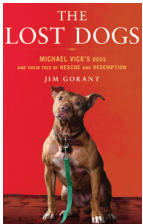




IN SERVICE TO MAN

The Salvation of Jonny Justice

FEW BELIEVED THE PIT BULLS FROM AMERICA'S MOST INFAMOUS DOGFIGHTING RING COULD BE SAVED



In 2007, Michael Vick, then the star quarterback for the Atlanta Falcons, was implicated in an interstate dogfighting ring through his Bad Newz Kennels in Smithfield, Va. Dogs that did not perform well in training were killed by various methods, including drowning and hanging. Vick would later plead guilty to a single felony in federal court and was sentenced to 23 months in prison. While observers initially speculated that the 53 pit bulls rescued from Bad Newz Kennels would have to be euthanized, pet lovers around the country organized to save the animals and were largely successful. In this excerpt from his book, *The Lost Dogs*, Jim Gorant tells the story of one of these dogs.

Cris Cohen didn't know exactly what to expect. Cohen, who ran the parts department of a car dealership, had agreed to foster one of the dogs rescued

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from a fighting ring operated by pro football player Michael Vick and his friends. Almost six years earlier Cohen and his girlfriend (now fiancée) Jen Long had first visited BAD RAP, a pit bull rescue organization in Oakland, Calif. They brought home a rescued brindle female they named Lilly, who still lived with them. Over the years, they had fostered six or seven pit bulls in all, so Cohen thought he was prepared for this latest guest.

Still, the dog was from a fight ring, and his potentially violent history made Cohen a little cautious. Those facts swirled through his mind, on Oct. 25, 2007, as he made the half-hour drive from the Sunset District of San Francisco to pick up Jonny Rotten at BAD RAP. When Jonny was led through

the door, Cohen saw he was about 35 pounds with black-and-white fur that left his right eye in a ring of black, while the other was surrounded by white. Without question, Jonny was small and cute. Cohen laughed in relief while he signed the release papers and put Jonny's pen into the truck.

In the previous nine months, the dog had been moved from Michael Vick's property to a shelter, transported cross-country in an RV, lodged at BAD RAP, and now was being moved again—to Cohen's house. The dog was stressed and wired, so once they were home, Cohen settled Jonny in a crate in the dining room to sleep. He then planned to put him immediately on a schedule. Dogs love a routine that doesn't change. Once they know they're going to get fed and walked and have playtime daily, they can relax and focus on other things.

When Cohen greeted Jonny in the morning, the pit bull's eyes were the size of silver dollars, taking in everything. For their first walk, Cohen clipped a leash on him and led him to the stairs to go out. Jonny came to a stop. Cohen walked down a few steps and encouraged the dog to follow. Jonny shifted and barked. He reached his paw out once or twice, but when it didn't make contact with anything he pulled it back. Cohen realized the pit bull had never lived in a house.

He decided it would be a lesson for another day and picked Jonny up and carried him downstairs. The dog was ecstatic to be outside. But while carrying him, Cohen noticed that the pads of his paws were as soft as cooked ravioli. Jonny had spent the last six months living on concrete floors, but he didn't go anywhere. As he sat in his tiny pen, his body had atrophied and his feet lost the calluses that usually build up when an animal walks around. Until Jonny's feet hardened, they would have to keep their excursions short.

However, Cohen realized within minutes that Jonny would not make it far that day for another reason. He was so stimulated and fearful that he jumped and chased and retreated and cowered in jumbled succession. Cohen held the leash like a man waterskiing behind a hummingbird. By the time they reached the corner, a distance of perhaps 100



Cris Cohen and his fiancée Jen Long share the love with their dogs Jonny Justice (right) and Lilly.

yards, they'd had to come to a complete stop twice so Cohen could untangle himself from the leash.

That first walk was a challenge, but by the second day, Cohen began to get clearer on what the dog did and didn't like. For example, Jonny was very interested in people, but didn't seem to care much about dogs. Garbage trucks set him scrambling in three directions in panic. Still, Cohen felt hopeful. Sure, the little guy was scattered and scared, but he was people-friendly and had no interest in messing with other dogs.

The next day Jonny and Cohen were out by 6 a.m. The dog was getting the hang of the leash, so they made more progress. This time the two marched right past the local school and then on to Sunset Playground. A set of bleachers stood next to a field. Cohen looked at Jonny. It was worth a try, he thought. Whether it was the open-air setting or fewer distractions, the pit bull went up and down those steps without a problem. For the first time, he seemed more focused.

