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Vick's fighting pit bulls learning new tricks

Even some animal experts are astonished. Scarred, 4-legged gladiators once owned by the jailed NFL star are said to be acclimating to lives without violence.

By Brigid Schulte

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When football star Michael Vick pleaded guilty last year to conspiring to run a dogfighting operation, he had kept about 50 pit bulls on his 15-acre property in rural Surry County, Va.

The dogs were chained to car axles near wooden hovels for shelter. Those that wouldn't fight were beaten, shot, hanged, electrocuted or drowned.

Headlines described the nameless dogs as "menacing." Some animal-rights groups called for the "ticking time bombs" to be euthanized as soon as they were no longer valuable as evidence.

Instead, U.S. District Judge Henry Hudson ordered each dog to be evaluated. And he ordered Vick, now in prison, to pony up close to \$1 million to pay for the lifelong care of those that could be saved.

A year after being confiscated from Vick's property:

- Leo, a tan, muscular pit bull, visits cancer patients as a certified therapy dog in California.
- Hector, who bears deep scars on his chest and legs, recently was adopted and is about to start training for national flying disc competitions in Minnesota.
- Teddes takes orders from a 2-year-old.
- Gracie is a couch potato in Richmond, Va., living with cats and four other dogs.

Classic fighting pit bulls—part bulldog and part terrier—were bred to be friendly to people and aggressive with other dogs. Their ability to withstand pain and keep fighting is a quality prized as "gameness."

But with an explosion in urban street fighting, some pit bulls are being trained to go after animals and



people.

"I thought, if we see four or five [Vick] dogs that we can save, I'll be happy," said Randall Lockwood, an animal behaviorist with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. "If we had to euthanize the majority, then we could at least say we'd tried."

Instead, they found dogs with behaviors that ran the gamut. Some would lick human hands but lunge at other dogs. Some almost immediately went into play mode with other dogs, wagging their tails and crouching down in a play bow.

The big problem: Isolation

"One of the things that struck us ... was that these dogs were more like the dogs we see rescued from animal hoarding situations," Lockwood said. "Their main problem was not aggressiveness but isolation."

All that the dogs seemed to know about people was that they were to be feared.

One of the few dog names that appeared in court papers was Jane, one of the first pit bulls Vick bought in 2001 to start Bad Newz Kennels. Jane is now called Georgia. Her jaw is crooked, having been broken at least once, and her tongue sticks out. She is covered in scars, and her teeth have all been pulled.

By court order, Jane will live out her days in Dogtown, at the Best Friends Animal Society's 3,700-acre sanctuary in Kanab, Utah. So will Lucas, a tail-wagging, 60-pound dog who evaluators suspect was Vick's grand champion fighter.

Sharon Cornett, a member of the Richmond Animal League's board, agreed to foster Gracie and is adopting her.

"I adore this dog. She is just a love bucket. She loves people and animals unconditionally," said Cornett, who has four other dogs. All of them sleep together at night.

Still, Cornett and other pit bull rescuers say they never leave the dogs unsupervised with other animals. And rehabilitating a fighting pit bull isn't for everyone: You have to know what you're doing, they say.

John Goodwin, a dogfighting expert with the Humane Society of the United States and a proponent of euthanizing fight dogs, is skeptical of reports of the Vick dog recoveries. Fighting is in their blood, he said.

Skepticism voiced

"The behavior is bred into them," he said. "These groups are not rehabilitating these dogs. They're training them to behave in a more socialized manner. But these pit bulls should never be left alone with other dogs, because you never know when that instinct to fight another dog is going to surface."

Tim Racer, one of the founders of Bay Area Doglovers Responsible About Pit bulls, or BAD RAP, who before taking in 10 Vick dogs had evaluated and retrained 400 pit bulls over the past 10 years, disagrees. Racer said it isn't surprising that many of the dogs get along so well with other dogs. "Dogs are pack animals," he said. "They survived because of their pack. ... It's hard-wired into their genes that they do no harm to each other."

Indeed, long before a glowering pit bull came to symbolize tough-guy vogue, pit bulls, or American Staffordshire terriers, were the all-American dog. In the Civil War era, they were known as nurse dogs because they were so good with children.

All the more reason, rescuers say, to look at each dog individually. "Every thoroughbred is not a great racehorse. Every pit bull, even if it's of fighting stock, is not an aggressive dogfighter," said Stephen Zawistowski, an animal behaviorist with the ASPCA who helped assess the Vick dogs.

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