

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

"If I was sitting in my office, and Jonny was lying on the floor on his dog bed, and Mr. Vick came walking in, what would Jonny do?" asks Cris Cohen of San Francisco, the newly adoptive owner of one of the 54 dogs seized from Michael Vick's Bad Newz Kennels dogfighting operation in Surry County, Virginia. "Jonny would wag his tail and walk up to him and greet him. What does that tell you about dogs? They're such forgiving animals."

Dogs giving back

View a photo slide show of the dogs Jonny, now a certified therapy dog, is just one example of former Vick dogs making positive contributions to their communities – all thanks to a huge public uprising. "A lot of people wrote, called and petitioned to have the Vick dogs saved, which saved [Jonny's] life," Cohen says. "It's nice to take Jonny and give back to the community."

While Vick, former NFL starting quarterback for the Atlanta Falcons, was on trial for felony dogfighting in late 2007, an enormous number of dog lovers demanded the pit bulls be saved from near-certain execution.

"Some people were saying the dogs should all be killed; they're killing machines. Others said they should all be saved," says Stephen Zawistowski, Ph.D., CAAB, an executive vice president of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in New York.

Some vocal national groups held the position that all dogs confiscated in dogfighting cases are dangerous and should be euthanized once the trial ended. Other groups, including Best Friends Animal Society in Kanab, Utah, and Bay Area Doglovers Responsible About Pit Bulls (BAD RAP), located in San Francisco, requested individual evaluations that would identify the dogs that were good candidates for rehabilitation and a new life.

"Fighting dogs, previous to the Vick case, were automatically put down without assessment," says Marthina McClay, certified professional dog trainer and founder of Our Pack Inc., a pit-bull rescue group in San Jose, Calif. "Any dog can be damaged in an abusive situation, but let's find out what's going on with the dog first."

Vick dogs evaluated

Fortunately for the Vick dogs, Judge Henry Hudson and Mike Gill, assistant U.S. attorney, opted for evaluations. Of the 54 Vick dogs initially seized, 49 were placed with rescue groups. Of the remaining dogs, two were euthanized (one for health reasons, the other for aggression issues), one went into law enforcement and two died shortly after they were seized.

See the full timeline After several rounds of evaluations, 22 of the dogs were sent for sanctuary care with Best Friends. The rest went to foster homes through seven other groups across the country, including Animal Rescue of Tidewater in Norfolk, Va., and the Georgia SPCA.

During those first assessments, one dog constantly cowered, hiding under a towel in its kennel. Another was so frightened and anxious, it would vomit whenever taken out of its kennel. Other dogs acted like almost-normal dogs.

"We were pleased some dogs were so friendly," says Frank MacMillan, DVM, Dipl. ACVIM, director of well-being studies at Best Friends. MacMillan's team assessed 25 possibly sanctuary-bound dogs – the worst of the worst. "In the dogs that were afraid, some of the levels of fear made you tear up. These poor dogs were existing in a world of absolute terror. They were afraid of everything."

Following are the amazing stories of five rescued and rehabilitated Vick pit bulls.

Jonny lights up libraries

“Jonny lit up around children. It was like turning on a Christmas tree,” Cohen says of his adopted ex-Vick dog, Jonny Justice. He’s certified temperament tested, an American Kennel Club Canine Good Citizen and a therapy dog certified with Therapy Dogs International. “You could physically see the change in his posture, his eyes, his stance, his ears. It was wonderful to see.”

Once a month, you’ll find the cheerful Jonny, who is about 3 years old, in a San Francisco public library helping children read. As a nonjudgemental audience of one, he lies by the child’s side and pays close attention to the chosen book when given the cue words, “To Read.”

In 2008, the Peninsula Humane Society in San Mateo, Calif., established its Paws for Tales program to aid children who have trouble reading aloud in groups, and Jonny was a perfect fit. “Jonny’s so accommodating,” Cohen says. “He’ll sit there and wag so happily, his little tail spins like a propeller. The kids love it so much; sometimes it’s hard to keep them reading.”

