

The Post and Courier

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An illuminating tradition



Photographs by Henry Taylor/Staff 

Charleston held its 15th annual Chanukah in the Square celebration Sunday on the first night of Chanukah.

Above, Diny Adkins reaches up with the help of Rabbi Yossi Refson from Chabad of Charleston to light the menorah. At top, children scramble about to catch gelt chocolate coins as the Charleston Fire Department tosses them from an engine ladder. At left, stilt walkers wave the fabric sprawling from their outfits around while walking tall over crowds.

Online
For more photos, go to postandcourier.com.

Building method on chopping block

Officials could ban construction that experts say increases home flooding risks

BY CLARE FIESELER
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Charleston city officials appear on the cusp of banning “slab-on grade” construction, a building method that some view as egregious and which puts homes at greater flood risk.

The fact that such a restriction even seems possible is viewed as progress by some.

“It makes me optimistic about the future,” said Chris DeScherer, an attorney at the Southern Environmental Law Center’s Charleston office.

Council and stakeholders met recently to discuss proposed restrictions on the building method that can worsen damage from floods. The method is increasingly popular among Charleston developers building in low-lying areas, including islands where the city’s fastest growth is happening.

Johns Island was cited as ground zero for this practice, as well as the

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Officials take down ‘biggest’ dogfighting ring in SC

BY CAITLIN ASHWORTH
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EASTOVER — In a secluded, wooded area about 25 miles outside Columbia, about two dozen alleged dogfighters from across the state gathered in September for the “Carolina Classic,” a secret — and illegal — tournament for the blood sport.

In the crowd, one of them was wired. Federal and state authorities were tracking his location and listening to his conversations.

In the middle of a dogfight, authorities with the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the State Law Enforcement Division raided the Eastover property, seizing 14 dogs and arresting at least 17 people on state charges of presence at an animal fight, a felony which carries up to five years in prison.

Several raids across the Midlands followed the next day with nearly 300 dogs seized in what the U.S. Attorney’s Office calls the “biggest takedown of a dogfighting operation in South Carolina history.”

Many dogs had severe scarring and were found isolated. They wore heavy chains staked to the ground or to trees, according to federal

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Newspaper launches redesign with start of new press

By PJ Browning, Publisher

The Post and Courier will celebrate 220 years of continuous publication in January of 2023. But before we turn the page on 2022, we are excited to announce two milestones in our newspaper’s history.

Yesterday marked the last day The Post and Courier was printed on our presses at 134 Columbus St. Press A and Press B, as we call them, were purchased in 1978 and 1989, respectively. They have printed a record of history that has documented the lives of our community through harrowing economic downturns, devastating hurricanes and floods, political upheavals, and, in plain speak, good times and bad. They have



The last copy of The Post and Courier is moved out of the printing press on a conveyor belt in Charleston on Dec. 18.

HENRY TAYLOR/STAFF

served us well for 44 years.

Today marks a significant fresh beginning in our history as we proudly print the first issue of The Post and Courier on our new presses purchased in January 2020, and now fully operational at 4500

Leeds Ave. in North Charleston.

The new presses represent an investment in journalism and a free press in South Carolina for generations to come. Along with the launch of the presses, today we premiere a more vibrant news-

paper design with all the content our readers enjoy in an engaging and contemporary format with more color available.

Because of the configuration of the presses, a new layout with our live production run will require the newspaper to print in two sections. Although this will not change the page count, it will impact where you find some of your favorite sections. You can learn more about the layout on pages A10-11 in the Dec. 18 edition or in the online version of this article.

We acknowledge that newspapers across the United States and globally are cutting back on print, but, simply put, that’s not what

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Inside

OPINION

Passage of the Infrastructure and Jobs Act showed that compromise is still possible in these polarized times. The law has its flaws, but South Carolina will continue to reap benefits from it for years to come.

