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**Not Your
Usual
Tawdry
Hollywood
Sex Story**
By Lynn Hirschberg

Afghanistan's Found Generation

Their first semester in the new world.

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That Car Is You

By A.O. Scott, Douglas Century,
Danny Hakim, Jamie Kitman,
three master designers and a slew
of stylish drivers.

Dog Bites Dog

From big-time breeders to small-time drug dealers, ever increasing numbers of dog owners are conditioning and goading their animals to fight to the death.

By Shane DuBow
Photographs by Jeff Mermelstein

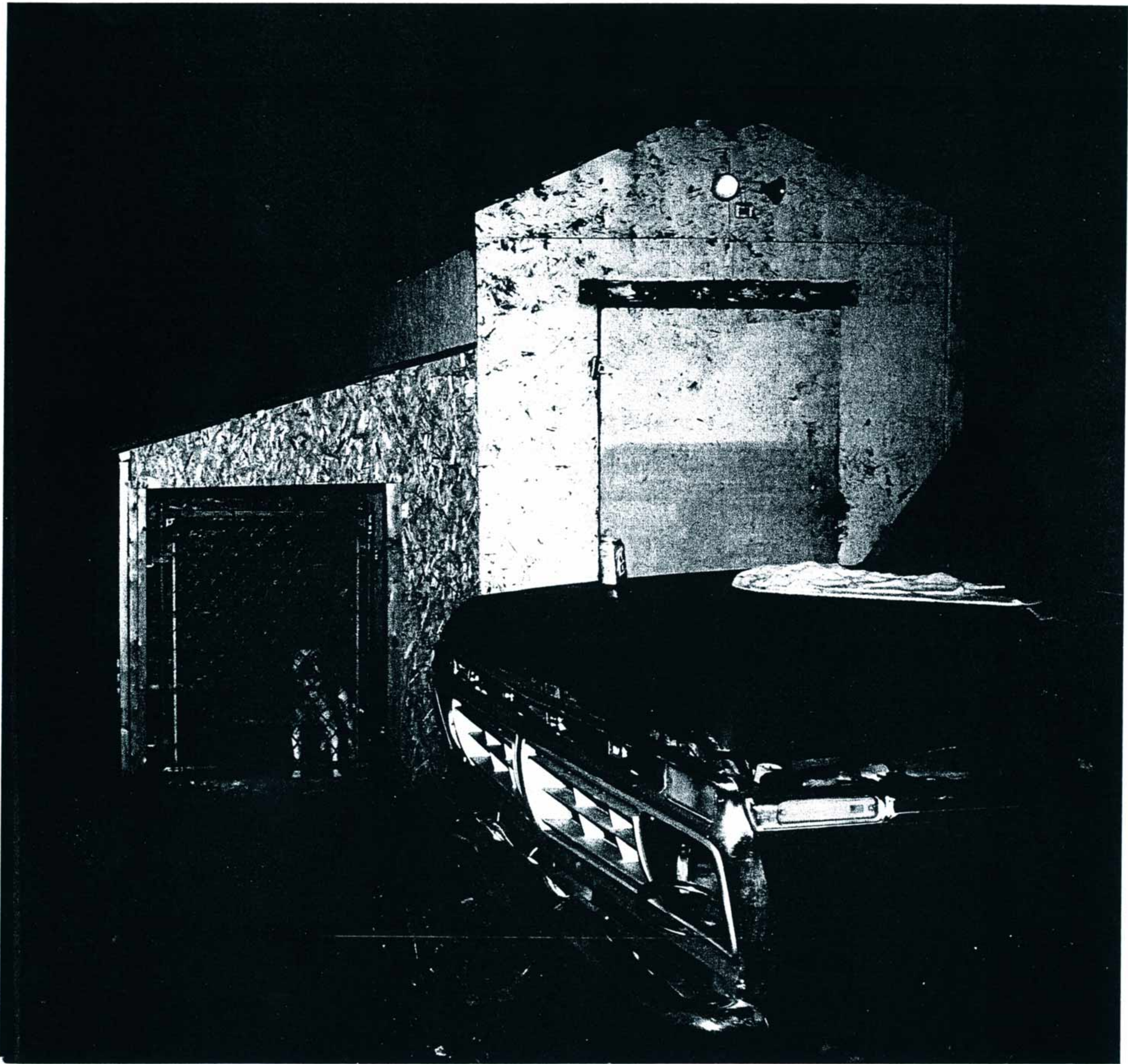
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he day will come, D. says, when he'll be famous, a known player in "the game," when he will be more than just a laid-off tradesman, when he will in fact be a top breeder of fighting pit bulls and when all this "wannabe stuff," these small-purse fights, will be in his past. And the dog that will help him do this, he hopes, is a young female named Roxy with a sleek athletic look. But before setting up a first sparring trial for her, the 20-something-year-old D., at a solid but cherubic 5-foot-4, wants to play me a tape. It's a video of some of his "unofficial" dogfights, a compilation meant to validate his wins and losses in a "sport" that's a felony in 46 states. As the VCR whirs on, D.'s family wanders in. We are now flanked not just by D.'s two house dogs — a fight-scarred pit named Whopper (after the sandwich) and a tiny Pomeranian named Minnie — but also by his sleepy blond wife and two pale sons, one of whom, the 3-year-old, stands close enough to touch the giant screen while we watch.

