

Humane Society of Missouri

# Tails

FALL 2009

**RESCUED FROM  
A HEINOUS  
BLOOD SPORT**

**HSMO INVESTIGATION LEADS TO  
LARGEST DOG FIGHTING RAID  
IN U.S. HISTORY**



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The entrance to a large dog fighting operation in Northeast Missouri.



**IT'S A BRUTAL, VICIOUS, HEINOUS CRIME,** animal abuse at its absolute worst. The so-called "sport" of dog fighting is rampant in the United States, in every state and in almost every county and community. Often, it's out of sight, deep in the woods or in a basement or abandoned building. It's big business; a puppy from the "best" lineage can go for as much as \$5,000. And it's often associated with other illegal activities involving drugs, weapons and gambling. It must be stopped.

This is the life-long passion of **Tim Rickey**, director of HSMO's Animal Cruelty Task Force. "Early in my career, I came across the most sickening situation I had ever imagined. I responded to a call and found two dogs that had been forced to fight for their very survival. One was dead and the other on the brink of death. All of this so the owners could bet on which person's dog was tougher. From that moment, I knew I would do everything in my power to end this torture and suffering."

"Wednesday, July 8, 2009 was one of the best days of my life and a banner day for all members of **HSMO's Animal Cruelty Task Force**," smiles Rickey. "That day, 26 alleged dog fighters were arrested in eight states and, most importantly, more than 500 dogs were rescued." The Humane Society of Missouri played a leading role in what turned out to be the largest dog fighting raid and rescue in U.S. history.

## NEVER TO FIGHT AGAIN

### The Investigation

Early in 2008, Rickey and HSMO Animal Cruelty Investigators **Kyle Held** and **Carmen Skelly** were working with local law enforcement on a dog fighting case in rural Missouri. Information from that case led to the involvement of the Federal Bureau of Investigation and the Missouri State Highway Patrol in what turned out to be an 18-month, multi-state investigation. Rickey and Held spent many hours sharing with authorities their knowledge of the underground business of dog fighting—how cruelly the animals are bred, housed, trained and fought and how tragically many of them die. Then, as undercover officers gathered crucial first-person evidence, the two sacrificed numerous weekends serving as consultants and working closely with those agents and standing ready to receive any dogs recovered during the investigation.

**ALL THE FIGHTS ARE BRUTAL;  
DOGS ARE ENCOURAGED  
TO INFLICT AS MUCH DAMAGE  
TO AN OPPONENT AS POSSIBLE.**

“What we witnessed confirmed much of what we already knew,” said Investigator Held. “The cruelty begins very early in the dog’s life.” Held explains that the most aggressive male and female fighters are bred, sometimes forcibly. Bloodlines are meticulously tracked; puppies from grand champion fighters can command high prices.

The puppies begin training as soon as they are weaned. Training is rigorous using treadmills, often with smaller caged animals as bait. Dogs are also forced to swim for

hours at a time in a pool or run behind a vehicle to build stamina. They spend their lives on the end of a heavy chain, often half of the dog’s weight, to build neck strength. As early as four months of age the dogs are forced to begin “rolling”—an abbreviated, controlled fight

to find out if the dog has the fighting spirit. All the fights are brutal; dogs are encouraged to inflict as much damage to an opponent as possible. A dog fight can be short, if an opponent is quickly defeated, or as long as two hours ending in death, sometimes for both exhausted, bloody, injured dogs. Dogs that don’t win often are brutally killed on the spot by hanging, drowning, strangling, electrocution, shooting or in other inhumane ways. Winners who survive their injuries are “rewarded” by being left on the end of a chain hidden in the lonely shadows to suffer through days or weeks of pain and agony. Soon they will begin again the intense training process in preparation for the next fight.

Daily life is cruel, too. Often the dogs are kept in remote areas tethered to a 30 lb. heavy-gauge chain locked onto a 4" wide heavy collar. (Necks rubbed raw or embedded collars are common.) The water source is a dirty bowl filled with rain; so water, when available, is always filthy. For some, food may come only once or twice a week. Houses often are plastic or metal barrels with jagged doorways and little or no bedding.



