

Exclusive**Trained to be killers, Vick's pups now on death row**

BY CHRISTIAN RED

DAILY NEWS SPORTS WRITER

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HANOVER, Va. – As Commander Sergeant Kevin Kilgore led a

reporter and photographer through the dimly-lit back room of the Hanover County Animal Control facility today, he warned them not to put their hands or faces close to any of the individual cages holding Michael Vick's pit bulls.

Fingers could get chewed off. A face could get spewed with dog saliva. Kilgore said a pit bull from another seizure had chomped right through the heavy gauge metal door and escaped its confines. As Kilgore opened the main security, the creak of the door set off an immediate crescendo of barking.

"This one gets a little spooky," Kilgore said, as he pointed to a pit bull housed in pen No. 28 near the right rear corner. "And this one," Kilgore said, pointing to pen No. 29, "he's showing his aggression. He wasn't like that when we got him, but hormones may be kicking in and as he's become more accustomed to the pen, he's claiming his space. Definitely an Alpha dog." As if on cue, the pit bull in question – dark body fur and a white stripe down the middle of his muzzle – lunged at the gate, turned a metal water bowl over and barked ferociously at any human who strayed near the cage front.

A tan male pit bull behind pen No. 41 cowered near the back of his cage, terrified of any interaction. "He's the most submissive of the group," Kilgore said.

Friday, Aug. 31 marks a somber three-week anniversary for the 11 pit bulls – five females and six males – brought to the brown, L-shaped building where Sgt. Kilgore and his staff have been responsible for their care. The 11 dogs are far from the average abandoned pet or mistreated animal. They are among the 53 dogs seized from the Smithfield, Va. property of Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick back in late April which sparked the summer-long saga of the now-disgraced NFL star. Monday, the 27-year-old Vick pleaded guilty to bankrolling a dogfighting operation called "Bad Newz Kennels" and to helping execute dogs that did not perform well in testing sessions.

Today offered a rare glimpse of what has become of the dogs since they placed in various shelters throughout southeastern Virginia. Some of the dogs were forlorn. Others had visible marks from having been trained to fight.

While Vick awaits his prison sentence on Dec. 10 and is suspended indefinitely from the NFL, the fate of the 11 dogs at the Hanover facility is grim. Kilgore, who has been the Animal Control Chief for 15 years, said the U.S. Department of Agriculture maintains custody of the pit bulls and will decide next week whether any of them are fit for adoption. The USDA conducted several searches of Vick's rural Smithfield property on Moonlight Road after local Surry County authorities uncovered evidence of dogfighting on April 25th.

"I can tell you from experience, pit bulls are very hard to place," Kilgore said. "Even if you found a well-experienced dog handler, there's a very good chance that these dogs pose a danger to the community because they were trained for fighting.

"I see a lot of cage aggression with the (Vick) dogs. It's not mean aggression, just them being protective of their territory. Unfortunately, many people want these pit bulls for a range of reasons – as a status symbol or a machismo thing. But if allowed to run loose, these dogs may have a prey drive kick in. "

Kilgore won't speculate on the USDA's decision, but it is likely that all of the Vick dogs will be euthanized. One of the Vick pit bulls, a female behind pen No. 43, showed gruesome scarring over much of her body, indicative of the horrific details that were outlined in the July 17 indictment of Vick and three other men, all of whom have pleaded guilty in the sensational case.

The 11 pit bulls are kept in solitary cages and once a week, they are removed from their pens to be weighed and examined within the facility. Even though a vast, enclosed outdoor yard is adjacent to the Animal Control building, none of the Vick pit bulls are permitted outdoors for walks or exercise. They are fed twice a day and Kilgore said each of the 11 has gained about 10 pounds while they have been housed at the Hanover shelter and weigh between 40 to 50 pounds. All 11 are in the two-year age range.

The handling of the dogs can get tricky, especially if one shows its aggressive side. "We handle some with catch poles, which have a noose on the end," Kilgore said. "They are muzzled if necessary." Kilgore points to the cage where the pit bull chewed right through the metal gate. "Imagine what that would do to human flesh," he said.

Kilgore said the 11 dogs are nameless, but that his staff members and volunteers who help with the care of the dogs probably use their own nicknames during interaction. Vick has never called the facility to inquire about the dogs, according to Kilgore. Kilgore did not know if that was the same case with the other seized dogs in shelters from Richmond to Newport News, Vick's hometown.

If there is a bright side to the Vick case, Kilgore said it's that dogfighting and animal cruelty are being spotlighted, something that may help curtail these types of crimes.

"It's very difficult seeing animals mistreated," Kilgore said. "But the people in my profession are dedicated to seeing that it doesn't happen whenever possible."