

# An underdog's second chance

Saved from Michael Vick's property, pit bulls now in loving homes

By

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His back resting comfortably against her chest, Hector nestles his massive canine head into Leslie Nuccio's shoulder, high-fiving pit bull paws against human hands.

The big dog — 52 pounds — is social, people-focused, happy now, it seems, wearing a rhinestone collar in his new home in sunny California.

But as Hector sits up, deep scars stand out on his chest, and his eyes are imploring.

"I wish he could let us know what happened to him," says Nuccio, the big tan dog's foster mother.

Hector ought to be dead, she knows — killed in one of his staged fights, or executed for not being "game" enough, not winning, or euthanized by those who see pit bulls seized in busts as "kennel trash," unsuited to any kind of normal life.

Instead, Hector is learning how to be a pet.

After the hell of a fighting ring, he has reached a heaven of sorts: saved by a series of unlikely breaks, transported thousands of miles, along with other dogs rescued with him, by devoted strangers, and now nurtured by Nuccio, her roommate, Danielle White, and their three other dogs.

The animals barrel around the house, with 4-year-old Hector leading the puppy-like antics — stealth underwear grabs from the laundry basket, sprints across the living room, food heists from the coffee table — until it's "love time" and he decelerates and engulfs the women in a hug.

Nuccio wishes he could let her know all that happened.

But what she does know is this: Hector has come such a long way since he was trapped in the horrors of Michael Vick's Bad Newz Kennels.

## Inside Vick's dogfighting operation

Authorities descending last year on 1915 Moonlight Road in Smithfield, Va., found where Vick, the former NFL quarterback, and others staged pit bull fights in covered sheds, tested the animals' fighting prowess and destroyed and disposed of dogs that weren't good fighters.

Vick is serving a 23-month federal sentence after admitting that he bankrolled the dogfighting operation and helped kill six to eight dogs. Three co-defendants Purnell Peace, Quanis Phillips and Tony Taylor also pleaded guilty and were sentenced, and the four now face state animal cruelty charges. Oscar Allen, who sold a champion pit bull to Vick's dogfighting operation, was sentenced Friday on a federal dogfighting charge.

Officers who carried out the raid found dogs, some injured and scarred, chained to buried car axles. Forensic experts discovered remains of dogs that had been shot with a .22 caliber pistol, electrocuted, drowned, hanged or slammed to the ground for lacking a desire to fight.

A bewildered Hector and more than 50 other American Pit Bull Terriers or pit bull mixes were gathered up. So were "parting sticks" used to open fighting dogs' mouths, treadmills to condition them, and a "rape stand" used to restrain female dogs that did not submit willingly to breeding.

The dogs, held as evidence in the criminal prosecutions, were taken to a half dozen city and county pounds and shelters in Virginia.

Hector was bunked in the Hanover pound in a cage below a dog named Uba who was smaller and more clearly showing anxiety.

Uba flattened on all fours when Tim Racer, an evaluator on a team assembled by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, arrived at his cage.

"Are you going to kill me now?" was the message another evaluator, Donna Reynolds, read in Uba's eyes.



At her home in the San Francisco Bay Area, Leslie Nuccio holds her Michael Vick's property.

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The black-and-white dog tried to wriggle away once out of the cage, but he came around after a while. He wagged his tail when the team showed him a 4-foot doll, to test his response to children. He spun around and got into a play position when they brought out a dog.

“This is the big secret. Most of them were dog-tolerant to dog-social. It was completely opposite of what we were led to believe,” Reynolds said.

How much to trust the capacity of fighting dogs to have a new life as pets or working dogs in law enforcement or therapy settings is an issue that has divided animal advocates; some believe most such animals should be put down as a precaution, while others say they must be evaluated individually. One dog seized at Bad Newz was euthanized as too aggressive, but the others, four dozen plus in all, have had different fates.

Nearly half have been sent to a Utah sanctuary, Best Friends Animal Society, where handlers will work with them. None showed human aggression and many have potential for adoption someday. Others, evaluated as being immediate candidates for foster care and eventual adoption, went to several other groups.

Among the latter was Hector.

A team of animal welfare experts got things rolling last July when federal authorities sought ownership of the seized dogs. The result, they say, was groundbreaking.

The Oakland, Calif.-based pit bull rescue and education group Bay Area Doglovers Responsible About Pit bulls, or BAD RAP, which had done similar rescues from fighting busts in California, asked Assistant U.S. Attorney Michael Gill for permission to evaluate and rescue as many of the dogs as possible, with the hope of eventually placing them in adoptive homes.

“Much to our amazement, he said yes,” said Reynolds, who heads BAD RAP. “This doesn’t happen. People don’t say yes to pit bulls.”

