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Oakland group rescues dogs from Vick's kennels

• Many of the pit bulls, which are former fighters, possibly could be adopted

By John Simerman
STAFF WRITER

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When a federal court in Virginia assigned an animal law scholar to oversee the fate of dozens of pit bulls seized in the Michael Vick dogfighting case, she turned to the leaders of an Oakland-based education and rescue group.

Now that group is caring for 10 of the dogs in the Bay Area, readying all but one of them for adoption, and hailing the court's "landmark" decision to let the fighting dogs live.

Federal officials have barred Bay Area Doglovers Responsible About Pit Bulls, or BAD RAP, from talking about the dogs until the last defendant is sentenced in a case that led Monday to a 23-month federal prison term for Vick.

The former NFL star was accused of bankrolling the Bad Newz Kennels operation and helping to kill dogs deemed unsuitable for fighting.

But Rebecca Huss, the guardian/special master in the case, credited the group and founder Tim Racer for key expertise in assessing their prospects in a report to the court last week.

Racer evaluated each of the forfeited dogs in October. Huss, of Valparaiso University law school, reevaluated them with a BAD RAP representative last month before writing her report.

"A number of the dogs showed great promise as candidates for adoption and family pets," said Donna Reynolds, BAD RAP's executive director and Racer's wife and rescue partner. "Others within the group that were too shy or shut down are going to sanctuary."

A BAD RAP representative moved to Virginia to care for some of the dogs. Vick and three other men were indicted in July.

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"That's a long time to basically sit in a box. That takes its toll on dogs," Reynolds said. "We're always concerned about their physical and mental stability in long confinement."

Two dogs were euthanized, one for medical reasons and another for aggressiveness, she said.

In all, 22 of the 47 remaining pit bulls were deemed likely to be adoptable after time and training in foster care. The other 25 may never be adoptable. All but three of those dogs are going to a Utah sanctuary run by Best Friends Animal Society.

Three of the adoptable dogs are now with the SPCA of Monterey County in foster care, said Beth Brookhouser, director of community outreach.

BAD RAP has taken nine of the dogs, along with one that may need a lifetime of specialized care.

The couple founded the group in 1999 to help save dogs and to counter negative perceptions of the breed.

"If the dog has a good, sound people-loving temperament, as any pit bull should, it's really not a big deal to bring them into the real world," Reynolds said. "That resiliency that's so common in the breed, it does shine through."

Reynolds said that the Vick case "signals a change of consciousness" in how the federal court dealt with the dogs.

Leaders of the Humane Society of the United States and other groups had called for euthanization, arguing that



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they would remain kenneled too long and were less adoptable than others.

Under Vick's plea deal, he will pay more than \$600,000 for their care.

"What I love is that the money is being called restitution for the victims. For the court to look at them as victims is brand new," Reynolds said. "The feds decided to listen to somebody else. They didn't take the easy way out."

The fact that the dogs come from Bad Newz Kennels will not be an issue when it comes time to adopt them out, she said.

"They won't know it's a Michael Vick dog," Reynolds said. "They'll just know it's a dog they'll connect with."


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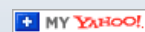
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