

THE GOOD NEWS FOR THE ‘BAD NEWZ’ DOGS

THE SAGA OF PIT BULLS RECOVERED
FROM AN NFL STAR’S DOGFIGHTING
OPERATION REMAINS A CLASSIC STORY
—EVEN 10 YEARS LATER

BY JIM GORANT

In April 2007, police raided a dogfighting operation in Smithville, Va., operated by then-NFL quarterback Michael Vick. Fifty-one pit bulls were rescued—but many others had been killed by Vick and his associates. Vick served 21 months in prison and then resumed his football career, reformed if never fully redeemed. The greater redemption, however, may have been that of the dozens of blameless dogs themselves.

Zippy became a happy addition to the Hernandez family. Clockwise from top left: Berenice, Jesse, Francisco, Eliana and Vanessa.



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The dog approaches the outstretched hand. Her name is Sweet Jasmine, and she is 35 pounds of twitchy curiosity with a coat the color of fried chicken, a pink nose and brown eyes. She had spent a full 20 seconds studying this five-fingered offering before advancing. Now, as she moves forward, her tail points straight down, her butt is hunched toward the ground, her head is bowed, her ears pinned back. She stands at maybe three quarters of her

height.

She gets within a foot of the hand and stops. She licks her snout, a sign of nervousness, and looks up at the stranger, seeking assurance. She looks back to the hand, licks her snout again and begins to extend her neck. Her nose is six inches away from the hand, one inch, half an inch. She sniffs once. She sniffs again. At this point almost any other dog in the world would offer up a gentle lick, a sweet hello, an invitation to be scratched or petted. She's come so far. She's so close.

But Jasmine pulls away.

Peta wanted jasmine dead. Not just Jasmine, and not just PETA. The Humane Society of the U.S., agreeing with PETA, took the position that Michael Vick's pit bulls were beyond rehabilitation and that trying to save them was a misappropriation of time and money. "The cruelty they've suffered is such that they can't lead what anyone who loves dogs would consider a normal life,"

says PETA spokesman Dan Shannon. “We feel it’s better that they have their suffering ended once and for all.” If you’re a dog and People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals suggests you be put down, you’ve got problems. Jasmine had problems.

They began in 2001, about the same time Vick started cashing NFL paychecks and bought a 15-acre plot of land at 1915 Moonlight Road in Smithville, Va. After Vick bought the land, it took him a few years to build a house there. It wasn’t a priority. The Atlanta Falcons’ new quarterback never intended to make the place his home.

Beyond the house, shrouded by trees, were five sheds painted black from top to bottom, including the windows and doors. Past them were scattered wire cages and wood doghouses. Farther still, where the trees got thicker, two partly buried car axles protruded from the ground. This was the home of Bad Newz Kennels, the

dogfighting operation that Vick and three of his buddies started a year after Vick became the first pick of the 2001 NFL draft. In April 2007, when local and state authorities busted the operation, 51 pit bulls were seized, Jasmine among them.

A few of the dogs, probably pets, were kept in one of the sheds. The fighters and a handful of dogs that Bad Newz housed for other people lived in the outdoor kennels. The rest—dogs that were too young to fight, were used for breeding or were kept as bait dogs for the fighters to practice on—were chained to the car axles in the woods. The biggest shed had a fighting pit, once covered by a bloodstained carpet that was found in the woods.

According to court documents, from time to time Vick and his cohorts “rolled” the dogs: put them in the pit for short battles to see which ones had the right stuff. Those that fought got affection, food, vitamins and training

sessions. The ones that showed no taste for blood were killed —by gunshot, electrocution, drowning, hanging or, in at least one case, being repeatedly slammed against the ground. So one would think that April 25, 2007, the day law-enforcement officials took the dogs from the Vick compound, would have been a good one for Jasmine and all of the others. But things were more complicated than that.

Zippy is not a big dog, but she's a pit bull, one of the Vick pit bulls, and she's up on her hind legs straining against the collar, her front paws paddling the air like a child's arms in a swimming pool. The woman holding her back, Berenice Mora-Hernandez, is not big either, and as she digs in her heels, it's not clear who will win the tug-of-war. "Watch it!" she says to the visitors who stand frozen in her doorway. "Be careful. Sometimes she pees when she gets excited." And just like that Zippy whizzes on the floor. Twice.

