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Vick's pit bulls thrive at SPCA

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The Salinas Californian

A pretty face can hide a dark past - even among dogs.

Less than a year ago, 3-year-old Stella was in a dog-fighting arena, battling for her life. Now, all that concerns the American pit bull terrier is garnering affection from everyone she can, playfully licking hands and "smiling" as her tail thumps a steady rhythm.

"I think she might make a good agility dog for someone," said Justin Phillips, shelter supervisor at the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals for Monterey County, as Stella nearly jumped into his lap to give him a friendly "kiss."

Stella, along with two other dogs, Lil' Red and Ginger, are living in Monterey County foster homes, said Beth Brookhouser, the SPCA for Monterey County's director of community outreach.

The SPCA is not accepting adoption applications yet, Brookhouser said, but the goal is to eventually find permanent homes for all three, and perhaps more.

Phillips evaluates the behavior of dogs that come through the Monterey County SPCA, a role he has filled for more than five years, and he has a particular passion for pit bulls.

In October, he was part of a nine-person team called on to assess 49 dogs confiscated from former NFL star Michael Vick's dog-fighting operation, known as Bad Newz Kennels.

"We are extremely proud that Justin was selected to be a part of the evaluation team," said Gary Tiscornia, executive director of the Monterey County SPCA. Tiscornia said Phillips' knowledge of pit bulls added an extra layer to the behavior tests, allowing him to uncover even the slightest signs of aggression in the dogs.

The Monterey County SPCA was selected to take in three of the dogs, which arrived by RV on Oct. 23, Phillips said. Humane societies around the country, including a group in Oakland, took in many of the rest.

Bad reputation

The animals at Vick's property weren't lame, nor did it look like they had been abused, he said, though some - including Stella - bore minor scars.

"The biggest concern is arousal when the play stops," Phillips said. "We check out the dog-to-dog aggressiveness."

Despite a fearsome reputation, pit bulls can be great family dogs if treated properly, he said.

"Pit bulls honestly test very high in temperament tests," Phillips said. "All they really want to do is please the human that's with them."

Phillips said he thinks Lil' Red would make a good therapy dog.

"He's well-mannered and low energy," he said. "He's happy just being right next to you."

Despite the unfortunate treatment of the animals in the Vick case, SPCA officials have found positives in the situation.

"It's given us an opportunity to show what this breed can be, even after a terrible start in life," Tiscornia said.

Vick serving time

SPCA authorities had agreed not to release any information about the dogs until the last person involved in the federal case against Vick and his cohorts was sentenced, which occurred Friday.

Oscar Allen was sentenced to three years probation and a \$500 fine for selling a pit bull to Bad Newz Kennels.

Authorities in Surry County in Virginia also have charged Vick with animal cruelty. He's set to stand trial in April. Vick began a 23-month prison term for his role in the dog fighting operation earlier this month in Leavenworth, Kan.
