

Dogfighting in the Spotlight

Celebrity case heightens public and police awareness

BY NANCY LAWSON

About a week before Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick was indicted on felony dogfighting charges in Virginia, the first felony animal fighting trial in Lancaster, Pa., history was just beginning.

It would quickly end in a partial mistrial. Though police had seized pit bulls, roosters, training equipment, and animal fighting publications as evidence, jury members were apparently unconvinced. They found the defendant guilty—but only on a minor cruelty charge stemming from the conditions in which the dogs had been kept.

When graphic details of the Vick case exploded onto the national scene just days later, staff at the Humane League of Lancaster County saw it as a case of bad timing.

"We were joking with the assistant district attorney and we said, 'You know, I think you tried this case one week too early because now with all the publicity ... maybe jurors would be more informed,'" says managing director of operations Kerry Flanagan.

It was a fair assumption. As reporters around the country scrambled to find local angles to the dogfighting story, some were surprised to discover it wasn't difficult—and they turned their revelations into in-depth treatments of an issue that had been under the public radar far too long. Readers paid attention, as did law enforcement officials; in places like Baltimore, Md., officials announced plans to assign an officer to dogfighting investigations for the first time.

Though no one is celebrating the circumstances of the case, Vick's celebrity status put a needed spotlight on one of the greatest challenges to animal shelters. Whether because of increased public awareness or new police interest—or both—The HSUS has witnessed a rise in the number of cases pursued by local jurisdictions. In the month following the



indictment of Vick and three associates, at least 32 dogfighting rings were broken up in 15 states.

More people know how to recognize signs of dogfighting now, but more people also engage in it, says Lt. Mark Timmers of Harris County Precinct 6 in Texas. As a contracted investigator for the Houston Humane Society, Timmers has seen dogfighting investigations jump from 1 percent of his caseload in 2003 to about 12 percent last year, he says.

While local law enforcement agencies step up their efforts, The HSUS is expanding its law enforcement trainings, developing a marketing campaign to change attitudes toward streetfighting, doubling rewards to \$5,000 for information leading to the arrest and conviction of dogfighters, and advocating for stiffer penalties—a desperately needed deterrent, says Elliott Serrano, a community outreach specialist for the Anti-Cruelty Society in Chicago.

"I've had kids say to me that they're either not going to get caught or they're not going to get prosecuted for it," says Serrano. "They know that their case is going to get pleaded out—that when they go to court on a dogfight charge, the judge is going to knock it down to a misdemeanor. ... But now, I'm hoping that law enforcement starts really changing attitudes, and I'm hoping judges also start changing attitudes about it." AS

Animal Sheltering Receives Kudos

Animal Sheltering recently received two awards from the Society of National Association Publications: a bronze for best single-topic issue (for the Mar-Apr 2006 Katrina edition) and a bronze for most improved magazine.

Other recent honors include a bronze Ozzie Award in the category of "best overall design" of a non-profit publication from *Folio: The Magazine for Magazine Management*. *Animal Sheltering* also earned four awards from this year's Dog Writers Association of America contest: the best feature award for "Dogfighting Investigations" by Carrie Allan (Jul-Aug 2006); a special award from North Shore Animal League America for "Go Spay It on the Mountain" by Jennifer Hobgood (Jul-Aug 2006); and the best special publication award for the Katrina issue. Allan received an award for best Internet feature for "Refusing to Leave Them Behind," first published on humanesociety.org in the aftermath of Katrina.

Thanks to our readers for your help in creating a better magazine. Your submissions, questions, and feedback have contributed to the shaping of a more dynamic publication that we hope will serve you well for years to come. AS

