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- Crime
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- Immigration
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You are here: LAT Home > California | Local

» HOME DELIVERY

California/Local

Columnists:

- » Steve Lopez
- » Sandy Banks
- » Patt Morrison
- » George Skelton
- » Dana Parsons
- » Steve Harvey
- » Steve Hymon

Community Papers:

- » Burbank
- » Newport Beach
- » Laguna Beach
- » Huntington Beach
- » Glendale

News/Opinion

- California | Local
- National
- World
- Business
- Sports
- Olympics
- Campaign '08
- Science
- Environment
- Opinion

Arts/Entertainment

- Entertainment
- The Guide
- Arts & Culture
- The Envelope

Living

- Travel
- Health
- Autos
- Home & Garden
- Food
- Image
- Books
- Living Green
- Video
- Photography
- Obituaries



Robert Durell / Los Angeles Times

Tim Racer works with Moose in Oakland, preparing the playful brown-and-white pit bull for adoption. One of his first steps: changing the dog's name to Jelly Roll Jones. Oakland's shelter gets an average of two dozen pit bulls each week.

COLUMN ONE

Oakland couple rescues pit bulls and works to redeem breed's image

The pair tackle their biggest job yet: finding homes for Michael Vick's battle-scarred animals.

By John M. Glionna, Los Angeles Times Staff Writer
 August 15, 2008

OAKLAND --

For Tim Racer and Donna Reynolds, the dog rescues started with an open-door policy.

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Photos: BAD RAP to the rescue

Moving west, the two commercial artists focused their rescue efforts on American pit bull terriers, which they consider the nation's most misunderstood breed. In 1999, they formed Bay Area Doglovers Responsible About Pit Bulls, or BAD RAP, to help reverse the dogs' criminal image.

Now they've set their sights on the most vilified outcasts of all: fighting pit bulls taken from disgraced football star Michael Vick's Bad Newz Kennels.

In most dog-fighting busts, the animals are euthanized. But this time, a federal judge ordered Vick to pay for the dogs to be assessed individually by experts who would look past the breed's stereotype.

Working with a team from the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and others, Racer and Reynolds evaluated 49 dogs.

What they found astounded them: Only one dog was put down because of its temperament. Twenty-two, deemed either unsocialized or dog-aggressive, were sent to the Best Friends animal sanctuary in Utah.

The rest were placed with families, including an attorney who wears a T-shirt

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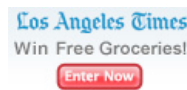
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proclaiming "My best friend is a pit bull."

As part of the adoption effort, BAD RAP took 13 dogs back to Oakland. There was Teddles, Vick's white-and-gray trophy dog, and Hector, who still bears fighting scars on his chest and legs. And Jonny Justice, Zippy, Grace, Iggy and little Uba, many of them bearing the pit bull's signature physical traits: the broad face and brick-like head. The couple has so far found homes for 10 of the dogs.

"I give BAD RAP a lot of credit for what was accomplished with the Vick dogs," said Rebecca Huss, a Valparaiso University law professor who was appointed by federal prosecutors to be guardian of the Vick dogs. "They were there at the forefront."

Over the last decade, Racer and Reynolds have found homes for 400 pit bulls. They assist kennels nationwide in creating pit bull adoption programs and help new owners train their pets.

For the artists, natives of Detroit who met at the Center for Creative Studies there, the work is part of the mission to help restore a tarnished image. Just a few generations ago, they say, pit bulls were considered America's dog: The dogs helped sell bonds during World War I. And Petie the pit bull later became the mascot of "The Little Rascals," the popular children's TV show.

Now, thanks to perverse breeding and training, the animals are associated mostly with violence. They are by far the most commonly found breed in shelters nationwide, and hundreds of thousands are euthanized each year.

Racer and Reynolds say the dogs are chosen as fighters because of their athleticism and stamina. Many want nothing to do with fighting yet are still put down by authorities.

"The Vick case is a milestone," said Reynolds, 46. "For once, these dogs were not destroyed, dismissed as ticking time bombs. They were seen for what they are -- as victims."

Despite successful rescue efforts, some animal experts say pit bulls are not for everyone. Abandoned pit bulls need to be evaluated before an adoption and, like most dogs, they need exercise and training. Though fiercely loyal to their owners, some can be aggressive.

"These dogs are athletic, determined and unbelievably, unnaturally strong," said Daphna Nachminovitch, vice president of cruelty investigations for [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals](#). "They may be friendly with people, but many are animal-aggressive. People need to know that going in."

Countered Reynolds: "One need only to look at the Vick dogs to see excellent examples of dogs breaking those exact stereotypes."

Weary of the Midwestern winters, Racer and Reynolds moved to Oakland. In 1996, they bought their first house. And the first law of home ownership, they joked, was having their own dog.

Racer wanted a pit bull, something playful and clownish but with a sense of physical confidence. Not Reynolds. "All I knew I'd learned from the media -- that these were unpredictable, violent dogs. I thought, why would you want to own a pet like that?"