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HEALTH

Georgetown ‘Mermaids’ create community. **B1**

LOCAL

‘Combined Intervention’ mentors young men. **A4**

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Newsletters

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‘The No. 1 reason they fight dogs is money’

DOGFIGHTING, from A1

court documents demanding the forfeiture of the dogs. An indoor dogfighting pit had blood stains. A dog’s skull was found at another site. Federal agents had eyes on the properties weeks before the raid, doing flyovers and other surveillance, taking note of signs of organized dogfighting before obtaining search warrants.

As authorities raided properties across the Midlands, the hundreds of dogs seized were then considered live evidence. Nonprofits stepped in, taking the dogs to confidential locations and documenting scars and injuries. Dogs are being rehabilitated to prepare them for a new home. Months later, law enforcement is still investigating.

Fight to the death

A dogfight is like a boxing match, except a dogfight often ends in death, according to Terry Mills, the director of blood sports investigations for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. “The losing dog rarely — if ever — leaves the building,” Mills said. As a former law enforcement officer who has gone undercover to investigate dogfighting in other operations, Mills has seen the fights firsthand. Money is put down several weeks before a fight, and dogs are matched by gender and weight, he said. The fighting dogs are heavily conditioned and often eat high-protein diets to prepare.

Money revolves around fights. Those on the sidelines gamble while handlers put down hundreds to tens of thousands of dollars for a fight. It’s not unusual for \$40,000 to \$50,000 to change hands in a single fight, Mills said, adding that the highest wager documented was half a million dollars on one fight. But a major source of money is in breeding, Mills said. The more wins a dog has, the more expensive the puppies. Stud fees from champion bloodlines can bring in thousands of dollars, according to Mills, and vials of semen are often sold for up to \$2,000 to \$2,500 each depending on the bloodline.

When a dog wins a fight, it suddenly becomes valuable and wounds are immediately treated. The losing dog, if it survived the fight, is often killed, unless it showed “gameness,” meaning the tenacity to keep fighting. “The No. 1 reason they fight dogs is money. Right under the money is their ego,” adding that dogs are killed, even tortured to death, out of spite or embarrassment from a loss.

Investigation continues

As the investigation into the South Carolina dogfighting ring continues, officials with the USDA and SLED said they were unable to comment on the arrests and dog seizures. “The investigation following September’s historic dogfighting arrests is active and ongoing,” SLED spokeswoman Renée Wunderlich said in a statement. While federal agents with the USDA led the investigation, on the state level, SLED had recently instated a dedicated special agent to investigate dogfighting in South Carolina. Gov. Henry McMaster had advocated for the role and the General Assembly recently agreed to fund the new initiative, according to the Governor’s Office spokesman Brian Symmes. “Having created a dogfighting task force while he was attorney general, this has been a priority of Governor McMaster’s for a long time — not only because of the abject cruelty involved in dogfighting itself, but also because these investigations often provide law enforcement with invaluable information about the criminal elements involved,” Symmes said in a statement. In an earlier statement, SLED Chief Mark Keel said dogfighting can often lead law enforcement to discover illicit drugs, firearms, human trafficking and child abuse.

Collecting evidence

Over the summer, agents from the USDA office met with two confidential informants who told them about the “Carolina Classic” and named kennels involved, according to court filings. One source said a kennel called “Secret 6,” for the six people associated, would be hosting the show in



PHOTOS FILED IN FEDERAL COURT

A dog seized by federal and state authorities in South Carolina’s largest takedown of a dogfighting operation.



A suspected dogfighting pit in New Zion. A special agent with the U.S. Department of Agriculture-Office of Inspector General found a break stick with what appears to be teeth marks on the floor of the pit.



Federal agents conducted surveillance on a Rock Hill property suspected of involvement in organized dogfighting.