Berenice's 6-year-old daughter, Vanessa, disappears and returns with a few paper towels. The spill absorbed, Zippy is

set free to jump up and lick and wag her hellos before she leads everyone into the family room, where Berenice's husband, Jesse, sits with the couple's 5-week-old son, Francisco, and two other dogs, who rise in their pens and start barking. But Zippy has no interest in them. Instead she leaps onto the couch, where Vanessa's 9-year-old sister, Eliana, is waiting. Vanessa joins them, and over the next 15 minutes the two girls do all of the things that ought to provoke an abused and neglected pit bull who's been rescued from a dogfighting ring. They grab Zippy's face, yank her tail, roll on top of her, roll under her, stick their hands in her mouth. Eliana and Zippy end up nose to nose. The girl kisses the dog. The dog licks the girl's entire face.

Zippy is proof that pit bulls have an image problem. In truth, these dogs can be among the most people-friendly on the planet. Perhaps that's why for decades pit bulls were considered great family dogs and in England were known as "nanny dogs" for their care of children. Most dog experts will

attest that a pit bull properly trained and socialized from a young age is a great pet.

Still, pit bulls historically have been bred for aggression against other dogs, and if they're put in uncontrolled situations, some of them will fight, and if they're not properly socialized or have been abused, they can become aggressive toward people. It doesn't mean that all pit bulls are instinctively inclined to fight, but there is that potential.

"A pit bull is like a Porsche. It's a finely tuned, highly muscled athlete," says Stephen Zawistowski, a certified applied animal behaviorist and an executive vice president of the ASPCA. "And just like you wouldn't give a Porsche to a 16-year-old, you don't want just anyone to own a pit bull. It should be someone who has experience with dogs and is willing to spend the time, because with training and proper socialization you will get the most out of them as pets."

In many cases, that doesn't happen. Too many dogs are irresponsibly bred, encouraged to be aggressive or put in

situations in which they could not restrain themselves. Some contend that this hysteria reached its apex with a 1987 *Sports Illustrated* cover that featured a snarling pit bull below the headline *beware of this dog*. Despite the more balanced article inside, which was occasioned by a series of attacks and maulings by pit bulls, the cover cemented the dogs' badass cred.

Berenice stood up for the breed then and still does. "It's almost always the owner, not the dog," she says, who is responsible for aggressive behavior. Her family has been "fostering" pit bulls—minding them in their house in Concord until they can be adopted—for nine years. "These girls have grown up with pit bulls their whole lives, and they've loved every one of them."

That wasn't hard to do with Zippy. When she arrived from the rescue group BAD RAP (Bay Area Doglovers Responsible About Pitbulls) in October 2007, "she was afraid of her own shadow," says Berenice. Loud noises made her

jump, and when she entered another room she'd crawl through the doorway on her belly. That lasted about six weeks, but once Zippy got comfortable she took over the house. She races from room to room, goes for runs with Berenice and plays in the yard with the other two dogs: the family's big blue pit bull, Crash, and another foster dog, Roller, a bulldog-pit mix. She does what it seemed like she'd never have the chance to do: live the life of a happy dog.

After being taken from the Moonlight Road property, Vick's dogs were dispersed to six animal-control facilities in Virginia, where they were mostly kept alone in a cage for months at a time. They were given so little attention because workers assumed they were dangerous and would be put down after Vick's trial. The common belief is that any money and time spent caring for dogs saved from fight rings would be better devoted to the millions of dogs already sitting in shelters, about half of which are destroyed each year.

What the pit bulls had going for them was the same thing

that had once seemed to doom them: Michael Vick. They were, in a sense, celebrities, and there was a massive public outcry to help them. Mike Gill, assistant U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of Virginia, reached out to, among others, Zawistowski. Could the ASPCA put together a team to evaluate the animals and determine if any of them could be saved?

Around the same time, Donna Reynolds, the executive director and co-founder, along with her husband, Tim Racer, of BAD RAP, sent Gill a seven-page proposal suggesting a dog-by-dog evaluation to see if any could be spared. The couple, who have placed more than 400 pit bulls in new homes during the past 10 years, knew it was a long shot. It's faster and easier to judge the entire barrel as rotten. Zawistowski put together a team composed of himself, two other ASPCA staffers, three outside certified animal behaviorists and three members of BAD RAP, including Reynolds and Racer.

On Sept. 4, 5 and 6 of 2017, under tight security and a court-imposed gag order, Zawistowski's team assembled in Virginia. It quickly agreed on a protocol for testing the dogs that would show their level of socialization and aggressiveness. Among other things, the dogs were presented with people, toys, food and other dogs. Their reactions and their overall demeanor were evaluated. In those three days the team assessed 49 dogs at six sites.

