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## Last of Four Defendants Sentenced to Prison in Multi-State Dog Fighting Conspiracy

### New Jersey and Chicago-Area Defendants Sentenced As Part of Operation Grand Champion

Four defendants were sentenced this month in federal court in Trenton, New Jersey, as a result of their roles in a multi-state dog fighting conspiracy that extended to New Mexico and Indiana. Acting Assistant Attorney General Jeffrey H. Wood of the Justice Department's Environment and Natural Resources Division and U.S. Attorney Craig Carpenito of the District of New Jersey made the announcement.

- Today, Lydell Harris, 32, of Vineland, New Jersey, a/k/a "Sinn," was sentenced to serve 17 months in prison. He had pleaded guilty to one felony count of conspiracy to sponsor or exhibit a dog in an animal fighting venture, and one felony count of possessing a dog intended for use in an animal fighting venture.
- Anthony "Monte" Gaines, 37, of Vineland, New Jersey, was sentenced on March 5, 2018, to serve 42 months in prison. Gaines had pleaded guilty to two felony counts of conspiracy to buy, sell, receive, transport, deliver, and possess dogs intended for use in an animal fighting venture, and one felony count of possessing a dog intended for use in an animal fighting venture.
- Frank Nichols, 40, of Millville, New Jersey, was sentenced March 9, 2018, to serve 57 months in prison. He had pleaded guilty to one felony count of conspiracy to transport, deliver and receive dogs intended for use in an animal fighting venture, and one felony count of possessing a stolen firearm subsequent to a felony conviction.
- Pedro Cuellar, 47, of Willow Springs, Illinois, was sentenced on March 12, 2018, to serve 12 months and a day in prison. He had pleaded guilty to one felony count of conspiracy to transport, deliver, and receive dogs intended for use in an animal fighting venture.

A fifth co-defendant who has pleaded guilty will be sentenced on April 18, 2018. The court is expected to set a trial date for four additional defendants for some time this summer. Judge Anne E. Thompson sentenced Gaines and Judge Peter G. Sheridan sentenced Harris, Cuellar, and Nichols.

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According to court documents filed in connection with the cases, from October 2015 through June 1, 2016, the defendants and their associates fought dogs – including to the death – and trafficked in dogs with other dog fighters in Indiana, Illinois, New Mexico, and elsewhere so that those dogs could be used in dog fights. They also maintained fighting dogs and dog fighting equipment such as dog treadmills, intravenous drug bags and lines, “breeding stands” used to immobilize female dogs, and chains weighing up to several pounds per linear foot. Agents found canine blood on the floor, walls, and ceiling of the basement of one defendant’s residence, indicating that the area was likely used as a dog fighting pit. Among other acts involved in the charges, one of the pleading defendants admitted that his dog died in his car on the way home after losing a dog fight.

“In close partnership with the U.S. Attorneys’ Offices and USDA Office of Inspector General, our Division is aggressively pursuing those who engage in illegal animal fighting ventures,” said Acting Assistant Attorney General Wood. “These sentencing demonstrate our firm commitment to prosecute those who violate federal laws banning the torture of animals in the fighting ring. As these cases also demonstrate, animal fighting ventures often involve other forms of serious criminal conduct like illegal gambling and illegal trafficking in drugs and weapons. 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, charitable humane organizations, and the taxpayers of New Jersey,” said U.S. Attorney Carpenito. “We applaud our local and federal partners who investigated this case and brought the offenders to justice. The message from these sentencing 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, which often entail other forms of criminal activity involving drugs, firearms and gambling,” 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.”

“Homeland Security Investigations is proud to have been involved in this interagency investigation that sends a clear message that New Jersey will prosecute such offenders to the fullest extent of the law,” said Resident Agent in Charge Richard Reinhold for Cherry Hill Homeland Security Investigations. “It also points to the diverse law enforcement work that HSI performs on a daily basis.”

This case is part of Operation Grand Champion, a coordinated effort across numerous federal judicial districts to combat organized dog fighting. The phrase “Grand Champion” is used by dog fighters to refer to a dog with more than five dog fighting “victories.” To date, 98 dogs have been rescued as part of Operation Grand Champion, and either surrendered or forfeited to the government. The Humane Society of the United States assisted with the care of the dogs seized by federal law enforcement. The government is represented by Trial Attorney Ethan Eddy of the Justice Department’s Environmental Crimes Section, and Assistant U.S. Attorney Kathleen O’Leary. The case is being investigated by the U.S. Department of Agriculture – Office of Inspector General, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security – Homeland Security Investigations, and the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

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**Component(s):**

Environment and Natural Resources  
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