WHEN THE VICTIMS COME TO STAY

Sheltering fighting dogs can be hard on your staff, the dogs, and even your building, which may have been constructed without regard for the strength and persistence of these animals. Legal cases often name the dogs as evidence, and few dogs seized from fighters can be safely placed with adopters. The outcome for the animals is almost always euthanasia—a heartbreaking end for both the dogs and their caretakers. But if you are housing dogfighting victims, remember that you’ve rescued them from a far worse fate, and focus on what you can do for them by making their stay as comfortable and safe as possible.

Evidentiary issues. If owners of animals in your care have been charged with a crime and you must hold the dogs for a later court date, it’s vital to document their condition upon arrival at your facility. Without delaying treatment of wounds that may endanger the animal or cause further suffering, write down and photograph as much as possible before you treat and bandage. Record the animal’s breed, sex, weight, and identifying marks, and include an ID number in the shot when you photograph the dog, making sure the number stays with her while she’s in the shelter. Carefully document and preserve any evidence of wounds or signs of neglect or mistreatment; if the case is prolonged, those wounds will heal in your care and be invisible in the courtroom.

Dogs of professional fighters endure intense and often brutal physical training prior to a match; when they come to you, they’ll live a more sedentary—and decidedly more cushy—lifestyle. When the Tulsa Animal Shelter in Oklahoma held a large group of fighting dogs for over a year, security and safety issues prevented staff from providing as much exercise as they would have liked. Weight gain was a problem, says director Larry Briggs.

Under such circumstances, skinny pooches will plump right up, so you need to be able to show what they looked like when they first came to you. If the jury sees a dog after six months of TLC, they might get the wrong impression of his care at the hands of his owners.

Veterinary treatment. After the dog’s initial condition is recorded, a veterinary exam should be performed as soon as possible. The results should be officially documented, so make sure your veterinarian signs and dates a thorough report of the animal’s condition (and if your veterinarian suffers from the notorious affliction of doctor’s handwriting, make sure the report is legible!). Fighting dogs will likely be covered in scars and wounds that are either infected or in varying stages of healing. Look for broken teeth and toenails, and check for broken bones.

Diagnoses may include medical conditions not directly related to the battle, says Andy Newmark, chief veterinarian at the Humane Society at Lollypop Farm. Dogs are often wormy and parasitized when they come from streetfighting situations; this is less common with dogs of professionals, many of whom provide at least rudimentary treatment and some vaccinations. The dogs may have stomach issues caused by ongoing stress and strange foods. Fecal samples can help identify intestinal parasites, and standard preventive vaccin-
tions can help protect the dogs throughout their stay.

Newmark says the dogs occasionally have other complications: Professional dogfighters try to be their own veterinarians, and their skills frequently leave much to be desired. “These guys have their own pharmacy anyway, so they’re providing IV fluids and antibiotics and trying to suture them up and all kinds of things like that,” Newmark says. “They don’t do a good job; they don’t really know what they’re doing. They have all these old wives’ tales which aren’t always medically sound protocols. So they take a flap of dead skin and staple it back into place; they put all kinds of weird ointments and things on these really severe bite wounds, which is not the way to treat these things. It’s important to clean wounds but to sit there and smear all kinds of ointment, which is just not going to let the wounds breathe and heal and will just trap dirt and germs, is not good either.”

Veterinarians treating seized fighting dogs may spend a lot of time fixing the bad “care” the dogs have already received.

Handling. Many dogs who’ve been trained to fight or attack other animals are friendly and often strikingly responsive to people. But a few days or even months of TLC won’t erase the dogs’ training and experiences. When handling fighting dogs, shelter staff will have to contend with the stimulus most likely to send them into attack mode—the presence of other animals. And in a building designed to house hundreds of homeless pets, complete separation is no easy task.

At Fort Wayne Animal Care and Control in Indiana, it took only the most fleeting glimpse of another animal to trigger a friendly fighting dog during her veterinary exam.

“She was doing just fine, she [was] not having any problems or tenselessness or anything—in fact, she was enjoying the attention,” says director Belinda Lewis. “And a dog was brought in from the garage, walked past the door of the room where she was being examined. She wouldn’t normally have been able to see him, but at that moment, somebody walked through the door, and she saw the rear leg of the dog that was being walked by.”

That was all she needed to see, Lewis says. “She shot off the table through the little crack in the door and attacked the other dog. But she had a muzzle on, so they were able to get them separated.”

Even though the shelter’s animal care supervisor had tried to set up a tightly controlled environment for the exam, she had also muzzled the dog for extra assurance—an important step any time a fighting dog is being handled outside his kennel, says Lewis.