A treadmill used for fight training.

## NEVER TO FIGHT AGAIN



Life spans for dogs used to fight are short so breeding is crucial to owners.

Because this activity is so underground, veterinary care is minimal. “Stop the bleeding and get back to the ring” is the rule says Held. Many dogs suffer from multiple wounds and scars; some have torn or missing ears; some are missing limbs. One dog from this rescue has no lips, her teeth perpetually showing.

“It truly saddens me to think of how much these poor dogs give and how much more is taken from them by the barbaric owners who put them through this life of torment and torture to satisfy sadistic appetites and achieve financial gain,” said Rickey.

### The Rescue

Organizing this rescue was a logistical challenge for Rickey. While arrests and animal rescue occurred simultaneously in eight states, the majority of the sites and dogs in this raid were in Missouri and Illinois.

“We were given only one day to pull off the largest rescue in U.S. history, more than four hundred dogs from 22 sites across two states. We had to document each dog fighting yard as a crime scene: every dog had to be photographed and videotaped to document

The dogs spend their non-fighting lives tethered at the end of a heavy chain attached to an often tight, very thick collar.

any wounds; a forensic team searched the property for evidence of recent fights or deceased dogs. Then every dog was given a unique ID tag and transported to a single location, some as far as six hours from the rescue site,” said Rickey.

For the Missouri and Illinois sites he put together four 10-12 person teams of experienced animal rescuers and forensic investigators. The teams included personnel and equipment from the Humane Society of Missouri, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and the Humane Society of the United States.

While personally leading one of the rescue teams, Rickey was in constant communication with his other teams and law enforcement officials who simultaneously arrested 26 suspects at the various locations. Law enforcement also had to ensure each site remained secure until the rescue teams could arrive and remove the dogs. As the day progressed some involved thought the rescue operation was impossible to complete.

“Failure was not an option; there was simply no way we would leave even one of these poor dogs behind. We were committed



## NEVER TO FIGHT AGAIN



Animal Cruelty Investigator Kyle Held with Fay, one of the rescued fighting dogs. She no longer has lips, most likely the result of a fight, making her look like she's in a perpetual snarl. Actually, she's very friendly with people.

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to making sure none would ever fight again," vowed Rickey. "I always knew the dedicated members of our Animal Cruelty Task Force would find a way to rescue every one of these dogs. And, we did."

The rescue began with all teams hitting the first rescue sites at 6 a.m. Wednesday with members of county, state and federal law enforcement and ended with the last dog logged in at the temporary shelter at 5:30 a.m. Thursday. A total of 407 dogs, mostly Pit Bull Terriers were rescued in Missouri and Illinois. More than 100 dogs were rescued from seven additional sites in Iowa, Nebraska, Oklahoma, Arkansas, Texas and Mississippi.

"The Humane Society of Missouri and animal lovers everywhere recognize and are eternally grateful for the sacrifices made by the two Missouri Highway Patrol agents who spent months working undercover and in harm's way to expose this barbaric subculture of our society," said Rickey. "It is a testament to their commitment and persistence that

more than 500 dogs were rescued and the perpetrators responsible for this heinous crime will be held accountable. Hopefully, this monumental case will be the beginning of the end to this cruel and heinous form of animal abuse."

### **Triage and Sheltering**

Key to having law enforcement agencies buy in to pursuing a dog fighting investigation is having a place for the rescued animals to be housed and cared for as they await the legal forfeiture process. Depending on jurisdiction, that process can take several months to more than a year. That the Humane Society of Missouri was willing to step up to the plate and take on what turned out to be a monumental sheltering responsibility was a crucial factor ensuring this raid and rescue would happen.

"The Humane Society of Missouri is vehemently opposed to this heinous blood sport," said **Kathy Warnick**, president of the Humane Society of Missouri. "Sheltering these most deserving animals is not only an obligation but our honor and privilege."

