

Pit-Bull Ambassadors

Rescued from Michael Vick's dogfighting operation, these five pit bulls show their unquestionable love for people by giving back to their communities.

By Lisa A. Hanks

Leo teaches love

"When they see that Leo is a sweet, affectionate dog, they say, 'Wow! I can't imagine anyone wanting to hurt him,'" McClay says about the at-risk teen boys in the Alternative Placement Academy in San Jose, Calif. "It's a big change from when they first walked in, acting tough and calling Leo a bad-ass pit bull."

McClay is the trainer and foster caretaker of gentle-eyed Leo, a former Vick dog. At the Academy, Leo helps McClay teach positive reinforcement and empathy for animals, as well as humans. "Our culture tends to rely on punishment, rather than noticing what's right. [Rewarding] the correct behavior causes it to occur more often," McClay says. "I point out, now that Leo is in a positive environment and reinforced for positive behavior, he has become a positive dog. Imagine what your life could be like if you applied this concept to your friends and your family."

Since 3-year-old Leo arrived at Our Pack for fostering in December 2007, he's made immense progress. His worst problems were the effects of the isolation, boredom and a lack of experience with everyday things, both from the six-month shelter stay and from the Bad Newz Kennel experience.

When he first arrived, Leo paced and paced, unable to relax. "He was nuts from the kennel," says McClay, who introduced a soothing environment and soft music with calming exercises and massage. She rejoiced six days into his stay, when Leo sat next to her for a count of five.

"About 10 days into it, though, he really seemed to be coming out of it and started acting like a dog and a pet," McClay says. "He had a fabulous temperament, but horrible manners. He didn't understand what it was like to be inside a house. He didn't have the basic skills and manners normal for a dog his age." Leo didn't even know how to play with toys.

The 59-pound Leo didn't understand boundaries and how to approach people. "He'd walk up and plough his big head right into your lap," McClay says. "He's very affectionate and people-focused, he just didn't know how to communicate it with manners." Now, Leo waits for an invitation to approach and sits to be petted.

A certified therapy dog with Therapy Dogs International since January 2008, Leo also regularly visits the Camino Infusion Center, a chemotherapy treatment facility. "I thought it would be great to take a fighting dog and make him a therapy dog and show the rest of the world the true pit-bull temperament," McClay says.

"Almost 100 percent of the time, people will be petting him and touching him and then I'll say, 'Leo is a former Vick dog,'" McClay says. "Their mouths drop, and they look up at me and say, 'No way!'"

Red mellows out

Seven-year-old Red bears scars across his face and chest. "He's been in fights; there's no doubt about that," says Amanda Mouisset of Salinas, Calif., about her family's newly adopted pit bull. "Whether he was fighting in the ring, we have no way of knowing."

But it's not his scars that people remember – it's Red's gentle heart and laid-back attitude. Mouisset, a pet-behavior specialist with the SPCA for Monterey County, takes Red to SPCA-sponsored events in local schools to teach dog safety. "He's absolutely a dream with people, very gentle," Mouisset says. "He loves everybody, and if you have a treat, you're his best friend."

During one after-school event, about 80 elementary-age kids lined up to greet Red. "I was overwhelmed, but Red sat there and shook hands and let everyone pet him," Mouisset says. "He was glad people were coming to see him!"

When he arrived in California to be fostered by the SPCA in October 2007, Red was skittish. "He was pretty intimidated by everything, including ceiling fans, and extremely fearful," Mouisset says. "When going from a dog kennel into a home, it's a lot to digest. He was trying to figure out the new rules and how to be a house pet."

One challenge was teaching Red the difference between people food and his food. “The first time we sat down with a bowl of chips, Red thought, ‘OK, I’m on your lap. I’ll eat them, too,’” Mouisset says.

Red has adjusted beautifully to his new life. Now, Mouisset employs the mellow dog in her private training sessions with dog-aggressive dogs. While Red sits calmly nearby, Mouisset shows owners how to redirect their dogs’ attention and reinforce positive, non-aggressive behavior.

Red also dealt with a bout with cancer last year, but after undergoing chemotherapy, he’s now cancer-free. Currently, his schedule is filling up. Red has already earned his AKC CGC certification. “Stay was our hardest task,” Mouisset says. “He likes to follow way too much.”

Plus, Mouisset is eyeing therapy-dog work, once Red gets over his uneasiness with balloons – a fear she discovered after the dog refused to enter a room that was decorated with balloons for her daughter’s birthday party. “He was deathly afraid,” Mouisset says. “He’s still not too sure about those floaty things hanging around up there, but he’s getting better.”

From Vick to Vicktory

Oscar was scared of everyone. Lucas, a heavily scarred, prized fighting dog, would cringe in a corner. Tug didn’t like loud noises or camera flashes. This was typical of nearly all 22 of the Michael Vick dogs that were taken in by the Best Friends Animal Society in southern Utah – the most challenging of all the Vick dogs.

“One behavior included extreme cowering,” says Frank MacMillan, DVM, Dipl. ACVIM, Best Friends’ director of well-being studies. If you went into their run, they would pin themselves against the back of the run and get as far away as possible.”

Another issue with some dogs was dog-aggressiveness, which required Best Friends to build additional, separate housing in the Dogtown section of the 33,000-acre, no-kill sanctuary. “Now, quite a few of the dogs are co-existing peacefully together, which is really nice,” MacMillan says.

A gradual, compassionate rehabilitation plan carefully designed by knowledgeable dog-behavior and abuse experts has raised confidence and improved the dogs’ quality of life. “It’s all individualized,” MacMillan says. “We help them out of their shells by diminishing the fear, then doing simple behavioral tasks like Sit and Stay, and exposing them to things that enhance their lives. For instance, some of the dogs really loved to swim in the creek; others liked to ride in our golf carts.”