Over the next hour-plus in D.'s homey den, a slur of gnashing teeth and bloody coats flickers before us. Outside, it's a cool night in Indianapolis, a neighborhood of sagging bungalows and gang kids on stoops. Inside, the camera catches the legs of onlookers — all jeans and work boots — and the jocular talk of Friday-night wagers and boasts. One fight rages in a trashed kitchen. Another in a dim basement.

Another in a garage where a radio plays sugary pop to muffle the yelps. "Dude, this last one is one of the most brutal fights you'll ever see," D. gushes, as we view the tape a second time. "Athena there, that's my brother's dog, and she just slays this other dude's Red, just takes out both its eyeballs. And here's where Red gets his legs broke. Hear that crunch? That's his bones, man, and he's *still* winning because he never even breathed hard! Tail just kept on wagging — means he's happy, he's so game — and look, here's where it ends, that tail between Athena's legs. This is where she just quits and starts whining, got her back leg bit, and it's over, it's just over, and that other dude wins the 800 bucks."





The illicit dog-fighting culture breeds dreams that any pit bull could be the one to pull its owner out of ghetto poverty into the big time.

The tape ends. D. smokes Marlboros and drinks Buds and defends his love of the game by explaining that, to him, these fights offer not only a chance to make money and escape the ghetto but also a chance to associate with the pit bull's most noble traits, the quality of "gameness," or competitive heart, being the one that dog men prize most. In D.'s eyes these dogs are indomitable survivors, just like him. Their battles are heroically intense, as are his own battles with poverty, fatherhood and a legal system at work to lock him up for too much drinking and driving. "These are emotional animals," he says. "You got to love them." And then he runs out back to check on Roxy, lest she get stolen, as so many pits do, be-

cause in rough neighborhoods like this one they're just as good as money.

His wife, meanwhile, feeds the baby, named after the famed turn-of-the-century dogfighter John P. Colby, one of D.'s idols and also, perhaps, one of the men most responsible for helping this once provincial pastime become an urban epidemic. According to Merritt Clifton, of the investigative newspaper *Animal People*, "dogfighting hit the crossover point in 1998," the year nearly every dogfighting stat (people involved, dogs seized, related drug and homicide busts) proceeded to double or even triple, a trend that, with few exceptions, has continued since. An estimated 40,000 "doggers" in the United States are now involved. World-

wide proceeds from stud fees, puppy sales and fight bets have soared into the hundreds of millions. In response, numerous cities have reflexively banned the pit bull breed (actually a generic term for several similar breeds). And D., upset that dog-game “old schoolers” like himself are being lumped together with thuggish street fighters, has agreed to talk with me — because, as he puts it, “somebody’s got to stand up for these dogs.”

