

And baby pit bull makes three

by AL MANCINI

ON AUG. 20, ATLANTA FALCON Michael Vick admitted his involvement in an illegal dogfighting ring and offered an apology to "everyone who has been hurt by this matter." As I read it, my pit bull puppy is rolling around on the floor, gently play-fighting with a 2-year-old dog three times his size. The smaller dog is having a great time, and I almost believe my new pet, a former "bait dog," might be capable of forgiving the type of sadistic cruelty that people like Vick once imposed on him. I can't.

Bait dogs might be the most horrifying aspect of the obscenely cruel world of dogfighting: They're puppies used to cultivate the bloodlust of fighting dogs. Crammed into wire crates too small for them to move, they're tossed into the pens of fighters. The larger dogs rip into any flesh they can access through the wire, developing their taste for killing.

By the age of about 6 weeks, this particular puppy had apparently taken all the abuse he could handle. The Good Samaritan who saved his life spotted him being tossed into a dumpster on a public street by a man who quickly drove away. When the dog arrived at the Animal Emergency Center of Las Vegas, his head and hindquarters were covered with bite wounds. Some were several weeks old, others only hours. Many of the older wounds were infected, and vets had to place drains under his skin to relieve the pressure of the accumulating fluids.

The fact that he survived is miracle enough. But the brown and white puppy the hospital employees nicknamed Spike wasn't out of the woods yet. The overpopulation of pit bulls, combined with their violent reputation, leads to countless numbers being euthanized every year. Spike's chances of finding a home were even worse, since many pit bull rescue organizations refuse to handle bait dogs, afraid their early trauma might leave them too violent to be trusted in a home. The Vick story may have brought the dogfighting problem to the public's attention, but sympathy only goes so far. Nobody wants to adopt a pet they view as a ticking time bomb.

So how many Spikes die in dumpsters or animal shelters after their sadistic owners have used them up in fighting pens? It depends who you ask. Senior Animal Control Officer Greg Wallen says he hasn't seen any evidence of organized dogfighting in Las Vegas. He admits "from time to time veterinary hospitals and the animal control officers working on the street will encounter animals that have injuries consistent with fighting behavior." But he says there's no way of knowing whether those animals were hurt in organized fights for spectators, or simply fighting with other strays.

My friend Maggie Howes, administrator of the Animal Emergency Center, is a bit more suspicious that organized dogfighting does exist in Las Vegas. "We see multiple dogs and puppies come in from the same addresses that have similar wounds to Spike's," she points out.

Among those, Maggie occasionally finds dogs who haven't had their psyches completely destroyed by the unimaginable cruelty that defines their early life. She saw the way "Spike" reacted to other animals in her care, and decided his personality hadn't been as tragically damaged as his body. She also knows my adult dog Chloe, and thought the two would get along.

At first, my wife and I were worried that a dog like this could never be saved. It took an entire barbecue, two filet mignons, a half-dozen jumbo shrimp and innumerable shots of Jagermeister to convince us that the puppy should get a chance to integrate into our family. The next morning, looking at life through more serious eyes, we still liked the idea, and asked if we could meet him. Two days later, I was holding the fragile puppy in my arms, walking through the alley between my house and my next door neighbor's residence. The minute the tiny pit bull heard the neighbor's dogs barking and yelping in the yard, he pissed all over me, apparently flashing back to his former life.

That rough transition only lasted an hour, and the puppy's terror of other dogs disappeared before my eyes as he quickly got to know Chloe. In two more days the baby was rolling around with Chloe, play-fighting like a champ. My wife and I watched them intensely for days, and never saw a sign of true violence, fear or hostility. By day four, we were debating a name (my wife thought Brooklyn was a bit too feminine, and our early idea of Spider Pig seemed a little cruel). On day five, as he rolled around on the floor with Chloe, "Spike" officially became Jager -- short for Jagermeister. On day eight, I was raiding the kitchen of Michael Mina's incredible restaurant Strip Steak for marrow bones to bring him as a treat.

It's a happy ending. But no Mr. Vick, I don't accept your apology.

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