Richland County. During the weeks leading up to the September show, a special agent with the USDA Office of the Inspector General conducted surveillance on several properties across the Midlands, taking photos and documenting signs of organized dogfighting. SLED’s aviation unit assisted with surveillance, flying over land in Sumter County owned by a man who, an informant claimed, was an “accredited referee for dogfighting” and member of the Secret 6 kennels going by the name “Cowboy.” A photo taken during another aerial flyover shows dogs isolated from one another at a property in Rembert. The court filing said they were wearing chains weighing around 40 to 60 pounds, and some did not have adequate shelter. Nearby, agents drove out to another property in Sumter County where a source said a dogfighting pit was located. “The pit was indoors and had multiple blood splatter patterns on the walls and carpet where a dog fighting match had taken place,” according to court filings. “A mobile outdoor pit was also observed on the property.” Surveillance done in Rock Hill found dogs in isolation from one another, wearing heavy chains staked to the ground or wrapped around trees. Animal remains were found on a property.

The raids

After the surveillance and taking photos as evidence, more than 60 federal and state agents executed more than two dozen search warrants in Richland, York, Orangeburg, Clarendon, Lee, and Sumter counties in late-September. Officers seized 305 dogs, with 275 believed to be involved in organized dogfighting. More than 20 people were arrested during the crackdown. Officers seized slat mills, which are like treadmills used to condition the dogs, along with scales, break sticks and trophies. They also found

equipment used to staple and suture wounds as well as nutritional supplements, like “K9 Power Super Fuel,” which bulks and energizes dogs. According to federal court filings: ■ 27 dogs were seized at another Eastover site following a tip that the property owner regularly fought dogs and that there were three slat treadmills used to condition the dogs. ■ 42 dogs were seized from a property in Rembert in Sumter County after a tip that the property owner hosted dogfights and had pits on the property. ■ 28 dogs were seized at another Rembert property, as well as a slat mill, staplers and glue, an envelope with pedigrees, a “Best Kennels” Trophy, miscellaneous medicines, empty dog food bags, and multiple cellphones. ■ 20 dogs were seized at another Sumter County property. Many of the dogs were wearing heavy chains weighing around 40 to 50 pounds, which was about half the body weight of the dogs. ■ 47 dogs were seized in Rock Hill after agents searched properties associated with a man an informant claimed was a well-known dogfighter who had recently hosted a fight with a \$200,000 buy-in. Animal remains were also found. ■ 35 dogs were seized from properties in New Zion in Clarendon County and a suspected dogfighting pit was found on the property.

The rescue

Some dogs greeted responders with wagging tails while others were hunched over and peered reluctantly, according to the Humane Society of the United States, which stepped in to rescue the dogs alongside the Michigan-based nonprofit BarkNation. One of the dogs found in a kennel enclosure needed its front leg amputated. An X-Ray showed the bone had split and it was protruding through the skin, according to the Humane Society.

The dogs seized in the raids were taken to confidential locations by the nonprofits and other organizations. The nonprofit RedRover assisted with immediate care and temporary shelters for some of the dogs seized in the raids. BarkNation, which works solely off donations to assist law enforcement in dogfighting and animal cruelty cases, rescued all 26 dogs from one property raided by USDA and SLED officers. Through its “Fitness Protection” project, the nonprofit has a confidential shelter for dogs seized by authorities in dogfighting and cruelty cases. Since the dogs were live evidence, a forensic veterinarian screened them to make a record of the animals’ vitals and document each scar and injury, according to BarkNation director Jessica Brown. The records and photographs will be used as evidence in trial. “Almost all of them were underweight, dehydrated and had parasites,” Brown said about the group of dogs rescued by BarkNation. Some had skin infections, trauma from deep bites, heartworm disease, and breeding complications.

RedRover, which provides aid in crisis situations, set up temporary shelters for a group of about 45 of the dogs and got them into a daily routine, slowly introducing new toys and treats as the dogs adjusted to the new environment, according to the organization’s Field Services and Community Programs Manager Devon Krusko. “These dogs did really well,” Krusko said. “You can see a change in them pretty quickly ... They know when it’s mealtime, when it’s enrichment time.” A routine and consistency helps with a dog’s anxiety, Krusko said, adding that the dogs quickly adjust to a schedule with clear times for meals, quiet time when the lights are off, and enrichment time when dogs can exercise and are introduced to new toys and treats.

