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Turning pit bulls into patrol partners

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Diane Jessup of LawDogs USA rescues pit bulls from animal shelters and dog-fighting busts nationwide and helps turn them into crime fighters at her Thurston County kennel.

The Washington State Patrol uses eight pit bulls that were donated by Jessup as narcotics-detection and bomb-sniffing dogs, said Trooper Steve Gardner, a K-9 trainer for the patrol.

Jessup said the pit bulls she gives the patrol for specialized training are trailblazers in K-9 law enforcement, in which breeds such as Belgian Malinois, German shepherds and Doberman pinschers traditionally have dominated.

"My pit bulls right now are Jackie Robinson," she said. "They're breaking a barrier down."

Pit bulls are unfair victims of negative publicity because some bad owners breed and train them for aggressiveness, Jessup said. Pit bulls are naturally friendly and good natured, she said.

"If a pit bull kills a cat in Kansas, you'll hear about it. A lot of antisocial people own them," she said. "It would be nice if people saw the reality that most pit bulls are good."

Jessup has about 10 pit bulls — as well as some pups — on her property, which she calls "the pit bull paradise park." Jessup, 48, a Seattle native, said she has loved dogs for as long as she can remember. She said she has been breeding and raising pit bulls for about 35 years, and she worked as an animal control officer in Olympia for about 20 years.

At Jessup's kennel Friday, some of her dogs ran loose and played, showing no aggression toward visiting strangers.

Jessup founded LawDogsUSA in 2004 when she sneaked a pit bull out of Ontario after a law was passed in Canada banning the dogs. The law would have subjected the dog, Neville, to euthanasia or life in a research facility, she said. Instead, he is working to protect Washington's ferries for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security.

Jessup said she picks certain pit bulls that might have the right stuff for law enforcement training by measuring how good they are with people and whether they enjoy playing with a toy. It's important for a pit bull to love toys because they're used as rewards during training, she said.

Jessup said suspended Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick's recent guilty plea to a federal dogfighting conspiracy charge has drawn attention to the fact that pit bulls often are mistreated. "They're finally seeing pit bulls as victims" instead of villains, she said.

Jessup is checking whether she can get custody of any of the dogs that were seized from Vick's kennel. One of the members of a team assembled by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals to evaluate the surviving dogs from Vick's kennel has worked closely with Jessup, and she is going to determine whether any of the dogs would be appropriate for LawDogsUSA, Jessup said.

She said she also has put in a proposal with the U.S. Department of Agriculture to see if it will award her custody of any of the pit bulls from Vick's kennel that show an aptitude for detection work. The choice is up to the feds, she said.

Two puppies from Law DogsUSA are about to enter the State Patrol's K-9 training academy, Gardner said. Since the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001, there has been a sharp increase in the number of dogs used for detecting explosives, Gardner said, and using the pit bulls donated by Jessup is one way the State Patrol is working to meet the need for qualified dogs.