Gill declined to comment, but those familiar with the Vick case said the Justice Department hoped early on to find a way to give the dogs a second chance. As part of his plea deal, Vick agreed to pay for the dogs’ care.

The court even appointed a guardian and special master, Valparaiso University animal law expert Rebecca Huss, who oversaw the dogs’ disposition and recommended which rescue groups would accept them.

One result of the unusual process, said ASPCA’s Stephen Zawistowski, is that shelters that always euthanized such dogs are now saying “you’ve given us permission to care” about giving them a second chance.

Each dog was evaluated as an individual. Huss recalled the good-natured but quiet Rose, whose overbreeding had led to mammary tumors. In the end, needing surgery but unable to tolerate anesthesia, Rose was mercifully put down, just days after being transferred to a foster home.

“The good thing was she didn’t die in the shelter,” Huss said. “She had a little time in the sun, not enough, but a little time in the sun.”

Huss received reports from an ASPCA-led evaluation team and from volunteers who observed and worked with the dogs where they were being held as evidence in shelters and pounds.

Nicole Rattay, a volunteer from BAD RAP, spent six weeks visiting the Vick dogs in shelters every day, e-mailing and phoning her observations to Huss.

“Some dogs were ready to learn ‘sit’ and obedience,” she said. “Some needed more time to accept touch and feel comfortable in their surrounding. Sometimes I would just sit in their kennels.” For some, bits of roasted chicken became a “motivator,” she said.

She mentioned Handsome Dan, who bridled at touching at first but gradually grew more comfortable, though not enough for foster home placement, at least not yet. He ended up going to Best Friends.

“I hope that he can overcome what was done to him,” said Rattay.

### **Getting a second chance**

BAD RAP won government approval in mid-October to transport a group of dogs to California foster homes to get them out of confinement.

Hector and a dozen others were about to make the cross-country trip in a rented 33-foot Cruise America RV.

But first, they had to get ready.

Four BAD RAP members — Racer, Reynolds, Rattay and Steve Smith — cruised a Richmond, Va., Wal-Mart, loading up with doggy sleeping mats, crates, bowls and chew sticks. The next day, they split up in twos to pick up, bathe and exercise the 13 pit bulls from four shelters. Then they loaded them up.

Rattay walked through the RV, cooing and checking her cargo to the thump-thump-thump of happy tails against dog crates. Alert to an adventure, one dog circled his bed. Another stretched and yawned. A third slathered her outstretched hand with kisses.

“Oh my goodness,” she cooed to them. “It’s nice to see you again. Hi buddy, hi.”

At first, the caretakers put cardboard between the crates to offer the dogs privacy and calm. “But they were happier when they could see their neighbor,” Rattay said.

She and Smith took turns driving and napping on the 2½-day trip (Racer and Reynolds flew home to prepare for the dogs’ arrival).

The dogs drifted to sleep in their crates — atop the RV table, benches, queen bed and couch, and an area above the cab — but jumped right up each time the RV stopped for a break at a highway rest area.

Assembly-line style, the couple walked, watered, and fed each of the 13 dogs, causing some gawks from other drivers who’d stopped, but never any questions from the dogs.

“They did fabulous,” Rattay said. “They understood the program right away and got in and out of their crates.”

Mostly things went fine for Hector and his fellow passengers in the rolling kennel, though one incident briefly worried Smith and Rattay.

It hadn’t occurred to them to map a route that avoided places with ordinances banning pit bulls. A groundskeeper at an Arkansas rest stop warned them that “further down the road, they will take that dog from you unless you have proper paperwork.”

“We finished it up and got moving,” Rattay said.

At 10 a.m. on a Tuesday, Rattay pulled the RV in front of Racer and Reynolds’ house.

It had been a long trip, and soon after the two couples unloaded and walked the dogs, both drivers and animals fell asleep in the living room waiting for foster families to arrive.

Smith snored a little, Rattay remembered, and a dog gave a low grumble.

### **A new life**

Hector’s settling into his new life, getting further and further from his past.

Weekly AKC “canine good citizen” classes are correcting his social ineptitude. And he’s taking cues on good manners from patient Pandora, a female pit bull mix who’s queen of the household’s dogs. Once Hector graduates, he’ll take classes to become a certified therapy dog, helping at nursing homes and the like.

For now, he’s learning the simple pleasures of a blanket at bedtime, a peanut butter-filled chew toy, even classical music.

“I put on Yo-Yo Ma one day and he cocked his head, laid down and listened to the cello next to the speaker,” Nuccio said. “He’s turning out to be a man of high class and culture.”

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