Adoption

While Mills said he has doubts on whether the dogs can be rehabilitated and adopted after spending years in heavy chains and isolation, nonprofits BarkNation and RedRover said many dogs can be adopted. For the dogs at BarkNation, 17 of the 26 dogs seized in the South Carolina raids have already been adopted or placed in foster homes. The dog that had its leg amputated now has a new home, and a new name — Linus, after the Peanuts character. The Humane Society posted a video of Linus in a new home, showing the dog going on a walk in a neighborhood, sniffing the grass, and cuddling on the couch. Out of the hundreds of dogs BarkNation has cared for and rehabilitated, Brown said around 6 percent are unsuitable for homes, either because of their aggression, or because of a medical condition that cannot be treated.

“If we feel that a dog is going to harm another dog or person, we will make that decision not to place,” Brown said, adding that BarkNation will care for the dog for the remainder of the court case. Under state law, if no adoption can be arranged after the forfeiture, or if the animal is unsuitable for adoption, then the animal will be humanely euthanized. “Most of the dogs we get are extremely human social,” Brown said. “Some will need to be the only dog in the home, based on past traumatic events.” Some dogs will be fearful, as they have never been in a home environment before, Brown said. Those with BarkNation will meet with a family first to determine if the dog is a good match for them. Behaviors vary from dog to dog. “There are lots that go on to play fetch and go on hikes,” Brown said.

Weekly Meetings

Monday

Charleston Joint Committee on Recreation and Special Facilities

WHEN: 2:00 p.m.
CONFERENCE CALL #: 1-929-205-6099
ACCESS ID #: 879 3335 4923

Charleston Committee on Public Works and Utilities

WHEN: 5:00 p.m.
CONFERENCE CALL #: 1-929-205-6099
ACCESS ID #: 592 385 519

Hollywood Public Hearing

WHEN: 6 p.m.
ZOOM: us02web.zoom.us/j/83375635156

Hollywood Town Council

WHEN: 6:30 p.m.
ZOOM: us02web.zoom.us/j/83375635156

Mount Pleasant Waterworks Commission

WHEN: 5:30 p.m.
WHERE: Operations Center, Public Meeting Room, 1619 Rifle Range Rd.

Tuesday

Charleston Redevelopment Corporation

WHEN: 8:30 a.m.
CONFERENCE CALL #: 1-646-876-9923
MEETING ID #: 843 7169 4647
PASSCODE: 529693

Charleston Committee on Ways and Means

WHEN: 4:30 p.m.
WHERE: City Hall, Council Chamber, 80 Broad Street
CONFERENCE CALL #: 1-929-205-6099
ACCESS CODE: 300611887

Charleston City Council

WHEN: 5:00 p.m.
WHERE: City Hall, Council Chamber, 80 Broad Street
CONFERENCE CALL #: 1-929-205-6099
ACCESS CODE: 912096416

Charleston Board of Zoning Appeals: Zoning

WHEN: 5:15 p.m.
WHERE: 2 George Street, Public Meeting Room, First Floor

Lake Moultrie Water Agency

WHEN: 2 p.m.
WHERE: Goose Creek Fire Station Headquarters, 201 Button Hall Ave.

Sullivan’s Island Council

WHEN: 6 p.m.
WHERE: Town Hall, 2056 Middle St.

Wednesday

Isle of Palms | Commission

WHEN: 8 a.m.
WHERE: Commission Conference Room, 1300 Palm Blvd.

Sullivan’s Island Design Review Board

WHEN: 4 p.m.
WHERE: Town Hall, 2056 Middle St.

EDITORS NOTE: To submit a meeting notice, email: meetings@postandcourier.com. The deadline is Friday at 4 p.m. for the following week.

Newspaper launches redesign

REDESIGN, from A1

our readers want. We hear it every day. So if your day starts with coffee and The Post and Courier, you can look forward to holding it in your hands or reading it online, whichever you prefer, well into the future. We look forward to being South Carolina’s media of choice for the next 220 years.

P.J. Browning is publisher of The Post and Courier and president of the Evening Post Industries newspaper division.