Cohen and his wife, Jennifer Long, still volunteer for BAD RAP. They provide a foster home – currently caring for former Vick dog Grace – and they also take Jonny to BAD RAP’s educational events. “He’s been everywhere,” Cohen says. “He’s so fond of people. You can’t help but smile when you meet him.”

Jonny is a chipper, optimistic dog, thanks to plenty of fun-focused training and social interaction. “Jonny doesn’t have bad days anymore,” Cohen says. “He walks around like he owns the world. He’s confident. He’s a bold, friendly dog.”

When Jonny first arrived at Cohen’s home for fostering, he was an energetic wild child. According to Cohen, “Jonny didn’t know his name, Come, Sit – none of that. To him, they were just sounds. On leash, he’d go one way, then the other, tangling it around your legs.”

Jonny’s biggest challenge was becoming accustomed to life as a companion dog. He’d been confined to a kennel for so long, he wanted to take in everything at once, including all the delicious smells. “It’s as if you were raised in a closet, and suddenly, someone threw you into junior high,” Cohen says.

Jonny reacted poorly to certain noises, such as the air brakes on a garbage truck and rattling pots and pans, and he was terrified of stairs because he’d never experienced them before. “He didn’t know what they were for,” Cohen says.

Oddly, running water was the worst. Food-oriented Jonny actually ran from his dish after Cohen turned on the faucet to wash his hands. “His first bath was horrible,” Cohen says. “He was totally stressed and wanted to escape. Now, when I yell, ‘Bath time!’ Jonny runs and jumps into the bath. But it was a long, slow acclimation process.”

Grace enjoys PR duties

“Grace goes out in public and makes appearances just to let people know they have nothing to fear from these dogs,” says Sharon Cornett of Midlothian, Va., owner of the 4-year-old former Vick dog, one of four fostered by the Richmond Animal League. “She’s a superstar when she’s out.”

Grace (fondly called Gracie) appeared at one memorable Richmond Animal League fundraiser in May 2008, mingling with 2,000 to 3,000 people. One woman started crying. She had been at an anti-dogfighting rally that Cornett had organized in front of the federal courthouse the day Vick was indicted in July 2007. “When she met Grace, she was shocked,” Cornett says. “She hadn’t known what to expect, but sweet, gentle Gracie wasn’t it.”

Cornett, a Richmond Animal League Board of Directors member, puts Grace in the spotlight whenever she can. “It gives people a chance to see that she’s just a dog, a wonderful dog,” Cornett says. Cornett will even drop Grace off at the Richmond Animal League on her way to work to be escorted to press events or TV stations.

“The media has literally followed Grace since day one,” Cornett says. Her first appearance was at the March 2008 Virginia Federation of Humane Societies’ annual conference to honor exceptional local animals. “I thought a bunch of other dogs and cats were going to be there,” Cornett recalls. “But it was just Grace. She’d never been in a crowd like that before. She walked in like she owned the place.”

Between media events, this diva can be found lounging comfortably. “Grace is a couch potato,” Cornett says. “She’d rather be on the sofa, unless she’s out playing with another dog.”

Thankfully, Grace didn’t suffer from the adjustment problems that most of the other Vick dogs went through. This was apparent during her first day at the Richmond Animal League facility’s real-life room, which features everyday home items,

such as chairs, a television, a phone and couch. “We were stunned when Miss Grace promptly got up on the sofa and went to sleep,” Cornett says.

Every now and then, Gracie's horrific past catches up to her. “I live on a busy road and occasionally a car flying past backfires,” Cornett says. “It sounds like a gunshot, and Grace does kind of flip out when she hears it.”

However, Grace mostly just enjoys her new life with Cornett. “Sometimes at night, when we're sitting together on the sofa,” Cornett says, “I look at her and say, ‘Grace, if you could just tell me your story – I'd love to know your story.’”