Then, at a local animal shelter, they found Sally, a 10-month-old pup they couldn't walk away from. They took her home, intending to adopt her out, but soon noticed something peculiar. "This was one of the best dogs we'd ever known," Reynolds recalled. "Clearly, we had been lied to about pit bulls." They decided to keep Sally for themselves.

The couple also began scouring animal shelters for other pit bulls and launched a pit bull [website](#), [www.badrap.org](#). Like many people consumed by a cause, they can't exactly explain why pit bull rescues have come to dominate their lives. Reynolds jokes that it might be a good topic for a therapist.

Maybe their dog Sally was a stand-in for Casey Jones, a beagle Reynolds' parents allowed to run free until the dog one day disappeared. Reynolds was just 7.

"Every animal rescuer is rescuing a part of themselves," she said. "Maybe I'm still looking for Casey Jones."

With so much of their time devoted to dog rescues, the couple struggled to find time to work as artists, Racer as a sculptor and carousel carver and Reynolds as a commercial illustrator. And funding for their new pet cause was so scant, they refinanced their home three times in the early years to keep the effort going.



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But they couldn't stop. They searched local kennels for "breed ambassadors" that would make good pets and help change the pit bull image. Sometimes they saw abandoned fighting dogs in such pain it made them weep.

"But we're not bleeding hearts," said Racer, his deaf pit bull Honky Tonk snoring on his lap. "With animals we know will never be right with the world, we counsel shelters to put them down. We know we can't save them all."

Eventually, enough BAD RAP donations poured in for the couple to each draw a salary. And one day, Sally gave Racer a bit of canine inspiration.

Using Sally as his model, Racer, 45, began sculpting a wooden pit bull rocker. The art piece, which still sits in the couple's living room, launched Racer in a new direction carving ornate models of pit bulls and other breeds for art and carousel collectors.

One day, he'd like to carve pit bulls for a carousel to teach children not to fear the breed. "In so many ways," he said, "that dog changed our lives."

Neither Racer nor Reynolds had heard of Michael Vick when authorities indicted the Atlanta Falcons quarterback in 2007 for running a covert dog fighting operation.

The news was grim: Dogs -- both those that failed in the ring and those that refused to fight -- were shot, drowned, beaten to death and even electrocuted on Vick's estate in rural Surrey County, Va. Others were left chained to car axles.

Some animal experts called for the surviving animals to be put down. "We don't regard euthanasia as the worst thing for dogs raised to mangle one another in a bloody pit," PETA's Nachminovitch said.

Reynolds saw things differently. She wrote to federal prosecutors, proposing that the animals be evaluated and that "any dogs that demonstrate stability and resiliency to their abuse be given the opportunity to serve as living examples -- mascots if you will -- to encourage the pet-loving public to stay vigilant against the crime of dog fighting."

Authorities agreed. Last Labor Day weekend, Racer and Reynolds helped evaluate 49 dogs spread across six Virginia shelters. They found many dogs in deplorable conditions. Marked as killers, they were kept in isolation with little human contact.

One by one, they approached each animal to gauge its sociability. Was the animal shut down? Was it aggressive?

Experts were impressed with Racer's connection with the creatures.

"There was Tim lying on his stomach to entice these dogs out of their cages," said Stephen L. Zawistowski, an executive vice president for the ASPCA. "We'd been told these were the nation's most dangerous dogs. I thought, wow, Tim is really putting his life on the line."

But the dogs surprised them. Many frightened animals had to be carried outside for testing, where they cowered in the grass, relaxing only in the presence of other dogs.

The hardest test came with the one dog that was eventually euthanized. "She wouldn't even let us into the pen," Reynolds recalled. "She'd had enough abuse. That was it for her."

Several other dog rescue groups nationwide got involved to find homes for the Vick dogs. One is now a therapy dog in Palo Alto. "The majority of the Vick dogs did not need rehabilitation; they just needed to be rescued from that negative element," Racer said.

Huss, the dogs' legal guardian, said Racer's tour of the kennels where the Vick dogs were housed convinced her that authorities were doing the right thing: "Tim helped me see the value in these animals."

Moose the pit bull stepped out of the Oakland animal shelter with a weightlifter's stride. But once inside the fenced-in field, the brown-and-white dog was all playful puppy. "You're a good boy, yes you are," Racer said, rubbing his belly. "You're going to make somebody very happy."

Racer and Reynolds are helping the city shelter launch a program to find homes for the two dozen pit bulls left there each week. Like many, Moose has a mysterious past. But Racer thinks of the future.

Moose is getting a pit bull makeover. For starters, his name has been changed to Jelly Roll Jones, something whimsical and artistic.

But it's not just the dogs; owners also need image polishing, Racer said. "We're trying to show that even 90-pound women can own a dog like this -- nurses, teachers. Not just tough guys."

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