

Kenyon

COLLEGE ALUMNI BULLETIN

[Skip To Content](#)[Calendar](#) | [Contact Kenyon](#) | [Search](#) | [Parents](#) | [Alumni](#) | [Current Students](#) | [Faculty & Staff](#) | [Community](#)
[About Kenyon](#)[Academics](#)[Admissions](#)[Athletics](#)[Student Life](#)[News & Events](#)[Giving to Kenyon](#)

Crusader Against Cruelty

The Truth about Cats & Dogs



While animal rights advocates like Jeff Dorson have seen the horrific treatment some animals suffer, the vast majority of Americans love their pets. And they own them in record numbers. Almost two-thirds of households in the United States have at least one pet. The most popular pet? Fish, followed by cats and dogs.

- Cats may be man's best friend: Americans own 90 million cats and 74 million dogs.*
- Forty-one percent of all households with a dog also have a cat.*
- Forty-one percent of dogs share their owner's bed.*
- 2002 research from the Mayo Clinic found that pets in the bedroom regularly disrupt their owners' sleep, and cats are even more likely than dogs to be allowed in the bedroom.
- The only mammals with prostates are humans and dogs.
- There are 42 teeth in a dog's mouth. Cats have 30 teeth. Humans have 32.

- Some people think that cats and dogs don't perspire, but they actually sweat through the pads of their feet.

Animal rights activist Jeff Dorson '80 was so determined to stop dog-fighting in Louisiana that he went undercover, risking his own life for the sake of a more humane world.

by Mike Perlstein

Jeff Dorson '80 felt his anxiety climb with each passing mile as he zoomed past the small towns that dot the lower Mississippi River between New Orleans and Baton Rouge. He drove through stretches of wide-open marsh and dense cypress swamps. As he exited the highway toward Sorrento, he barely noticed the restored Cajun cottages that draw tourists from around the country.

Once Dorson hit the gravel road to his destination, his pulse raced, as it always did on these undercover missions to the out-of-the-way trailers and farmhouses favored by South Louisiana dog fighters.

Dorson met his "customer" and handed him a phony business card with his undercover identity: Matt Collins, sales manager, Ringmaster Dog Food Distributors. Inside the fenced-in yard were eight pit bull terriers tethered to small doghouses by short, heavy chains. Dorson quickly launched into the fight-game lingo that concealed his true identity as an animal rights activist.

"Sturdy-looking animals," Dorson commented, trying to act nonchalant despite his churning stomach. "Fightin' any of 'em?"

The owner pointed out one champion fighter but said most of his dogs were still in training. He said some of them had won prizes in weight-pulling contests, a sanctioned sport, but one with a dark fringe that often brings together dog fighters scouting fresh blood.

Dorson unloaded a sample bag of dog food from his van as the owner boasted about the "game" genealogy of his animals, including prized pups from the "Red" and "Carver" bloodlines, both known for their ferocity. Jeff listened attentively, all the while taking mental notes he would quietly slip to the police.

Just as Dorson's tensions were easing, a second man pulled up in a pickup truck and got out. As he approached, he squinted his eyes and pointed at Dorson.

"He was practically jabbing his finger into my chest," Dorson recalled, "and he says, 'Hey, you're the guy on TV, aren't you?'"

Dorson froze. Before assuming his undercover persona, he had appeared on television as the spokesman for his organization, the Humane Society of Louisiana. This man must have seen him. "It was the most terrifying microsecond of my life. I thought, this is it, this is the time I get exposed and killed. I really thought I was going to end up as gator bait."

"Yeah, I recognize you," the man continued. "You're the guy who does the dog food commercials." Dorson had never made TV commercials for dog food; apparently the man mistook him for someone else. But the important thing was that his cover was intact.

Barely able to conceal the spike of fear and relief that had just whipsawed through his body, he responded meekly, "Wow, those ads must really work."

Not all of Dorson's undercover missions were quite so harrowing. But as a self-styled, whatever-it-takes animal rights investigator, lobbyist, and organizer for the past twenty-five years, he has never shied away from taking risks to expose animal cruelty.

Dorson, now forty-eight, started his career as a crusader with a quiet epiphany about a year after he graduated from Kenyon with a degree in English. His original plan had been to work for a while with his father, an internationally known folklorist at Indiana University. But in 1981, his father died suddenly of a heart attack. At loose ends, Dorson ventured to Minneapolis to teach tennis.

Killing time in a library one day, he picked up a brochure on animal rights. "It was a life-altering moment," he says. "I started a philosophical inquiry about our relationship with animals and, from there, my life took a completely different direction."