IT’S A SATURDAY night, and D. squats in a dank basement holding Roxy by the scruff of her neck. “This is the one,” D. says, meaning: this is the dog that, if she can just win a few big fights and build a rep, might be retired to breed and make high-priced puppies (which go for as much as \$10,000 each) until D.’s wealth and fame, in this potent fantasy, approaches that of John P. Colby. Across the room, another local fighter holds another pit, and the plan is to give Roxy a casual “roll,” to see how much she “wants it” before placing her in any “official” contract match. “O.K.,” D. says, and the two men release, and while Roxy looks to D. for direction, the other dog “hits” her neck like an attacking shark. At which point Roxy’s bowels go loose, and D. rushes in with a sickened look and a jaw-popping “break stick,” used like a boot horn to pry open the other dog’s mouth. Over the last few years he has put his time and money into dozens of long-shot hopes, and each time the dogs have let him down. But Roxy was supposed to be different. He got her from a big-talking breeder. Her pedigree papers were strong (she came down off some talented fighting bloodlines with some tough dogs in her family tree) and he paid \$3,000 for her, no dog-game record (a \$60,000 dog has been rumored) but a lot more than he’d ever paid before. “Wow,” D. says, trying to calm his quivering animal with some gentle pets. “Wow, I’m very disappointed in you, Roxy. You’re a worthless, worthless dog, and I just don’t understand this. I’m very surprised.” Minutes later he’s on the phone trying to sell her and, at the same time, trade for Tyson, an unpedigreed mongrel with a fierce local rep, a dog that once pulled a Cadillac and that might best be described as a veteran bar brawler with the talent, D. now imagines, to turn pro.

D. SAYS THAT he learned to like dogfighting from his older brother. This was after D. quit high school and left his parents’ house: his mother was shooting drugs; his stepfather was throwing punches. D. was working at Long John Silver’s, staying in a boarding house, struggling to stay afloat, and in the first big dogfight his brother took him to, a breeder named Al won a quarter-million dollars. “Goddamn, it was awesome,” D. says. “You win a fight like that, it’s like, You the man.”

These days, after tucking the kids in, D. surfs the game-dog Web sites. He studies the various strengths — deep wind, strong jaws, big heart — associated with the various bloodlines. He takes in the bite-by-bite accounts of famous fights. He notes the best way to start a prefight diet or treat postfight blood loss. There are hundreds of links to follow. The visions of top-tier dogfighting shimmer out. And D. dreams of one day jetting to Russia, or Italy, or Puerto Rico (or any of the other exotic locales where the game has boomed) for championship contests that might feature armed guards and concessions, bleacher seating and on-site vets, six-figure wagers, “grand champion” canines (the title means five official wins without a loss) and then maybe an appearance by one of the sport’s elite breeders. These are men the authorities often track but rarely manage to catch, men who duck arrest not because they’re in hiding but because most lawmen lack the resources, initiative or access to bust them in the act. These are



Tyson, D.’s latest hope of a dog “game” enough to put him on the map.

men who might pull down six- or seven-figure incomes, men whose canine bloodlines routinely show up in the most secretive underground newsletters (to get *Sporting Dog Journal*, for example, you need an insider’s referral), which print only the most official fight results. “I’ve already got a big-time guy ready to sponsor me,” D. boasts, “and me and Tyson” — his dog now — “we’re definitely making it in there, mark my words.”

WHEN CHALLENGED, D. defends what he does by declaring that, among other things, most dogfights don’t go to the death. He also insists that he and his fellow doggers are only “letting” their dogs pursue the activity that defines them, the activity for which they’ve been bred. It isn’t cruelty, he claims; it’s love. This is not an argument that bears much sway, however, with Sgt. Steve Brownstein, a vegetarian Jew in Chicago Police blue with a renowned expertise in blood-sport crimes. Is it love, he asks, to set a losing dog on fire or knock its jaw half off with a two-by-four? In the shadow of some stony housing projects, he slouches in a battered police van and speaks of dogfighting in apocalyptic terms.