Leading the sheltering team was **Debbie Hill**, vice president of Operations for the Humane Society of Missouri. In just a few short weeks, she found an appropriate vacant warehouse site and transformed it into an emergency shelter for what turned out to be more than 500 adult dogs and puppies. (More than 100 puppies were born after the July 8 rescue date.)

Under contract with the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Office of the Inspector

## NEVER TO FIGHT AGAIN

General, Hill and a team of dedicated, professional shelter staff and experienced volunteers from HSMO and shelters across the United States met the daily needs of every animal. Each of the 407 dogs initially received at the emergency shelter was immediately examined by a veterinarian, microchipped and treated for parasites. Led by **Dr. Steven Schwartz**, director of HSMO's Veterinary Medical Centers, and HSMO Veterinarian **Dr. Julie Brinker**, a team of veterinarians also developed longer-term medical plans for every dog, including those injured, ailing or pregnant.

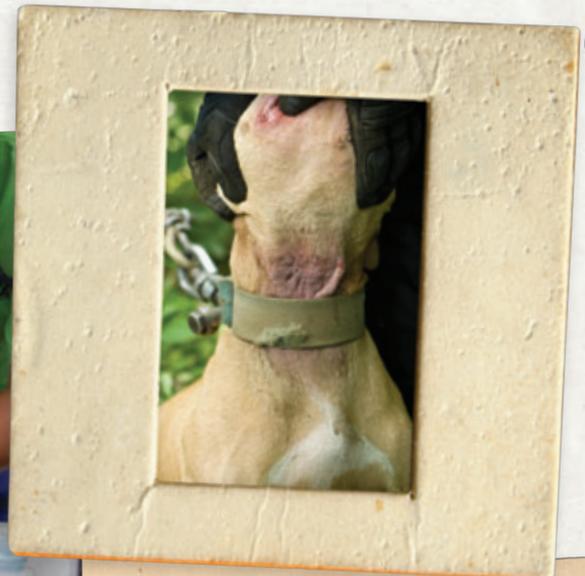
### Evaluation and Placement

In the past, all dogs from fighting situations were assumed to be unadoptable. In 2007, HSMO became the second agency in the country to evaluate for placement dogs rescued from a dog fighting operation. Our experience and commitment to ensure every animal had the opportunity for a second chance meant these dogs received individual behavior evaluations to determine their aggressiveness and ability to be rehabilitated. Surprisingly to most people, Pit Bull Terriers are one of the most people-friendly breeds of dogs.

The same holds true for the majority of the dogs received in this situation.

"Most of these dogs greet every person they meet with exuberant tail and body wiggling euphoria," observed **Linda Campbell**, RVT, CPDT, director of HSMO's Behavior and Training Program. "In sharp contrast, many of those same dogs immediately react to another dog with total commitment to attacking and killing. Only witnesses to this polar opposite response can truly appreciate the rehabilitation and placement challenges we faced."

To help in placement recommendations, an expert team led by Humane Society of Missouri pet behavior professionals and experts from the ASPCA and advised by **Debra Horwitz**, D.V.M., DACVB, developed the evaluation protocol and conducted an individual evaluation for each dog over the age of seven weeks. Along with the veterinary reports, the evaluations were given to the U.S. District Courts which made the final determination regarding the outcome of the dogs.



**above:** Raw, open neck wounds are often the result of the thick, tight collars most dogs used to fight are forced to wear.



**left:** Triage support staff assist as Dr. Matthew Shivelbine sutures the lips, face and paw wounds of one of the dogs brought to the emergency shelter by HSMO's Animal Cruelty Task Force the day of the largest dog fighting raid and rescue in U.S. history.

## NEVER TO FIGHT AGAIN

Campbell continued, "Because these dogs never lived in a home environment, most will require extensive behavior modification and training by qualified organizations before they could be considered for placement. Once available for adoption, many will have to be placed in homes without small children or other pets. After adoption, all should continue to participate in training classes."