At dinnertime, Cohen sat on the floor with his legs stretched on either side of Jonny. Cohen asked the dog to sit, showing him how when he didn't seem to understand. Every time he sat on command, he got a piece of food. And so they went each night.

Dogs raised in an environment like Jonny's at Bad Newz Kennels grow up very reactive to external stimuli. They see a bird, they want to chase it. Teaching them even the most basic commands, like stay, forces them to make a choice. In the past Jonny might have simply thought, *I smell food, and I want it, so I should just find it and eat it.* Now, he had an alternative: *If I wait, and do what is asked, I'll get the food, plus positive reinforcement.*

Though he wasn't allowed initially to interact with Lilly, on day four Jonny joined her, Cohen, and Long on their first walk together. The outing went well. Jonny was settling into his new life and

/// DID YOU KNOW... ///

The Humane Society of the United States estimates that 6 million to 8 million dogs and cats are put into animal shelters each year. Typically, about half of them are adopted. But even animals haven't been immune to the recession. A Comcast survey of shelters in 25 U.S. cities, released in late 2009, found that while 91 percent of the shelters saw more animals come in during that year, about two thirds of them reported fewer adoptions.

his personality was starting to come out. Anytime anyone played with him or gave him lots of praise, he went from mellow to madman in 60 seconds. He loved to rub his head against Cohen and would go bonkers with joy, running and leaping into the air. Usually, Cohen calmed him by putting him back in the crate. When he emerged, his softer side came out. Cohen and Long learned that a chest scratch would often be rewarded with kisses. Then Jonny would lie on the floor and play with his fuzzy chew toy until he drifted off to sleep.

On day 10, Cohen took Jonny to an empty parking lot in Berkeley where BAD RAP held its

their dogs to the park. Before Cohen knew what was happening, a dozen kids were crowding around Jonny and petting him. The dog lit up. Cohen had read about pit bulls' affinity for children, but because he didn't have kids, he'd never witnessed it.

Cohen was inspired. He must find a way to harness this side of Jonny. He did some research and found a program called Paws for Tales that was run by the Peninsula Humane Society and SPCA. The program enabled kids to practice reading aloud in front of a completely receptive and nonjudgmental audience: a dog. Cohen contacted

the program's administrators to find out how Jonny could get involved.

They told him the dog would need to pass the American Temperament Test and have a Canine Good Citizen certification. Well, check and check. Jonny had finally gotten both—two major achievements. However, he would also need to be a certified therapy dog, so Cohen and Jonny got to work on that requirement immediately.

Part of the challenge was to teach the dog to react properly. If a child held a book in the air while reading, then he was supposed to stare at the kid as if he were hanging on every word. If the youngster rested the book on the floor, then Jonny needed to stare at the pages, like he was following along. It took three more months of intense training sessions—and a pen stuffed with food and laid in the book—to teach him, but Jonny got there. Cohen took him in for

a demonstration and evaluation by the program administrators, and he passed.

Finally, on Nov. 18, 2008, less than two years after he was saved from an almost certain end at Bad Newz Kennels, Jonny Justice walked into the San Mateo Public Library and lay down on a blanket in a cavernous conference room. At 4 p.m. the doors swung open and a few kids came in, trailed by a parent. They sat in a circle on the floor, and one by one they moved onto Jonny's blanket and read a short book: *Biscuit's New Trick* or *Through the Heart of the Jungle*. Jonny sat and listened to the cracking voices as if he'd never done anything else in his life, as if he'd been bred for the job. ●

Jonny Justice was a popular Paws for Tales helper at San Mateo libraries until 2010. He and Cohen are now taking a break, but they will probably return, in time, to service and therapy work, Cohen says.

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Charlie DeValliere reading to Jonny Justice at Belmont Library in San Mateo, Calif.

weekly training sessions. As many as 50 or 60 pit bulls would be there. Cohen was excited. He felt that Jonny had made a lot of progress in his first week, and he was looking forward to showing him off. Unfortunately, class was a disaster. Jonny was so wound up he couldn't concentrate. There were new people and new dogs all around. He forgot or simply refused to do all the things he and Cohen had worked on. After an hour of commands, he was so fried that he stumbled around like a drunken sailor.

Cohen was discouraged, but that first, disastrous class actually proved to be a turning point. Jonny emerged with a better idea of what he was supposed to be doing. He learned commands like uh-uh (as in "no"), drop, take, down, go see, and wait. His training went so well over the next several months that a cofounder of BAD RAP, Tim Racer, suggested that the dog be renamed Jonny Justice in honor of the justice meted out to Michael Vick and perhaps being achieved for pit bulls as Jonny showed what they could do.

One late summer day, Cohen and Long took