In cities like Chicago, he says, dogfighting has become a financially viable complement to inner-city drug dealing. Which is upsetting, he continues, because it’s not the high-end pros who worry him most. It’s the inner-city street fighters who idolize those pros, the wannabes and young dabblers whose main training technique, when it comes to prepping a fight dog, might start and stop at making it mean. Jalapeños up the anus, cocaine on the nose, a diet of gun powder (for irritation), steroids (for bulk) and bait animals — like cats — to encourage a blood lust. These are the sorts of abuses, Brownstein holds, that turn loving pets into man biters and give the breed an undeserved bad name. (In fact, when not mistreated, pit bulls are famously people-friendly.) And as Brownstein and others agree, these too are the sorts of abuses that ripple out, the acts of animal cruelty that often lead to acts of human cruelty, as numerous studies have shown.

“Think about it,” Brownstein says, wearily, nodding toward the looming project buildings and the streets beyond. “This is now the preferred entertainment for the American underclass. And so now you’ve got these little kids exposed to it, exposed to all this violence, and it’s desensitizing. I mean, this is now a window into our whole society, into a future where cruelty is condoned. You go into these urban schools, ask the fourth graders who’s seen a dogfight, every hand goes up. What’s it going to look like when these kids get older? You’re going to see a spike in

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D. is awaiting the day his dog Tyson can have his first 'official' fight, a match that might finally land him in the underground Sporting Dog Journal.

violence, I'm sure of it, and you have to think: Well, what's going on here? How's this happening? Who are these kids looking up to?"

BIG M., INDIANAPOLIS'S self-dubbed king of fighting pit bulls and D.'s main source for game-dog advice, is out holding court when we roll up. On the top step of the dinky house where he lives with about 30 dogs (all chained or caged out back), his large pistol and his aging mom, this pink and fleshy giant is telling stories to three young black guys, one of whom sports a gold front tooth. The stories are basically sports stories, like those told by fans with good seats at big games. Only here the games are dogfights, the players are canine and the stats often involve the minutiae of death. One dog, Cracker, had its legs "basically torn off" but still managed to rip an opponent's throat out with one last lunge. Another dog, when he wasn't killing competitors, liked to pop car tires and play with a 16-pound bowling ball.

Already, after just two visits here, the rough use of dogs and the rough talk about dogs feels easier to take. Visit 1 featured Roxy's incontinent surrender, her ignominious quitting, or "curing out." Visit 2 featured a front-porch ear cropping, a bloody cosmetic surgery involving razor blades and Valium. And then afterward, a wide-eyed young street fighter walked up dragging a young pit on a phone-cord leash. Did Big M., the kid asked hopefully, think this pup might grow up to be a killer? Here and now, on Visit 3, D. and Gold Tooth have arrived to wrangle out the contractual terms for D.'s first-ever "official" match, a match that might finally land him in Sporting Dog Journal and put him on the dogfighting map. In D.'s corner there will be Tyson, with his low-gear strength. In Gold Tooth's there will be Black Sunday, a "hard mouthed," or strong biting, dog bought out of American Pit Bull Terrier Gazette and brought over in the trunk of Gold Tooth's Grand Marquis.

The negotiations hew toward a traditional protocol. After agreeing on a purse — D. has mentioned putting up his house — a date and a maximum weight, the two men will train their animals for four weeks before the match. If possible, they'll enlist a well-known ref, a key step toward snagging a write-up. Already, D. has started Tyson on a conditioning program known as a "keep." On the high end, a keep might involve swimming-pool workouts, chiropractic adjustments, performance-drug cocktails and treadmill sessions in high-altitude chambers at fancy gyms. On D.'s end, however, it tends toward running Tyson twice a day, making him drag a 45-pound logging chain, feeding him less Nutro Max and more meat and hitting him up with a shot of B12, for energy, come fight day.

"Why don't we just throw down now," Gold Tooth says, seeming impatient. "If you think your dog's all that, then let's just do this and let me win my money right quick."

D. chews his lip, considering, but the deal soon falls through because Gold Tooth wants a cash bet (\$1,000 minimum, what he calls a stack) and D. is broke, and the longer they haggle, the less certain D. seems about Tyson's chances. To fill the void, Big M. volunteers to scrap two of his own dogs, a couple of first-timers he's been wanting to test.