According to Hill, the number of suitable situations may be very limited. "Breed bans in many communities limit where the dogs can go. It's sad that some people think these dogs enjoy what they have been forced to do to survive. They fail to see that they are simply dogs and victims of animal abuse." The bias many people feel against the breed and the few number of dog lovers who don't already have at least one dog also severely limit the number of placement situations available. Adding to the challenge is the fact that more than 150 puppies also were available for placement.

The Humane Society of Missouri reached out to experienced rescue groups, shelters

and individuals from across the country to place the dogs. More than three dozen groups and individuals expressed interest in possibly taking some of the available dogs.

"We know it takes a special foster and adopter situations to find homes for dogs from fighting backgrounds," said **Gail Frey**, founder of St. Louis-based Mutts-n-Stuff, a rescue organization that works to find homes for pit bulls and other hard-to-adopt breeds. "We will continue to work with HSMO and every group and person we know who can help one of these dogs."

"It is a tragedy that because of mistreatment by humans for financial gain and so-called "sport," many dogs used in animal fighting may not ever be able to be placed in a home situation," said Hill. "We take pride and solace in knowing they will never be tortured in a fight again and those who caused their suffering are being brought to justice."

Warnick concluded, "the Humane Society of Missouri's involvement in this investigation and rescue is a testament to the commitment we have made to our mission of ending animal suffering and abuse. Our board, employees, volunteers and donors all came through to make a real difference for these animals. I am very proud of the sacrifices each person has made to end the suffering of these dogs forever and help put an end to this most heinous abuse."

*Dog fighting is illegal in all 50 states and exists via an underground network. Often, the operation is shut down as a result of a tip from a citizen concerned about the dogs' welfare. If you suspect dog fighting, inhumane dog breeding or any other cruel treatment of animals, contact the Humane Society of Missouri Animal Cruelty Task Force hotline at (314) 647-4400 or use our online form at [hsmo.org](http://hsmo.org). Choose "Animal Rescue" in the top menu bar. Although your contact information is required for our use, we do not reveal your name. Thank you for doing your part to keep animals safe. 🐾*



**THANK YOU TO OUR RESCUE PARTNERS**

**Volunteer and Rescue Groups Give Vital Support**

The expertise and manpower of other animal welfare groups have been crucial factors in the success of the largest dog fighting rescue, documentation, sheltering and placement operation in U.S. history. “We are proud to be part of a strong network of experienced volunteers and professional animal rescue groups. They have the softest hearts and the strongest wills of anybody I know,” said **Debbie Hill**, HSMO’s vice president of Operations and director of the emergency shelter for the rescued pit bulls. “It has been an impressive team effort and we are grateful to be in such good company.” Our heartfelt thank you to every person who gave so much to this effort!

- American Humane Association (v)
- Animal Farm Foundation (r)
- Animal Humane Society (v)
- Animal Protection Association of Missouri (v)
- ASPCA (v)
- Atlanta Bully Breed Rally (v, r)
- Atlanta Humane Society (v)
- BayPath (v, r)
- Be-More Dog (v, r)
- Best Friends Animal Society and Sanctuary (v, r)
- Bless the Bullies (v, r)
- Braveheart Rescue (v, r)
- Brazos Animal Shelter (v)
- Brew City Bully Club (v, r)
- Broken Hearts Mended Souls (v, r)
- Butte Humane Society (v, r)
- Denver Dumb Friends League (v)
- The Dog Spot Rescue and Rehabilitation (v, r)
- Hawaiian Humane Society (v)
- Hello Bully Pit Bull Rescue (v, r)
- Hickey College (v)
- Humane Society of Central Illinois (v)
- Humane Society of Greater Kansas City (v)

- Humane Society of Missouri (v, r)
  - Humane Society of the United States (v)
  - Kauai Humane Society (v)
  - Michigan Humane Society (v)
  - Mid-America Bully Breed Rescue (v)
  - Mutts n Stuff (v, r)
  - New Hope Pit Bull Rescue (v, r)
  - Oregon Humane Society (v, r)
  - Our Pack (v, r)
  - Pierce County Animal Response Team (v)
  - Pit Bull Rescue Central (v)
  - Ring Dog Rescue (v, r)
  - Seattle Humane Society (v)
  - Sioux Empire Pit Bull Rescue (v, r)
  - Spay & Neuter Kansas City (v)
  - United Animal Nations (v)
  - Washington State Animal Response Team (v)
- (v)—groups that provided volunteers to work in the emergency shelter*
- (r)—groups that offered to rehabilitate and find homes for one or more of the dogs from this rescue*