Because of the occasionally unstable, aggressive nature of fighting dogs, handling—at intake, during exams and cleaning, and on walks—should only be performed by a few well-trained staff who are comfortable with the job. Many experienced shelter staff warn against allowing volunteers access to the dogs—to protect everyone’s safety and prevent shelter liability. Along with muzzling, consider using control poles to move the dogs around within the building—and in case the unexpected does happen, make sure two staffers are present whenever the dogs are handled. “Getting complacent and forgetting about how powerful the dogs are and how tenacious they can be...is when accidents happen,” says Sandy Christiansen, president and CEO of the Spartanburg Humane Society in South Carolina. “The challenge is the safety part, and as many guards as can be put in place should be.”

Housing. It may seem like the kenneling that works for one dog should work for the next, but when the pit bull you seized from a dogfighter starts shredding her cage and destroying her stainless steel water bowls, you may have to reevaluate your housing arrangements.

Staff at the Humane Society at Lollypop Farm discovered this when the rescued fighting dogs “started eating the kennels,” says Gillian Hargrave, director of shelter services. “They got bored and they just start chewing the wall.” The dogs also figured out how to rip the automatic watering mechanisms out of the walls, spilling water everywhere.

The shelter ended up retrofitting the kennels, Hargrave says, covering the walls with stainless steel three quarters of the way up and then finishing the top part with a
fine, hard-metal mesh unfazed by dog teeth. A kennel should be made of impervious materials—stainless steel or cinder block—up to the five-foot mark to prevent bouncing dogs from projecting themselves to a height where they can start ripping.

“Some shelters just use normal kennel fencing, like backyard cyclone fencing, and backyard cyclone fencing doesn’t work for housing pit bulls ...” says Lewis. “They’ll get their lower jaw into it, grab it and twist and rip it open and ruin your equipment. And then if you use stainless steel bowls, they’ll chew on those because they’re so hard.” You have to be careful about certain danger spots, says Lewis, who’s seen fighting dogs crawl through gutters and work their way past guillotine doors trying to get at other dogs.

Check out any kennel thoroughly before placing a fighting dog in it. Like the velociraptors in Jurassic Park who repeatedly charged the electric fencing around their enclosure, former fighting dogs can become so frustrated by their cages that they’ll test it for weaknesses and lunge at it just for the sake of having something to do. “In this shelter we have bowl anchors in our gates, and the dogs seemed to not consider that something they should attack,” says Lewis. “But in our old building our bowls were freestanding on the floor, and that made them a toy somehow.”

At Lollypop Farm, the fighting dogs are kept, for the most part, in a special area reserved for cruelty cases. “It’s on its own, it’s in the back. Nobody can get to it besides staff; it has access to a courtyard,” says Hargrave. “It’s self-contained so that, God forbid, [if] we ever have a breakout, the damage is somewhat limited. It’s close to the back area and also has separate air exchange.”

Not everyone has a facility that will allow for such a great arrangement, of course, so just remember that when housing fighting dogs, it’s best to minimize their contact with other shelter animals and keep them isolated. An end cage unit in the kennels, where they won’t constantly see other dogs walk by, is a good place to start if you don’t have a separate housing area for cruelty/court cases.

Enrichment/exercise. Exercise and enrichment are especially vital for dogs housed over long periods, but the toys you give other pooches may not satisfy fighting dogs. Or rather, they may turn into a meal instead.

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DOGFIGHTING RESOURCES & EDUCATIONAL MATERIALS

PUBLICATIONS
- AnimalSheltering.org's resource library includes a section on animal fighting; posted there is an article on sheltering fighting dogs. Go to www.animalsheltering.org/resource_library and click on “Animal Fighting.”
- The HSUS's Final Round campaign provides brochures and educational materials on ending animal fighting, including reward posters and a 7-minute video that offers an excellent introduction to the subject. Go to www.hsus.org/hsus_field/animal_fighting_the_final_round.
- The HSUS offers an excellent manual on animal fighting specifically for law enforcement officers and investigators. It contains information about dogfighting and cockfighting, signs and equipment to look for, methods of investigation, and much more. This resource is available only to investigators; if you’re interested in receiving a copy, contact The HSUS’s West Coast Regional Office at 916-344-1710.

VIDEOS/DVDS
- Two recent documentaries provide an in-depth introduction to the subject and make for great educational materials to show law enforcement personnel and policymakers. Bobby Brown's Off the Chain is available at http://offthechain-movie.com, and Out of the Pit: Dog Fighting in Chicago can be ordered at www.izzyworksfilms.com.

TRAINING
- Humane Society University offers courses in investigating illegal animal fighting; the next one will be in Fort Wayne, Indiana, this November. For more information, see www.humanesocietyiu.org/workshops_and_classes/ial_IN.html.
- The HSUS also offers a technical, daylong course on illegal animal fighting; topics covered include dogfighting, cockfighting, the history of the bloodsports, detection techniques, evidence collection, and case preparation. The course is certified by the Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST). For more information, e-mail The HSUS's West Coast Regional Office at wcro@hsus.org.
- Experts from The HSUS can provide other advice and training on dogfighting on a case-by-case basis.