In fact, MacMillan has been conducting a 12-month study charting key emotions, such as fear, energy, friendliness, enjoyment of life and confidence. Best Friends hopes that this scientific study will highlight the best rehabilitation tools, as well as show other rescues how to work with canine victims of abuse, rather than euthanizing them.

Promptly renamed the Vicktory Dogs, 21 of the 22 dogs have made incredible improvement. (One dog is progressing a bit more slowly than the rest.)

“We’re thrilled with their progress,” MacMillan says. “We love the fact that we decided to take these dogs. We [can’t] imagine that this many dogs should be put down. It seems so unfair, especially given the results we’re seeing in my studies.”

After 18 months, Lucas relishes meeting new people; Tug loves walks and tug toys; and shy Oscar, despite his uneasiness with crowds, just passed his American Kennel Club Canine Good Citizen test. Best yet, one of the dogs, Halle, has been sent to a foster home – the first step toward finding a loving, permanent home for her – and for every Vicktory Dog.

– L.A.H.Hector flops for cuddles

“We walked around the Capitol building and met a lot of the legislators,” recalls Roo Yori of Rochester, Minn., newly adoptive owner of former Vick dog Hector. “Putting a face to one of the victims of dog fighting made a big impact. Here’s this happy, dopey dog trotting around the Capitol, walking up to anyone who wants to pet him.”

This January, Hector and Yori were featured guests at the Missouri Alliance for Animal Legislation’s 2009 Lobby Day, held in Jefferson City. The group supported pending legislation to strengthen dogfighting penalties and minimize the number of days seized fighting dogs have to stay in shelters, which would ease the strain on shelter resources and benefit the dogs.

Hector is more comfortable shaking hands and receiving accolades than most movie stars. His appearances include

events for BAD RAP, the rescue group that fostered him. Yori has brought the lovable Hector to other dog-related events, such as kid-oriented, dog-safety events, and plans to do therapy dog work now that Hector has passed his Therapy Dogs International certification test. "When people are banning pit bulls and killing them just because of what they are, people need to see a good image of the dogs," Yori says.

They also meet with domestic-abuse victims. "Hector cheers them up, and they can relate to his situation," Yori says. "If this dog can come through the abuse and be fine, it gives them hope, as well."

Yori brought Hector home in June 2008, thinking he would blend well with his family, which includes his wife, Clara, and a high-energy Frisbee dog, Wallace, another pit-bull ambassador. "I figured if we can pair Wallace with one of these well-known Vick dogs, I could create a dynamic duo."

Happy-go-lucky Hector is 50 pounds of sheer love, with an endearing habit of flopping like a limp ragdoll whenever anyone holds him. "I always get people to pick him up and flip him over," Yori says. "He just lies there with his eyes closed."

While on his back, you might notice small scars all down his chest and legs, and a little notch missing from his ear and tongue, as well as a few missing teeth. "However, he kept a pretty-boy face to charm everyone with," Yori says. "His nickname is Handsome Hector because everyone thinks he's so good looking."

The general public's reaction to pit bulls still frustrates Yori. "People back off, then when I say he's a Vick dog, they feel sorry for him," Yori says. "Once they see Hector melt in my arms, that says more than any debate I could have with them."

Changing public perception

"I've heard people say, I used to think this or that about pit bulls, but every single pit bull that's come in here has been sweet, affectionate and well-mannered," McClay says of her therapy pit bulls. "All the dogs helped change their minds, including Leo."

The dogs have been able to shine thanks to the endeavors of devoted rescue groups, dog owners, volunteers and activists, such as Best Friends, BAD RAP, Baltimore-based Recycled Love, ASPCA, Our Pack and many more. "There wasn't a system in place to take care of these dogs before," Cohen says. "People took it upon themselves to make one. Everyone said, 'We don't want to see these dogs die, they're victims,' and it snowballed from there."

Dog advocates continue to strive for better treatment of dogs, particularly those in the court system. Best Friends, for example, developed a multilayered strategy that includes model anti-dog-fighting legislation, national and regional education, prototypical programs for at-risk communities, and how-to manuals for assessment and rehabilitation of dogs formerly used for fighting. "If there's a protocol to follow, people are going to be more likely to accept these dogs and give them the chance they deserve," Cornett says.

Since the Vick case, other shelters have contacted Zawistowski at the ASPCA for information on how to conduct evaluations. However, he notes that this case is unusual and sets many precedents. Some of the dogs were allowed to leave the shelters before the case was settled. Plus, the courts brought in a core of behavior experts, a special guardian and money – a vital asset for cash-strapped shelters.

A few states have implemented bonding laws, which call for the guilty party to pay for the upkeep of the seized animals. "Michael Vick was required to put up almost \$1 million for the care of the dogs," Zawistowski says. "Most of the time, though, we aren't busting millionaires. We're busting guys living in some dump somewhere."

However, others cite human resources as more important than money. "The Vick case was not a fluke," McClay says. "It was successful thanks to the resources available. The money helps, but it's really foster homes and people."

All the media attention drawn to this case has made a huge difference in the fighting-dogs situation. "I believe Vick has probably single-handedly done more for the plight of the pit bull in a national forum than has been done in many years," Cohen says.

For dog lovers, it's hard to fathom what fighting dogs are made to endure. "I cried many times when I was holding Leo and looking at his face," McClay says. "I'd think, how could anyone put you in anything less than a safe, loving environment? This dog is so loving and sweet." Thanks to the dedication and hard work of volunteers and activists, for Leo, and former Vick pit bulls like him, the future looks bright.

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