We gather in the basement — blood-smearred cement, rank carpet drizzled with dog spit — to drink beers and watch. Big M. brings the dogs down. Gold Tooth fires a blunt. D.'s mood goes visibly relaxed, the basement seeming to serve as a sort of clubhouse where the need to hide his darker passions finally lifts. "You're going to like this," D. assures me. "It's just too bad we couldn't do an official match."

"Yeah," Big M. chimes in. "If this were official, we'd start with a weigh-in." And then, he says, they'd move on to a washing, each man getting to sponge off the other man's dog as a hedge against topical poisons, a classic cheat.

"Aren't you supposed to use buttermilk for that?" D. asks.

Big M. makes a face. "No," he snaps. "You use soapy water, stupid. Don't you know the Cajun Rules?"

Passed down through the generations, the first 9 of these 19 Cajun Rules, D. explains, relate to things like choosing a timekeeper and a ref and having both handlers bare their arms so that nothing illicit gets hidden up a sleeve. At Rule No. 10, they dive into combat.

An "official" dogfight, D. says, starts when the dogs, initially held in opposing corners, are released to scrap until one of them looks to rest or quit. Here the ref will call a "turn" — as in one of the dogs has turned away — and the handlers will swoop in to drag their dogs back. To continue, the turning dog must now perform a "scratch." That is, he must prove willing and able to resume fighting by leaving his corner and charging, limping or dragging himself across a "scratch line," two of which are marked on the floor, 14 feet apart, one in front of each dog's corner. Dogs that repeatedly prove willing to do this are said to be "game." And the best dogs are said to be "dead game," meaning that no matter their injuries, they will fight on until death.

But this fight shouldn't go that long. The dogs — one black, one brown — are slight and young. And as in boxing, the smaller fighters are more active but deliver less obvious hurt. Early on, the black dog, a 33-pounder, latches on to the brown dog's snout, a face hold, and there's a sharp crunch. "Probably bone or teeth on teeth or an eye socket or something," D. murmurs, while Big M. and Gold Tooth crouch to invoke encouragements like "sic-sic-sic." At Minute 11, after a turn, the black dog scratches by launching himself through the air, a strategic attempt to dodge the brown dog's teeth and bite down on the brown dog's neck. At Minute 28, the brown dog "clicks on" while the black dog "tucks a leg," a defensive move, suggesting that he's had that leg bit before and has now learned.

"O.K., O.K., let's quit this," Gold Tooth finally says, once the fight's early fury starts to wane.

Big M. sighs — something about this game test, which has no formal import, seems to have deflated him — and yells for his mom, who tromps down with two syringes so that Big M. can stab each panting and puncture-flecked dog in the rump with a 1.5-c.c. penicillin shot. He does not see the need, however, for anything more advanced, like gash-closing stitches or rehydrating IV drips or any of the other vet tricks most doggers learn.

"To tell the truth," D. volunteers quietly, as he heads on out, Big M.'s "dogs are pretty damn game, and I just don't know yet about Tyson." Could Tyson have stopped Black Sunday? Is Tyson really the sort of pit to lift D. above the sport's fast-swelling street ranks? D. isn't sure. Though three days later, in an e-mail message, he will tell of dispelling his doubts: "I couldn't stand it anymore; I had to see what Tyson was about before I put my house up on him." An account of how D. "two dogged" Tyson — fought him against two dogs, one after the other, in a single drunken night — comes next. The first dog was a virgin fighter owned by a friend. The second was good old Whopper. And in each case, after 25 and 85 minutes respectively, Tyson won out, prompting D. to announce ambitiously: "Tyson is game enough to die in the pit. He will not quit until he has won, and he will go agenst [sic] some of the most famous dogs in the world today."

But before anything like that can happen, D. goes to prison on a 10-year sentence (you drive illegally long enough and the years add up), and Tyson goes to stay with some of D.'s friends. With good behavior (and by taking the G.E.D.), D. figures, he could get out much sooner. And if he gets out much sooner, he maintains, then both he and Tyson might get another shot, another wild chance to win big, ditch the ghetto and make real D.'s dream of owning "hundreds of dogs" on his very own rural property, the dogs chained in tidy rows beside individual pens, the pens yawning so far toward the horizon that "man," D. says, "I'm gonna need a golf cart just to take my kids to play with the puppies on the end." ■