OTHER RESOURCES
- Membership in The HSUS's National Illegal Animal Fighting Task Force (NIAFTF) can keep police and humane law enforcement officers up to date on breaking news and investigative techniques. For information on joining the task force, contact special investigator Chris Sanford of The HSUS at csanford@hsus.org.
- The Michigan State University College of Law provides the excellent Animal Legal and Historical Center online (www.animallaw.info). The site contains information about dogfighting and countless other subjects.
- Dogfighters.org, a sub-site of Pet-Abuse.com, offers information to law enforcement, humane law enforcement, police, and prosecutors working on illegal dogfighting cases. You’ll have to verify your identity with the webmaster through a sign-up process designed to ensure fighters don’t gain access to the information.

After a seizure in Fort Wayne, Lewis says, it quickly became apparent that no toys but Kongs would survive the wear-and-tear. “Every one of [the dogs] got their own great big Kong, and that was really good for them to have the Kongs to attack and play with,” Lewis says. “We were stuffing Kongs like crazy for days. Every retailer in town had no Kongs on the shelf because they had all been bought and brought in to us.”

Other shelters have resorted to even heavier toys. A pook recently sheltered at Lollypop Farm even took up a new sport, enthusiastically pushing a bowling ball around inside her cage, Hargeva says.

Several shelters swear by a messy-but-effective concoction: Take kibble and other treats, put them in a water bowl, freeze the whole thing, and then put the frozen kibble-hockey puck into the kennel. Dogs can be entertained for hours, pushing the ice block around, watching it melt, and waiting for the treats to be accessible. It makes an incredible mess, but the dogs love it.

Exercise is a must, but it can present safety and liability issues. If fighting dogs are being held as evidence for a later court case, the shelter may be held responsible if one gets lost while being walked. And because of their unpredictable nature, fighting dogs could pose a danger to the public. Make sure experienced handlers walk the dogs in an area away from visitors and other animals. An enclosed yard can be great for giving these dogs some time to run, but remember the rule about having more than one staffer on hand.

Security. Seized dogs may be the subject of unwanted attention from owners (or their friends) who want them back. Members of the public, including reporters, should not be allowed uncontrolled access to these dogs—another reason for
housing them in areas of the shelter with no other animals and little foot traffic.

Dogs seized from fighters should probably be kept under lock and key so that criminals, or even sympathetic but unknowing members of the public, don’t try to steal them. “Our law enforcement officers are really good about telling us if they think they might have a problem person, and we’ll actually padlock the kennels,” says Hargrave.

A shelter holding a large number of fighting dogs should consider extra security measures, such as staff alerts for the public address system and a security guard who can monitor the building even during closed hours. Through its excellent relationship with the New Orleans Police Department, the Louisiana SPCA was afforded regular police visits after they raided dogfighting kingpin Floyd Boudreaux’s kennels. The police still come during working hours and on the weekends as well, just to make sure everything’s under control.

A police presence should be part of the course in a large case, says Eric Sakach, director of The HSUS’s West Coast Regional Office. “When a shelter is holding these types of animals as evidence, they need to be looking at things like security service, videotape, alarm systems, a close working relationship with law enforcement so they understand the need for periodic patrols, and rapid response time if there is a problem,” Sakach says. “And looking at security extends all the way to their hiring practices. … A number of [stolen-animal] cases I can recall involved inside jobs. And that means limiting [access of] employees and volunteers to those areas.”

Placement and Euthanasia. For a long, sad list of reasons—including public safety and protection from liability—adopting out dogs who have a known fighting history is not an option. The long holding periods for these beautiful dogs, many of whom are people-friendly, can cause staff to become particularly attached to them. The final decision to euthanize can feel like a terrible blow.

Try to help staff by being honest about the dogs’ future from the beginning of the case, and by allowing them time to grieve, advises Hargrave. “Certain staff will become attached to specific animals and we try to allow them to do what they need to do,” says Hargrave, who laments the lengthy holding periods that are often required. “They all know the reality, and I’ve never had to argue a case with anybody. … We try to let them do what makes them feel good, whether that be spend time with the dog or train the dog or give it a particular toy. And at the end we always give courtesy to all the staff who want to say goodbye, who want to walk it, who want to be present. … It’s a lot of support.”

Lollypop Farm even holds memorial services and cremations for victims of dogfighting and every other shelter animal involved in a cruelty case.

“People get attacked for euthanizing these critters, and what gets lost in the shuffle is what the option is,” says Christiansen, who’s seen some of those terrible options up close. Dogs who aren’t rescued and taken in by a shelter are left to die in the brutal fights of the pit, or, if they fail to perform or get injured, the dogfighters often take the matter into their own hands, says Christiansen. For fighting dogs who haven’t had the fortune of intervention, this can mean a death by any means from bludgeoning to electrocution.

“There was a fight this past weekend down in Florida where apparently one of the guys, his dog lost, and he jumped into the pit and cut its neck from ear to ear and let it bleed out and threw it on the side of the road,” Christiansen says. “The alternatives are far worse. … The euthanasia debate should focus on that. These animals are saved once somebody gets them out of the hands of the people who’re abusing them.”