Before, he had been a typical "hamburger kid," whose experience of animals had been limited to family pets. Now, it was as if he were aware of another emotional dimension in the world. "I felt like whenever there is cruelty to an animal, there's a shudder, a vibration, that ripples through humanity."

Dorson had found a vocation. Soon he was joining protests. He registered as a state lobbyist in Minnesota and created LISA, Legislation in Support of Animals. In 1987, he joined the worldwide organization PETA, People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals. His first assignment took him to New Orleans to lobby for the release of the much-publicized Silver Spring monkeys, a group of macaques whose mutilation in a laboratory had become a catalyst for the animal rights movement.

He decided to stay in New Orleans, forming a chapter of LISA, which eventually changed its name to the Humane Society of Louisiana. He helped outlaw the backwoods barroom spectacle of bear wrestling, made emergency food drops to starving emus on abandoned ranches, and, more recently, helped rescue more than 1,700 animals from Hurricane Katrina's floodwaters.

But nothing has made Dorson prouder than his decade-long crusade to crack down on dog-fighting, a shadowy but widely practiced blood sport with deep roots in South Louisiana. Before the state made dog-fighting illegal in 1982, it was a fixture in Cajun country alongside cock-fighting, another controversial activity that is outlawed in every state except Louisiana and New Mexico.

Despite its gruesome violence and its popularity in some pockets of the state, dog-fighting wasn't on Dorson's radar until 1991. That's when a rural sheriff's office asked if his group would adopt ten pit bull terriers seized in the raid of an organized dogfight. When Dorson went to retrieve the dogs, he was horrified.

"They were bloody and scarred. Some had missing eyes, broken bones, open wounds. As bad as that was, what really upset me was that all of the people who were arrested walked. Not one conviction," Dorson says.

Researching the Louisiana dog-fighting statute, he found that the law was toothless and difficult to enforce. People could be convicted only if they were caught in the act of a fight, a tall order given the clandestine nature of this spectator sport.

Dorson launched a lobbying campaign and, two years later, it paid dividends. The state legislature revamped

the law, making it a felony to own a dog for fighting purposes and a misdemeanor to be a spectator at a fight. The law also was strengthened by making the animals--as well as training paraphernalia like treadmills and heavy chains-- contraband that could be seized and destroyed.

With the tough new law, Dorson figured the next logical step would be to help the police make cases. He and his group launched a dog-fighting hotline to field tips, and they were bombarded with calls. He quickly found that, in addition to the traditional rural version of the sport, dog-fighting had become popular in the inner city as a hard-edged undercurrent of hip-hop culture.

He got a glimpse of the urban dog-fighting scene himself one day when he was walking along the Mississippi River levee near his home. He spied three youngsters, none of whom appeared to be older than thirteen, holding two pit bulls muzzle to muzzle, jabbing them with sticks and baiting them into a fight.

As Dorson watched from the safe cover of some bushes, the boys released the dogs. Both were "game"--a term dog-fighters use for pit bulls that are bred to fight--and one of them quickly chomped down on the other's neck, holding tight. Blood spurted out, and the victim howled in pain.

Dorson's first instinct was to rush into the fray, but he held himself back and nervously called the police from his cell phone. "The longer I'm waiting, the more I'm panicking," he recalls. "Do I jump out and intervene? Pull their dogs away? What if the kids are armed? What if the dogs turn on me?"

The police never showed up and the boys walked away after about fifteen minutes, laughing and dragging away the staggering, wounded dogs on oversized chains.

The episode, which haunts Dorson to this day, steeled his resolve.

"I went out, investigated complaints, took pictures," he says.

"I had files and files of field reports. I kept bringing the information to police, but they just weren't interested."

For most of the 1990s, Dorson's group tried to expose the near-

epidemic growth of pit bull-fighting by writing letters, giving presentations to police, and holding seminars for animal control groups. In discussions with cops, Dorson emphasized the overlap between dog-fighting and other illegal activity such as gambling, drugs, and guns. Some of the more ruthless trainers stole pets to use them as "bait animals," sacrificing the smaller dogs to give the pit bulls a taste for blood. By the late 1990s, police had made some small cases in New Orleans, but enforcement remained a low priority.

"The entire nineties was spent banging my head against a wall. Police just weren't interested," Dorson says. "So after ten years of asking others to investigate, I decided to go undercover and make contacts and do what was necessary."

Dorson hit pay dirt immediately. While driving around some of the city's rough-edged neighborhoods, he came upon a man walking a pit bull and began asking questions. The man said he was a retired dog-fighter, so Dorson offered him \$500 to reveal the tricks of the trade.

