

America's pit bull unearths streak of hypocrisy in dog-loving Britain

By PETER MILLERSHIP

LONDON (Reuter-Kyodo) It took America's pit bull terrier to unmask a streak of hypocrisy among the British, who like to believe they are a nation of animal lovers.

Savage attacks in which dogs bred for fighting have permanently disfigured children and adults have provoked a public outcry.

Tabloid newspapers screamed for the slaughter of Britain's 10,000 pit bulls, calling them "Devil Dogs." The government hastily arranged new laws to get rid of them.

A national scandal over dog-fighting, called "the poor man's blood sport" highlighted a curious mix of brutality and sentimentality in the British character.

Middle-class girls idolize their ponies. Children keep rabbits and mice. Animal welfare appeals raise fortunes.

The switchboard jammed at The Royal Society for the Protection of Cruelty to Ani-

mals (RSPCA) - (founded in 1824) when it sought homes for some beagles, bred for research and retrieved from a kennel that went bust.

"To his dog, every man is a Napoleon," said British writer Aldous Huxley, trying to explain his countrymen's love of their dogs.

More than 7 million pampered canine pets are led by Queen Elizabeth's corgis, for whom her affection was undimmed even when one of them bit her earlier this year.

King Charles I gave his name to a breed of spaniel and one of them was presented to the Prince of Wales by 18th century poet Alexander Pope. Its collar bore the legend:

"I am His Highness' dog at Kew. Pray tell me, sir, whose dog are you?"

Yet a love of blood sports exposes a brutal trait in the British people.

Angling is the most popular British sport. Youths gather

in remote woods to kill badgers with ferocious dogs. Rabbits are hunted by tame ferrets. Whippets and greyhounds chase hares at coursing events.

The function of American pit bull terriers in 1990s street culture is but the latest activity to belie the traditional British concept of a beloved family pet.

A straining pit bull with its studded harness has become de rigeur as an accessory for youths in some inner city areas.

Foxhunting is legal. Dog fights were made illegal in 1835.

Still, close-cropped and tattooed youths regularly set pit bulls at each others' throats in grisly fights at secret locations. Referees, timekeepers and hefty prizes characterize big matches. Undercover RSPCA agents try to bust the fighting syndicates.

A pit bull's jaws are lined with 5 cm of muscle and lock like a steel trap.

Body muscle is built up with steroids and toned on treadmills. Cats and badgers are used to make the dogs savage.

