on calls and ask us to come with them when they were doing arrest warrants because [the criminals] always had pit bulls,” says Destreza. “And it sort of built [from there] as we did more and more work with the police and started taking these dogs away from people and charging them with dogfighting.”

**Multiple Crimes, Same Perpetrators**

In Boston, Giacoppo also helped start a task force called Operation Dogtag. Working with officers from a community policing unit, Giacoppo and staff from other local shelters and animal control agencies conducted neighborhood sweeps to address ongoing problems simultaneously.

Joining forces allowed the agencies to accomplish much more than they could have on their own. Before Operation Dogtag, Giacoppo explains, if he responded to a cruelty complaint for the MSPCA, he might have unwittingly knocked on the door of a guy wanted on drug violations. If animal control got a call about a potentially dangerous dog, they didn’t have the authority to deal with any cruelty violations. If police went on a drug or domestic violence call, they often couldn’t identify animal issues at the same address. “So what we would do is go as a team, a task force, and address every issue then and there,” Giacoppo says. “Your dog’s unregistered? Boom, we’re taking it. Your dog shows scars from fighting? We can’t prove fighting, but he’s under a rabies quarantine now. Oh, by the way, you have a warrant out for your arrest and the task force received a citation of merit from the police commissioner. Now when Giacoppo talks to friends in the gang unit, they tell him they hardly ever see dogfighting anymore.

The approach used in Boston was based on the “broken windows” theory, a concept that inspired former New York mayor Rudy Giuliani’s “zero tolerance” policies and other major law enforcement reforms. The theory takes its name from an example in the 1982 *Atlantic Monthly* article that first described the idea: “Consider a building with a few broken windows,” the authors wrote. “If the windows are not repaired, the tendency is for vandals to go break a few more windows. Eventually they may even break into the building, and if it’s unoccupied, perhaps become squatters or light fires inside.”

The concept, Giacoppo explains, is that it’s best to address violations when they’re still small, the theory argues that if small problems are taken care of early, both petty and major crimes will be deterred. While some critics have questioned the validity of the idea, crackdowns on petty crime in several cities have in fact led to a reduction of major crimes as well. The premise behind “zero tolerance” goes to the heart of how people perceive their own neighborhood. People in a community where broken windows are fixed, where litter is picked up, where the area is kept attractive and is well-maintained, will feel safer. Responsible citizens won’t leave the
area, and they'll take action to protect their own neighborhoods.

"If someone is scared to walk down the street because there's a guy on the corner with these pit bulls, that's a quality-of-life issue for the citizens, so that is where a lot of police departments can be brought in," says Giacoppo. "Because if we go in there saying, seriousness of the crime and making the connection: Deal with the issues while they're minor, show that you're paying attention, and you'll have to deal with fewer major problems down the road.

Many animal control officers echo Parascandola's sentiments: that police who once didn't pay much attention to the issue are animal control agencies have enforcement powers that allow them to give citations, make arrests, and even carry guns, many do not—and when their staff or field officers encounter a crime like dogfighting, with its common accoutrements of weapons and drugs, they need to have police on their side to provide resources and support.

For animal shelter staff, who regularly tend to animals victimized by fighters—the torn and wounded dogs who come out on the other side of the meat grinder—it can be difficult to understand what seems to be a lackadaisical attitude from law enforcement. But, says Sandy Christiansen, president and CEO of the Spartanburg Humane Society in South Carolina, usually it's not a matter of apathy but simply competing priorities and a lack of understanding that shapes police response to the crime.

"It started as just being something where the police just needed to be educated about a particular crime being committed," Christiansen says. "Having a crime elevated to felony status helps a lot because there’s just a lot of demands on law enforcement's time and resources, and it becomes very difficult when there’s murders and all kinds of other really nasty stuff to dedicate a lot of manpower to a misdemeanor case."

In the late 1990s, Christiansen ran animal control in Rochester, New York, through the contract the city had with the Humane Society at Lollypop Farm. Dogfighting was a huge problem in the inner city areas, but the police didn’t seem to be doing much about it. What helped Christiansen start a working relationship with the police was one particular case: In his first week of work, a fighting dog got loose from his owner. The dog went running through the neighborhood and eventually knocked through the screen door of a house to get at a five-year-old

"These animals are being abused," they’re going to say, "You know what? The person abusing them is dealing guns and shooting people down the street, and I have to worry about that. Can't help you." Rightfully so: If people were getting shot in my neighborhood, I’d want the police to put a high priority on that. But once we in the humane world can learn to accept where we stand and where they stand and how to mix them together, that’s when it all comes together."

Understanding how intertwined some urban crimes are, how gang activities can gradually create a web of drugs and guns and dogfighting, many law enforcement departments are recognizing the now starting to take notice. As more connections are made among agencies, better team response results. Animal control agencies are learning about the training and resources police can offer them, and more and more police departments have come to understand the nexus of other crimes that tend to circle dogfights like an ugly smog: drug-dealing, weapons possession, illegal gambling.

Getting Their Attention

Still, the slow response of law enforcement agencies to dogfights is a continuing source of frustration for some animal shelters and animal control agencies that feel they don't get support from police when they need it. While some
girl who was playing on her kitchen floor.

