By ROBERT LONG
Advocate correspondent

Norm started attending dogfights when he was 16 years old. Before he "retired from fighting" in 1981, Norm had been to more than 100 fights nationwide, and he had raised, trained and fought dogs for 12 years.

"But I still have a few friends in the business and occasionally I like to get together with them at a fight and drink a few beers," Norm said. "I've probably been making two or three a year."

Norm discussed his dogfighting interests on the condition that his real name not be used. He was one of 81 people arrested in the Aug. 2 raid on a dogfight at an abandoned chicken farm in Livingston Parish.

Livingston Parish Sheriff's deputies moved in from the woods as the second of four fights scheduled for the evening was finishing, Norm said.

About 20 other people avoided arrest by fleeing through the woods, said Willie Graves, chief criminal deputy of Livingston Parish. Deputies learned of the event through an anonymous informant, he said.

Officers confiscated six dogs, eight vehicles, an electricity generator, a collapsible fight ring, two empty beer kegs and various medical supplies at the scene.

Of the more than 150 people charged with dogfighting offenses since it became a felony in 1984, only one has been convicted. His conviction is on appeal.

In June a state district court jury convicted P.J. Diglormo, 37, of Livingston Parish Sheriff's deputies at the first of the year.

People arrested in the Aug. 2 raid on a dogfighting convention in Natchitoches. He is appealing his maximum sentence of one year in jail and $1,000 fine.

District Attorney Mike Henry of Natchitoches said the lack of convictions is a result of a "tremendous deficiency in the law."

"The Legislature really handcuffed the prosecutors on these dogfighting cases. When the dogfighting statute was passed there was a provision initially to make spectatoring illegal, but in the final form of bill that was omitted," Henry said.

Revised state law 14:102.5 makes it a felony to cause a dogfight, aid or abet a fight, promote and stage a dogfight, sell tickets to a dogfight or operate a dogfighting facility. Maximum penalty for violating these provisions is one year imprisonment with or without hard labor and a $1,000 fine.

District attorneys say the ambiguity of the law falls under the aid or abet provision. Henry could not convince a jury that spectators were aiding or abetting the Natchitoches dogfight.

Duncan Kemp, 21st judicial district attorney, feels he can convince a jury otherwise in the Livingston dogfight arrests that are still under grand jury investigation.

"We have a situation where the spectators paid to get in, and we are looking at the possibility of taking the position that by paying an entry fee they were aiding and abetting," Kemp said.

Kemp said he hopes the matter will be wrapped up by the first of the year. State law also requires that confiscated dogs be kept by a veterinarian, at the expense of the parish, until their owners have been identified and convicted. In most cases no one claims the dogs because they are afraid they will be arrested.

"We still haven't disposed of the dogs in connection with dogfighting that we had confiscated in March," Kemp said.

"We have to spend thousands of dollars caring for these dogs before we can finally destroy them under abandonment," he said.

At least 144 people have been arrested so far this year for dogfighting, which Norm said is more prevalent in north Louisiana.

- On Jan. 29 in Baton Rouge, two men were booked with cruelty to animals and dogfighting and were released on $3,500 bonds. Three mangled pit bull terriers were seized in the arrest.

- On March 29 in Livingstone Parish led to 61 arrests. Those arrested were charged with dogfighting and released on $5,000 bonds.

Norm said there is a big myth about the number of dogfighters in Louisiana. "There are probably only 15 hard-core dog fighters in the state," he said. He described a hard-core fighter as one who breeds the dogs, raises the dogs and fights them once every two or three weeks. A hard-core fighter usually has 35 to 40 dogs.

"I'm not trying to whitewash dogfighting and say it is not cruel. Hell, it's a rough sport," Norm said.

"But for most people who are in dogfighting, it was handed down from their fathers, and their father's father. It's a way of life for them. They were raised to believe that this is not a horrible sport," Norm said.

"Dogfighters think horse racers are the cruelest son-of-a-bitches in the world. Or football, you watch it and see a player knock another player down and bust his leg, and all the people on the sidelines jump up and cheer for that. That's not cruel?" he said.

Norm admits that there are "undesirables" in dogfighting who do not treat the animals well.

"The biggest lie about dogfighting is how the dogs are trained. There is nobody in dogfighting that I know that would tolerate giving a pit bull a small animal. That's sick -- to take a little cat and let the dog eat it so it will build up a lust for blood," Norm said.

"They are trained on treadmills or turntables that spin while the dog remains stationary. The dogs are trained for endurance so they don't get hurt," he said.

"Pit bulls are born with a lust to fight. They are born to whip ass, and they enjoy it," Norm said.

That is not exactly so, according to veterinarian Craig Alberty, the public relations director for Capital Area Animal Welfare Society.

"Pit bulls are inbred as hunting dogs, not fighters -- they are trained to fight," Alberty said.

"CAAWS is very much against dogfighting. We believe that this is one of the worst types of cruelty that exists in Louisiana and feel like it is a very serious problem," he said.

"The class of people who are involved in these sports are not the higher-classed people in Louisiana, and because they don't have a lot of money they don't take very good care of the animals," Alberty said.

"Our greatest concern is that the potential for abuse is tremendous. Some of the people probably take good care of their animals, but they are not the majority that are involved in the sport," he said.

Norm said he feels most people are getting out of dogfighting because "it's too much trouble to try to evade the police."

"But one thing is certain," he said, "you won't see another fight that big in Livingston for a long time."