"He opened the door for me. He told me about the bloodlines, the fights, the culture, the lack of police enforcement," Dorson recalls. "I went around with him posing as someone interested in buying a dog, and

these fighters would talk nonstop about their matches, how much they love it and live for it. My head was spinning."

Dorson learned about the secret Web sites, the glossy underground magazines like *Sporting Dog Journal* and *The American Warrior*, and training practices such as steroid injections and "starvation diets" reputed to make the animals meaner and deadlier. The more Dorson investigated, the more he heard people talk about Floyd Boudreaux, a septuagenarian breeder in Lafayette, Louisiana, whose bloodline of "Boudreaux" fighting dogs are world-renowned for their viciousness in the ring.

While Dorson never crossed paths with Boudreaux, he used his Matt Collins guise to infiltrate Boudreaux's world. He made the rounds of the backwoods kennels used by top breeders and fighters, and quickly learned about the big money involved: fight purses topping \$50,000, pick-of-the-litter pups selling for \$10,000. He secretly tape-recorded many of his conversations.

For several years, Dorson tried to convince state and local police to act on his information, but he didn't break through until 2004. That year, the Louisiana State Police, through its gaming division, hooked up with Dorson and began launching raids and making cases. On March 11, 2005, the agency raided Floyd Boudreaux's spread outside of Lafayette, seizing steroids, fight videos, exercise treadmills, and fifty-seven pit bulls. The dogs, valued at more than \$300,000, were declared contraband and euthanized. Boudreaux is still awaiting trial on a host of dog-fighting animal cruelty charges.

"The day Floyd got arrested, it spread so quickly through underground channels that it was on the Internet within an hour," says Corporal David Hunt of the special investigations unit in the sheriff's office in Franklin County, Ohio. Hunt, one of the country's leading dog-fighting enforcers and a frequent Dorson collaborator, continues: "It was a huge arrest that had ripple effects around the world. I know Floyd was a major target of Jeff's long before any other agencies started paying attention. For a while, he was literally a one-man army."

While Dorson is quick to deflect credit, the Louisiana State Police have arrested more than 125 dog-fighters and seized more than 680 dogs since 2004. "Today they function like a military special ops unit, totally informed about dog-fighting and prepared to move quickly," Dorson says.

By the time of the Boudreaux raid, Dorson had given up his undercover identity. He says he was happy to step away from the razor's edge of the fight world and move back into lobbying, education, and animal rescue. His cell phone still rings off the hook, but nobody asks for Matt Collins anymore. On a typical day, Dorson might receive a call about a pack of feral dogs or a malnourished horse, or about reuniting a Katrina evacuee with a pet rescued from the flood. Lately, Dorson has spent much of his time rebuilding his group's tornado-damaged animal shelter in Tylertown, Mississippi.

"Now that I look back on it, I probably took some risks I shouldn't have, but I was willing to try anything to bring the roof down on these guys," Dorson says. "But somebody had to go undercover and show what was going on. Now I can leave all of that undercover stuff to the professionals."

--Mike Perlstein is an assistant professor in the School of Mass Communication at Loyola University--New Orleans. Previously, he was a staff writer with The (New Orleans)Times-Picayune, where he specialized in criminal justice issues.

[Back to Top](#)

Do you have [feedback](#) on this page?

[Story Index](#)

Features

[Concert Grand Tour](#)

[Eye on Terrorism](#)

[The Forty-Year-Old Freshman](#)

[Crusader Against Cruelty](#)

The Editor's Page

[Loving Lincoln](#)

[Letters to the Editor](#)

Along Middle Path

[Then and Now](#)

[Gambier is Talking about...](#)

[Kenyon in the News](#)

[The Hot Sheet](#)

[Sound Bites](#)

[Test your KQ](#)

[A First Job--at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue](#)

Books

[Guns, Drugs, and Elvis: A Guide to Research for Fiction Writers](#)

[Reviews](#)

Sports

[A Level-Headed Optimist](#)

[Sports Round-Up](#)

Office Hours

[Burning Question: Will it help or hurt to increase the minimum wage?](#)

[Little Metal Things](#)

[Faculty Digest](#)

[Touching the Page, Finding the Past](#)

Alumni News

[Alumni Digest](#)

[Class Notes](#)

[Tenacity, with a Contemplative Streak](#)

[Beyond the Buzzer](#)

In Memoriam

[Obituaries](#)

[Donald S. Rothchild '49](#)

[Helen Zelkowitz h'06](#)

[Caleb Gottinger '10](#)

The Last Page

[The Corrections](#)

Kenyon College. Gambier, Ohio 43022-9623 Phone: 740-427-5000