**Individuals and Corporations Pitch In, Too**

To help keep the dogs happy and occupied, the Humane Society of Missouri appealed for donations of blankets, towels, large animal crates and, interestingly, bowling balls and pins. All arrived in generous portions!” said Hill, “It’s truly amazing to watch a bored dog come to life rolling a big ball around his run and finding the peanut butter hidden in the finger holes!”

As you can imagine, this historic rescue effort has been very costly. Thank you to all donors who generously contributed to our Animal Cruelty Fund which helps these and future abused and neglected animals.

“We are very fortunate our donors share our passion for the welfare of animals and our dedication to ending abuse,” said HSMO President **Kathy Warnick**. “They are always there when desperate animals need them. I want them to know their donations are used wisely and they can be very proud of the dedicated people who always work tirelessly on behalf of abused, neglected and abandoned animals.”

We sincerely appreciate the support of corporations who provided food, supplies and funds for these dogs rescued from such a horrible situation.



*Help us continue to take care of abused, abandoned and neglected animals with a secure donation online at [hsmo.org](http://hsmo.org), by phone (314) 951-1542 or by mail to Humane Society of Missouri, 1201 Macklind Ave., St. Louis, MO 63110. We thank you, and so do the animals. 🐾*

## NEVER TO FIGHT AGAIN

### THEY SHOULD BE LOVERS, NOT FIGHTERS

Two years ago, the Humane Society of Missouri rescued 27 Pit Bull Terriers from a dog fighting ring in Stoddard County, Mo. Working with rescue organizations throughout the country, the rehabilitated dogs are getting their second chances...this time to be able to give and receive affection, not aggression.

When **Duke** straddles his Harley-Davidson motorcycle, a Pit Bull Terrier named **Dahlia** delightedly hops in her own sidecar. She relishes the admiring glances from passersby. At the end of the day Dahlia generously allows Duke a small portion of the bed. Her brutal past is marked by the scars on her face and chest and in the way her ribs jut out because they were broken from being repeatedly kicked.

When he was rescued, **Phoenix** was permanently blind and his jaw was broken in four places. Now he lives in his own castle, pampered by loyal subjects. His chateau even has heating and air conditioning.

Phoenix and Dahlia were among the Humane Society rescues fostered by Mutts-n-Stuff, an all-volunteer nonprofit specializing in strong breeds such as Rottweilers and Pit Bull Terriers. The Humane Society holds the organization in high esteem.

“We’ve been saving ex-fighters for years,” said **Gale Frey**, the group’s founder. “It takes patience and time to earn their trust. We know we’re making progress when they start

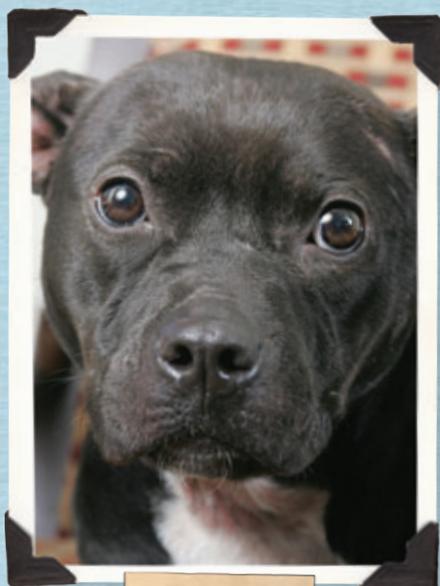
walking proud with their tails up,” said Frey. “It can take a year or more to get their tails out from between their hind legs.”

