

Dogfighting part of drug culture

Star Press - Muncie, Ind.

Subjects: Police; Professional football; Drug trafficking; Task forces; Animal control; Criminal investigations

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Date: Sep 6, 2007

Start Page: A.1

Section: News

Document Text

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MUNCIE -- Drugs, guns and dogs seem to go hand in hand, according to Muncie police Sgt. Jess Neal, a local drug task force member, as the number of dogfighting cases continue to rise.

"On more than 50 percent of our search warrants, we will call animal control," Neal said about the increase in pit bulls owned by criminal suspects.

And pit bulls, the breed found in most local dogfighting cases, seem to be part of the lifestyle of drug dealers, burglars and other criminals, Neal said, whether the animals are used to fight or intimidate.

That was not the case a decade ago, but dogfighting came to the local spotlight in 2005 after a dead pit bull was found in a trash container behind a former Chinese restaurant along South Madison Street. A year later, Tyson Carpenter and Joseph Keating became the first local men convicted of dogfighting -- a crime technically known as animal fighting contest -- under a new law that made it a felony.

Christopher Wilson this week became the latest local resident convicted of dogfighting-related charges in a case where a fire led police to a condemned house in which Wilson housed his animals. That case, like others, was based in part on the physical condition of the defendant's animals and possession of equipment used to train dogs for fighting.

While dogfighting cases have been on the rise, according to Delaware County Prosecutor Mark McKinney, there's no epidemic, especially when compared to the thousands of drug, burglary and theft cases yearly. And the first case involving an actual dogfight has yet to be filed, the prosecutor said.

"These are very underground activities," said McKinney.

He noted police and prosecutors depend on neighbors and others to help in such investigations.

According to court records, only three convictions for dogfighting have been made in Delaware County since 2005, when a task force was formed to eliminate the problem.

Jill Dolon, former Delaware County animal control officer, led that effort, which included law enforcement, animal control workers and veterinarians. That group has been inactive for more than a year since Dolon left to produce a documentary on dogfighting.

After testifying at Wilson's trial this week, Dolon hoped the local conviction -- along with the recent guilty plea to dogfighting-related charges by Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick -- would raise awareness about the violent sport and the need for animal protection.

"I hope people think we need to save those dogs," said Dolon, who hopes to restart the dogfighting task force.

Laurie Adams, who runs Casa Del Torro Pit Bull Rescue in Indianapolis, agreed, saying details in the Vick case brought dogfighting back in the spotlight.

"When the details came out of how these animals were executed, (that) was what turned a lot of people's heads around," said Adams, a former Johnson County animal control officer.

Many people don't believe dogfighting goes on in Indiana, but Adams said there had been more than a dozen high profile cases in Indianapolis in recent years and growing numbers statewide.

"When you have dogfighting, there is big money and it is quick way to make money," she said.

And Adams has observed children as young as 9 or 10 years old with an extensive knowledge of dogfighting, having been raised in a community that condones the illegal sport.

"There is no profile of a dogfighter," said Adams. "It has no color, no financial or social status and no age barrier."

Locally, the Muncie Animal Shelter has been active in the battle against dogfighting.

Three cases are pending with police and prosecutors, said Karen Gibson, animal shelter superintendent, adding that an animal control officer also works with law enforcement to enforce dogfighting laws.

Last winter, Muncie City Council passed an ordinance declaring animals left on vacant residential property to be abandoned.

"Almost every abandoned property had dogs staked out," Gibson said, contributing to the problem of dogfighting.

The animal shelter also identifies animals by implanting microchips as a way to track anomalies and owners involved in dogfighting.

"I think the cooperation of police, the prosecutor, the animal shelter and public awareness has made a big difference," said Gibson, who encourages people to call police if they are aware of dogfighting activities.

* Contact news reporter Rick Yencer at 213-5833.

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Abstract (Document Summary)

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