"I thought, If we can save three or four, it will be fantastic," Reynolds says.

So what they found in the pens caught them off guard. "Some of them were just big goofy dogs you'd find in any shelter," says Zawistowski. No more than a dozen were seasoned fighters, and few showed a desire to harm anything.

One dog, Jasmine, was so scared that even the confines of her kennel offered her no comfort. Shelter workers used a blanket to construct a little tent inside her cage that she could duck under. Remembering that dog, says Dr. Frank

McMillan, the director of well-being studies at Best Friends Animal Society, a 33,000-acre sanctuary in southern Utah, "Jasmine broke my heart."

Jonny justice likes to lie in a splash of sunlight that stretches across the floor of the living room in the San Francisco split-level of Cris Cohen. Head lolling back, eyes closed, legs sticking up in the air, he lets the rays warm his pink belly. But Jonny is on a tight schedule. He's up every day at 6 a.m., out for a 45-minute walk, making sure to avoid the garbage trucks, which freak him out. After that it's back home for a handful of food, some grooming, a quick scratch-down and then into his dog bed with a few toys and food puzzles. At lunchtime he's back out for a quick trip to the yard, some playtime and a little lounging in the sun, followed by a return to the kennel until around 4:30. Then it's another long walk—an hour this time—dinner, a game of fetch in the yard, quiet time and sleep.

After the ASPCA-led evaluations, the dogs were put into

one of four categories: euthanize; sanctuary 2 (needs lifetime care given by trained professionals, with little chance for adoption); sanctuary 1 (needs a controlled environment, with a greater possibility of adoption); and foster (must live with experienced dog owners for a minimum of six months, and after further evaluation adoption is likely). Rebecca Huss, a professor at the Valparaiso (Indiana) University School of Law and an animal-law expert, was placed in charge of the dispersal.

Jonny—originally known as Jonny Rotten—was a foster dog who was taken in by Cohen, a longtime BAD RAP volunteer who owns another pit bull, Lily, and had cared for seven previous fosters. “When he first came, everything scared him,” Cohen says. “We dealt with that by putting him on a solid routine. Everything the same, every day. Dogs thrive on that. If they know what to expect, they can relax.”

After about two months, his name was changed from Rotten to Justice—and it’s an identity he earned. During a walk in

Golden Gate Park one day, he was mobbed by a group of kids. Cohen wasn’t sure how Jonny would react to all those little hands thrust at him, but the dog loved it. He played with the children, and Cohen realized Jonny had an affinity for them. He enrolled Jonny in training for the program Paws for Tales, in which kids who get nervous reading aloud in class practice their skills by reading to a canine audience of one. Jonny was certified in November, and now once a month he sits patiently listening to children read.

Jasmine runs in the yard of the small suburban Baltimore house, jumping on Sweet Pea, another pit bull, and nipping at the back of her neck. Sweet Pea spins and leaps into Jasmine, and the two tumble together for a minute and then pop up and continue their romp. The people who know them best think that Sweet Pea is probably Jasmine’s mother. That’s why their families try to arrange play dates for them twice a month.

Jasmine wound up in the hands of Catalina Stirling, a 35-

year-old artist, and her husband and two children. Her recovery—from hiding under a blanket in a corner of her cage to romping in a yard—was a long one. For months she remained in her little cage in Stirling's house and refused to come out. "I had to pick her up and carry her outside so she could go to the bathroom," Stirling says. "She wouldn't even stand up until I had walked away. There's a little hole in the yard, and once she was done, she would go lie in the hole." Sweet Pea, who's better adjusted but still battles her own demons, was an hour away, and her visits helped draw out Jasmine. After six months, Stirling could finally take both dogs for a walk in a big park near her house.

In the end, 47 of the 51 Vick dogs were saved. (Two died while in the shelters; one was destroyed because it was too violent; and another was euthanized for medical reasons.) But it's Jasmine, lying in her kennel, who embodies the question at the heart of the Vick dogs' story. Was it worth the time and effort to save these few dozen when millions

languish in shelters? For all 47, any incidence of aggression, provoked or not, will play only one way in the headlines. It's a lifelong sentence to a very short leash. PETA's position is unchanged: sparing the dogs was simply not a good safety risk. But the people who worked with the dogs directly saw things differently—and always will.

"There was a lot of discussion about whether to save all of the sanctuary cases," says Reynolds, "but in the end [Best Friends] decided that's what they are there for. There are no regrets."

To support animal-care groups cited in this article, go to their respective websites: aspca.org, badrap.org, bestfriends.org, and recycledlove.org.