When **Willie Jake** recovered his confidence, the easy-going guy won the hearts of a couple from mid-Missouri. He has four roommates—two humans, a Beagle mix and a Daschund, his “best friend in the whole wide world,” according to Frey. Willie Jake is a celebrity in downtown Columbia. Business owners bring the lovable pooch into their stores for chats and pets.

**Smiley King Elvis** is still waiting for the right person. Smiley’s moniker comes from his rare ability to lift his upper lip only. As with humans, his smile signifies a friendly greeting. He is certified as a therapy dog and has his Canine Good Citizenship diploma. He needs an owner who will give him work to do.

Contrary to public perception, the dogs are sociable, loving and intelligent. “All of Helen Keller’s service dogs were Pit Bull Terriers,” said Frey. “They were once a preferred dog to play with children and were even nicknamed ‘nanny dogs.’”

Other ex-fighters have found their forever homes. A few are still being fostered as they wait for their second chances. The Humane Society of Missouri is appreciative of strong breed rescue groups from all over the U.S. for finding foster and forever homes for so many deserving dogs. 🐾



DAHLIA



PHOENIX



SMILEY KING ELVIS

## FEW POSSESS "THE RIGHT STUFF" FOR RESCUES

HSMO's **Animal Cruelty Task Force** is the most experienced, best trained and best equipped animal rescue team in the country.

**Tim Rickey**, ACTF Director, explained that it takes a special kind of person to do this challenging work. The first requirement is a background in law enforcement and working with animals of all types and sizes. Team members must be resourceful, level-headed and able to work in a wide variety of situations, some of them dangerous.

Task force members must be certified in swift water rescue or possess the qualifications to gain certification. "Floodwaters are life-threatening to humans and animals. We've even had to steer clear of alligators in post-hurricane rescues," he commented.

In a 2008 rescue, the Humane Society of Missouri was called in during spring floods to rescue a herd of cattle stranded on high ground in what was once their pasture. "This is a good example of why our team must have experience with both water rescues and large animals," he explained.

Ongoing training includes upgrading rescue skills and briefings on the law. Before, during and after rescues, the

Humane Society of Missouri must abide by laws and regulations affecting not only the animals but owners as well.

"Failure to follow the law can jeopardize a case we're trying to bring against animal abusers," he said. "We have to know how to obtain evidence and document it legally so it will be admissible in court."

At times the job combines many hours of strenuous physical labor with few hours to rest. So why would anybody want to do it? "The reward comes from knowing we are doing the right thing and making a difference for the animals," Rickey said.



### Pilot Program for Volunteers

The Humane Society of Missouri has launched a pilot program to involve volunteers in animal rescues. Like their full-time counterparts, volunteers must possess animal-handling experience and the ability to deal with a variety of challenging situations. Volunteers must be able to respond on short notice and travel throughout the state, sometimes for extended periods of time. To apply for this difficult, but far-from-thankless volunteer job, contact the Volunteer department at [hsmo.org/volunteer](http://hsmo.org/volunteer) or call (314) 951-1577. 🐾

## STAFF LAUDED FOR RESCUE WORK

Two organizations have honored Humane Society of Missouri efforts in the July 8 largest dog fighting raid and rescue in U.S. history.

In a ceremony recognizing significant cases handled in the past year, the **U.S. Attorney's Office** honored several HSMO staff members and our law enforcement and government partners. "This is a public 'thank you' for all the hard work everyone did on this case," said **Matthew Drake**, assistant U.S. attorney, Eastern Missouri District Court. Pictured at the right with Drake are the HSMO employees honored at the Oct. 1 ceremony: **Linda Campbell**; **Kyle Held**; **Tim Rickey**; **Julie Brinker**, D.V.M.; and **Debbie Hill**.

On Oct. 29 in a ceremony in New York City, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA) named Rickey and Held and the two Missouri Highway Patrol undercover agents as co-recipients of its Law Enforcement

Officer of the Year award. ASPCA President and CEO **Ed Sayres** said, "We are inspired by your courageous actions which resulted in numerous arrests. We commend you for saving and assisting abused dogs." 🐾

