

For Vick's fighting pit bulls, a happy ending

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When football superstar Michael Vick pleaded guilty last year to conspiring to run a dogfighting operation, we knew he had kept about 50 pit bulls on his 15-acre property in rural Surry County, Va. We knew the dogs were chained to car axles near wooden hovels for shelter. And we knew the dogs that didn't fight were beaten, shot, hanged, electrocuted or drowned.

But we didn't know their names. Headlines described the nameless dogs as "menacing." Some animal rights groups called for the "ticking time bombs" to be euthanized as soon as Vick's case was closed and they were no longer valuable as evidence. That's what typically happens after a dogfighting bust.

Instead, the court gave Vick's dogs a second chance. U.S. District Judge Henry Hudson ordered each dog to be evaluated individually, not judged by the stereotype of the breed. And he ordered Vick to pony up close to \$1 million to pay for the lifelong care of those that could be saved.

Of the 49 pit bulls animal behavior experts evaluated in the fall, only one was deemed too vicious to warrant saving and was euthanized. (Another was euthanized because it was sick and in pain.)

More than 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. Teddles takes orders from a 2-year-old. Gracie is a couch potato in Richmond, Va., who lives with cats and sleeps with four other dogs.

Of the 47 surviving dogs, 25 were placed directly in foster homes, and a handful have been or are being adopted. Twenty-two were deemed potentially aggressive toward other dogs and were sent to an animal sanctuary in Utah. Some, after intensive retraining, are expected to move on to foster care and eventual adoption.

How can this be? Reports of gruesome pit bull maulings make international news. Pit bulls are one of the few canine breeds thought to be so dangerous that they are banned in some places.

The answer, says Frank McMillan, a veterinarian who is studying the recovery of some of the Vick dogs, is that we don't know. "We've assumed all pits are the same, and we've never let this many fighting dogs live long enough to find out. There are hardly ever studies, because these animals don't survive," he said.

Evaluators found Vick's dogs with behaviors that ran the gamut. "Some actually perked up and developed more confidence only around other dogs," said Rebecca Huss, a law professor and animal law expert who was appointed by the court to oversee the evaluations and determine the dogs' fates. "They actually seemed happier around other dogs."

Once it became clear that the dogs might be allowed to live, evaluators gave them names: Iggy, Zippy, Cherry Garcia, Hazel, Little Red, Uba, Squeaker, Big Fella, Handsome Dan, Ginger, Ernie, Alf.

"One of the things that struck us immediately was that these dogs were more like the dogs we see rescued from animal

hoarding situations," said Randy Lockwood, an animal behaviorist with the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. "Their main problem was not aggressiveness but isolation." Loud noises startled them. A light coming on made them jump.

Tim Racer, one of the founders of Bay Area Doglovers Responsible About Pit bulls, said it is not surprising that many of the dogs get along so well with other dogs. "You have 150 years of man trying to produce an aggressive dog. But you have tens of thousands of years of Mother Nature preceding that," he said. "Dogs are pack animals. They survived because of their pack. ... It's hard-wired into their genes that they do no harm to each other."

Each dog should be looked at individually, rescuers say. "Every thoroughbred is not a great racehorse," said Steve Zawistowski, an animal behaviorist with the ASPCA who helped assess the Vick dogs.

As with any celebrity case, the legacy of the Vick bust has been far-reaching. Dogfighting raids across the country have tripled in the past year. And, in some cases, officials have asked pit bull behavior experts to evaluate seized fighting dogs rather than automatically euthanizing them. But most dogfighters don't have the kind of money that Vick did. So even those deemed worthy of a second chance don't always get one.

Charlie, Denzel, Halle, Oscar, Sox, Ray, Frodo, Aretha.

They, it turns out, are the lucky ones.

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