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17 Abusers Plead Guilty Because of Dog DNA Database

posted by: Sharon Seltzer 1 day ago



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Reggie's brown and white face still bears the scars from his dog-fighting days and his owner says he cowers whenever people get too loud. She thinks it reminds him of the dog-fighting pits where people wagered on his fate. Reggie is one of the 400 pit bull dogs rounded up last July in what became the largest dog-fighting raid in U.S. history. Now his DNA, along with the other dogs, will be used to put his abusers behind bars.

A story from the [New York Times](#) revealed how the first dog-fighting DNA database will, "help criminal investigators piece together an abused animal's history by establishing ties among breeders, owners, pit operators and the animals themselves."

The database is called Canine CODIS (Combined DNA Index System) and is just like the DNA database used by the FBI for human criminal cases. It is the joint effort of the American Association for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), the Louisiana SPCA, the Humane Society of Missouri and researchers at the Veterinary Genetics Laboratory at the University of California, Davis.

Everyone involved in the project is optimistic that CODIS will be a powerful tool to stop dog-fighting operations. Here is the theory behind checking the DNA of fighting dogs.

"People are not generally going to the pound and buying pit bulls to fight – these dogs are from established bloodlines," said Tim Richey, senior

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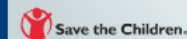
Sharon Seltzer Sharon Seltzer is one of the founders of the animal rescue group, Heaven Can Wait Sanctuary,...

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director of field investigations for the ASPCA. *"And if a suspected dog fighter's animal matches one of those bloodlines that would be a key piece of evidence."*

The illegal world of professional dog-fighting is a multi-million dollar industry and dogs that win fights bring in large cash prizes for their owners. When a particular dog becomes a champion his puppies can bring in as much as \$5,000 each. This can ultimately turn into hundreds of thousands of dollars for a breeder.

In their pursuit for a *"grand champion"* fighter, many of the dogs' bloodlines are connected. This fact alone could bring down a dog-fighting operation because it is common for a defendant to plead that he is strictly an enthusiast of pit bulls and isn't involved in the dog-fighting world.

In the dog-fighting raid from last July the DNA evidence is indicating that defendants knew each other and that some crossed state lines to breed fighting dogs.

Dr. Melinda Merck, a forensic veterinarian for the ASPCA said, *"If we find one location where there was a first-generation breeding, we could connect them to different dogs from a different crime scene."*

So far the DNA evidence has led to at least 17 guilty pleas in the multi-state case.

Dr. Merck also said juries expect medical evidence such as DNA in order to reach a verdict. *"Juries want to know that you have evidence you've run every possible test. The DNA is just one more tool in our kit that can bolster our cases,"* said Merck. *"I do think it's something that is going to make the dog-fighting world very nervous."*

Experts also plan to use the database for forensic investigations of blood samples found at dog-fighting sites. It will enable them to prove that specific dogs were present at a fight.

Dogs that lose fights are often killed and discarded at another a location. The database has the capabilities to place the executed dog at the scene of the illegal fight. It will also be able to provide information about where the dog was bred and possibly the name of the owner - leading to more convictions.

Of the 400 dogs seized in the large raid nearly 250 have been rehabilitated and placed in new homes. Reggie's new owner, Gale Frey, says, *"We're moving forward. The (dog fight) pit's in the past."* Reggie is being trained to work as a therapy dog in St. Louis-area hospitals.

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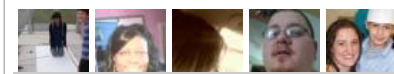
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