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Last Four Defendants Convicted in Multi-State Dog Fighting Case

New Jersey, New Mexico, and Indiana Defendants Convicted as Part of Operation Grand Champion

A federal jury in Trenton, New Jersey convicted four defendants yesterday of violating the animal fighting prohibitions of the federal Animal Welfare Act. The jury deliberated six hours following a nearly four-week long trial before U.S. District Judge Peter G. Sheridan. The four defendants convicted yesterday are the last to be adjudicated in this case, which is part of Operation Grand Champion, an ongoing multi-state dog fighting investigation. The defendants are Justin Love of Sewell, New Jersey; Robert A. Elliott, Sr. of Millville, New Jersey; Dajwan Ware of Fort Wayne, Indiana; and Robert Arellano of Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Each count of conviction carries a maximum of five years in prison and a criminal fine of up to \$250,000. The defendants will be sentenced on Feb. 20, 2019. Five other defendants in the case previously pleaded guilty to dog fighting and firearms charges and were sentenced to a total of 153 months in prison.

The jury convicted four defendants of engaging in a conspiracy to sponsor and exhibit dogs in animal fighting ventures and to buy, sell, possess, train, transport, deliver and receive dogs for purposes of having the dogs participate in animal fighting ventures. They also found defendants Love and Arellano guilty of unlawfully trafficking in fighting dogs and defendants Love and Elliott of unlawfully possessing fighting dogs.

The evidence at trial established that Arellano sold and shipped two fighting dogs to Love and co-conspirator Anthony “Monte” Gaines by air cargo in December 2014. One of those dogs was subsequently fought in a “roll” or test fight the following day, and sustained a serious injury. Gaines also transported a fighting dog named “Bubbles” to Dajwan Ware in order to hide her from law enforcement after local authorities in New Jersey located Gaines’s dog fighting yard. For his part, Elliott, Sr., housed a fighting dog named “Fancy” on behalf of Gaines and co-conspirator Frank Nichols, and possessed twelve fighting dogs of his own.

“Under the leadership of Attorney General Sessions, our Division is aggressively pursuing those who engage in the cruel and brutal practice of dog fighting, which is often linked with many forms of violent and organized criminal activity,” said Acting Assistant Attorney General Jeffrey H. Wood

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of the Justice Department’s Environment and Natural Resources Division. “Yesterday’s four convictions demonstrate our firm commitment to fight back against those who would abuse these animals, in clear violation of federal law, to satiate bloodthirsty spectators and gamblers. I applaud the law enforcement officers and prosecutors who worked tirelessly to deliver justice in these cases.”

“Dog fighting is vicious and cruel. And beyond the needless suffering it inflicts on animals, it exacts a toll on local animal shelters, humane organizations, and the taxpayers of New Jersey,” said U.S. Attorney Carpenito. “The message from these convictions is simple: if you fight dogs in New Jersey, you will face prosecution and imprisonment.”

“The provisions of the Animal Welfare Act were designed to protect animals from being used in illegal fighting ventures,” said Special Agent in Charge Bethanne M. Dinkins for U.S. Department of Agriculture’s Office of Inspector General. “Together with the Department of Justice, animal fighting is an investigative priority for USDA OIG, and we will work with our law enforcement partners to investigate and assist in the criminal prosecution of those who participate in animal fighting ventures.”

“This is a great example of interagency cooperation — in this case USDA and Cherry Hill HSI — stopping a barbaric practice that permanently damages and often kills dogs,” said Brian Michael, Special Agent in Charge, HSI Newark. “Those who engage in this heinous activity should know that they face serious legal consequences.”

The phrase “Grand Champion” is used by dog fighters to refer to a dog with more than five dog fighting “victories.” To date, 123 dogs have been rescued as part of Operation Grand Champion, and either surrendered or forfeited to the government. The case was prosecuted by Trial Attorney Ethan Eddy of the Justice Department’s Environmental Crimes Section and Assistant U.S. Attorney Kathleen O’Leary. The case was investigated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture – Office of Inspector General; Homeland Security Investigations, Cherry Hill Office; and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

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