"The dog went in and took the kid by the head and dragged her outside and was going to kill her," Christiansen says. "Kid ended up with like 70 stitches in her head. And the community was outraged—rightfully so—that a little kid could be playing on her own floor minding her own business and a fighting dog could break into the house and take the kid away. So then there was attention, so then my calls got taken. Sometimes there's an event or one particular case you can use to get your foot in the door."

Because of its ripple effects in the community, street-level fighting may become a higher priority for police than dogfighting that occurs in isolated areas. Within big, crowded cities, the crime can have major effects on a whole neighborhood—as Christiansen's case in Rochester showed all too tragically. The sundry criminal activities connected to dogfighting, be they drugs, guns, or other kinds of violence, will probably be noticed, feared, and complained about by citizens—even if the dogfights themselves aren't. Police are more likely to be asked to take action by their constituents and their superiors in places where dogfighting is affecting the community's quality of life.

When No One's Complaining

In the more rural, isolated settings commonly used for professional-level dogfights, getting the police involved may require a different kind of approach. Professional fighters maintain a close-knit group and are naturally suspicious of outsiders who seem eager to join their activities; infiltrating a ring may take months of undercover work and investigation.

In New Orleans, the cooperative work between the LA/SPCA and the New Orleans Police Department has had an unintended consequence: While many professional dogfights left the city as a result of the partnership, Destreza says, some have simply taken their nasty habit to more rural areas where fewer people are likely to notice it.

"In Louisiana there's only about 53 percent of parishes that have some sort of animal control, and that could be anything from the old man who loves animals to organizations like us that have a team of officers," says Destreza. "The dogfighters just migrate to those parishes where they'll be left alone."

It's a clever plan, but fortunately for the dogs, it doesn't always work. In the spring of 2005, working with the Louisiana State Police's gaming enforcement division and several other agencies, the LA/SPCA conducted successful raids on the kennels of several notorious dogfighters in the state, including those casework has been a boon to the gaming division, resulting in a stream of public support, recognition from superiors, and ongoing good publicity.

"I see all kinds of connections that should interest police," Lentini says, noting that on a recent dogfighting raid his officers seized a pound of marijuana and 16 weapons, some of them assault rifles. "So you had the dogs, the gambling aspect, you have the narcotics and the weapons violations. And that's on almost every [bust] you get that. To me, it's just a very attractive case. You're just not doing a cruelty case; you're getting a big bang for the amount of time you're putting in there. And once I was able to sell that to the department, they see this is a worthwhile thing to

Police are more likely to take action in areas where dogfighting is affecting quality of life.
do, not just that you’re helping these poor defenseless animals but you’re getting a lot of other things off the street.”

Even Exchanges
Christiansen’s seen similar results. When he assisted with a case in Schenectady, New York, in 2002, the state police were at first reluctant to get involved. But presented with evidence Christiansen and his team had gathered through game dog sites on the Internet, they assigned a detective to the case. The guy was less than pleased with his new task, and his colleagues let him know what they thought—they’d bark and growl at him whenever he’d turn up at meetings, Christiansen recalls.

The teasing continued until investigators turned up a huge bag of OxyContin. “The next thing you know, because of New York’s Rockefeller drug laws, that kid was facing an 8 1/2- to 25-year mandatory sentence,” says Christiansen. “He was going to jail for a very, very long time, and 25 dogs were taken off, and it was front page of the paper for days on end, and the media kept up with it. And next thing you know, that detective is getting praised by the highest of the commanders in the state police for responding to something that the public is so opposed to. . . . So all of his colleagues were then like, ‘Dag. Nobody ever says ‘Good job’ to me!’”

The animal care and control field can thank dogfighters for not limiting their crimes to vicious animal abuse, since it’s often the other violations that attract police assistance.

Build a relationship with law enforcement the old-fashioned way, says Sanford: Make face-to-face contact with a detective in the relevant section, and start exploring similarities in mission and possible areas of cooperation. Target your approach based on what you know of the problem, he advises. Whether you’re making a pitch for support to a rural crimes task force, a community-policing or code violations section, narcotics or gang officers, the best way to make sure you’re heard and understood is to be seen. Sit down in person, explain who you are, what problems you’ve witnessed, what evidence you have, what support you’d like.

“You almost have to put your animal advocacy on the shelf for that moment and just say, ‘This is what I have, this is animal cruelty because this is what constitutes animal cruelty,’ and be able to enumerate it with the statute,” says Joe Pentangelo, a special agent for the humane law enforcement division of the ASPCA who also served for 21 years with the New York Police Department. If you are able to provide clear, dispassionate evidence of a crime, he says, “I think it would be nonfeasance of duty for a police officer to not entertain that.”

When you talk to the police, make it clear that while you’re asking for help, you’re also offering it. You have expertise not only in animal handling, but in recognizing all the signs of the crime they might not pick up on—the paraphernalia, the drugs, the records of fights and breedings. You can handle the dogs and make sure they’re cared for humanely.

“You have to kind of explain the mission and get face to face and they get more comfortable,” says Sanford, adding that the police often worry about getting involved with animal groups because some have a reputation for fanaticism. Letting the police get a look at you, hear your ideas, and observe your professionalism will go a long way toward countering that reluctance, Sanford says, and the end results are better for you, the police, and the animals. “Working together in coordination, the whole case will go a lot smoother, the chain of evidence works a lot better, and you prepare a better case for the prosecution.”