

Advertisement

BREAKING NEWS
FED SLASHES RATE TO 3.00%

Lock - In Now
 30-Year FIXED:
 5.27% (5.40% APR)*

LendingTree
WHEN BANKS COMPETE YOU WIN®
*Terms & Conditions Apply



Become a member of the USA TODAY community now!
[Log in](#) | [Become a member](#)
 What's this?



Vick's former pit bulls making progress in rehabilitation at Utah animal sanctuary

Posted 5h 24m ago | Comment | Recommend

E-mail | Save | Print | [RSS](#)

By **Doug Alden, AP Sports Writer**

KANAB, Utah — Two months ago, Shadow was one uncooperative pit bull.

He had no interest in toys placed in his kennel and would firmly anchor his paws in the middle of walks, refusing to continue.

The dog wasn't being stubborn. He was frightened, adjusting to getting lavished with affection and attention after having survived the bloodthirsty world of dogfighting. Shadow and 21 other pit bulls are living at a southern Utah animal sanctuary where handlers hope to undo the mental damage done at Michael Vick's Bad Newz Kennels.

So far, the ragtag bunch of leftovers that other rescue groups passed over has shown encouraging progress.

"These are the 22 that they thought were the most hopeless - the least likely to ever be rehabilitated," said Dr. Frank McMillan, a veterinarian at the Best Friends Animal Society's sanctuary.

FIND MORE STORIES IN: [America](#) | [Virginia](#) | [Michael Vick](#) | [Ethical Treatment of Animals](#) | [Grand Canyon](#) | [Shadow](#) | [Bad Newz Kennels](#) | [Arizona-Utah](#) | [Best Friends Animal Society](#)

The 25 other dogs taken from Vick's operation were considered ready for adoption or foster care and went to other groups. The dogs Best Friends took were a mental mess.

It took weeks for handlers to get Shadow to stop cowering at the back of his kennel. Finally, someone discovered that he loves car rides and after a few spins through the red rock canyons - lapping up the air with his head hanging out the window - Shadow was warming up to his new caretakers.

The 21 others have also improved in the two months at Best Friends and McMillan said most of the early signs have been encouraging. Friendliness and calmness levels are generally improving and fear, aggression and excitability have decreased.

But it will be months before anyone can say whether the changes are temporary or genuine progress.

Vick's pit bulls are getting a chance most fighting dogs don't. And surprisingly, animal rights groups don't think they should. Groups such as the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals believe that euthanasia, the fate of most fighting dogs, would still be the most humane option, rather than keeping them in a shelter indefinitely or in some cases permanently.

Daphna Nachminovitch, PETA vice president for cruelty investigations, said as touching as it seems to give these dogs a taste of happiness after enduring such misery, nobody can be certain how they will behave if they are ever released.

"It's all very tragic, but there has to be some dose of realism for America," Nachminovitch said. "This isn't the last fighting ring that's going to be busted. Most fighting dogs don't get to go to Best Friends."

Nachminovitch said the money - which Vick was ordered to pay as part of his sentence - being spent on the dogs at Best Friends would be better used helping animals that face euthanasia because of overpopulation.

McMillan said PETA has a point. If a dog's disposition and behavior are misread and the animal is sent to the wrong environment, the results could be tragic. So the evaluation process will be extensive and stringent for at least six months, longer in some cases.

McMillan put together a list of behaviors that are tracked daily for each dog. He had to create his own because the concept of rehabilitating fighting dogs is so unusual.

Caregivers note how each dog interacts with people, whether the animals are frightened or aggressive and what triggers their responses. Handlers spend time walking, playing with and training each dog, and logging every trend and development.

Related Advertising Links

What's this?

Prepare to be Shocked

Millions have already taken this amazing test...
www.realage.com

Lower Your Blood Pressure

Non drug. No side effects. Proven to work in 10...
resperate.com

Advertisement

NEW Wii NERF
 SPORTS PACK
 Time Left: 5m 44s
 Current Bid: \$19.50
 Go

Shop Victoriously Find Yours

AdChoice

What's this?

Tickets

Buy and sell tickets to premium and sold out events

Search by events or regions:

Location **Select a region**

Genre **Select a sport**

Powered by **TICKETSNow**
THE POWER OF IT.

Ticket holders:

Looking to sell tickets quick? [Register now.](#)

"It's hard to know what normal is because there's never been a big rescue of fighting dogs to this level," McMillan said.

McMillan compiles the daily reports and does a monthly overall assessment on how the animals are doing. The results are compared to how they were when they arrived in early January and the very first evaluation done in Virginia.

McMillan said the February results were almost all positive.

"Right now it's very gratifying to see where we are," he said.

Two of the dogs are under court order to spend the rest of their lives at the sanctuary about 70 miles north of the Grand Canyon. The 20 others could find new homes, if they ever are considered well enough to interact with humans and other dogs.

And any dogs that don't meet the safety standards get to stay at Best Friends.

"We believe that the worst thing to do would be to kill these dogs," Best Friends chief executive Paul Berry said. "They all want to succeed and not giving them that chance, to me, is extremely cruel. It's very, very shortsighted thinking."

Best Friends' sanctuary sprawls over 3,700 acres just north of the Arizona-Utah border. Dogs, horses, rabbits, birds - pick a species - have their own area of the no-kill sanctuary where experts give care to the animals that need it and the others are sheltered until they can find homes. Vick's dogs have their own building and individual runs in "Dogtown," an area high in the canyons where the only sound is the barking of dozens of dogs.

While some seem like happy, normal dogs, others still show signs of the canine equivalent to post-traumatic stress disorder.

Shadow is still frightened of strangers.

Layla continues to bristle at the sight of another dog.

Little Red is friendly, but very wary of strangers and takes a while to trust people. Handlers believe she was used as a bait dog, her teeth filed to nubs so she wouldn't fight back when other dogs were trained to attack her.

Georgia's teeth were pulled out altogether, probably to keep her from attacking while she was bred.

Lucas, a heavily scarred male, is one of the friendliest. He loves visitors and jumps on his doghouse in anticipation when somebody starts to open his kennel gate. Lucas' tail wags like a propeller as he prepares to greet whomever with a big wet lick to the face.

"Most of these guys, we couldn't go near at first," said trainer John Garcia, who was part of the team that evaluated the dogs in Virginia before they were sent to the various groups. "They were so shy and so down and scared. Now they're just loving on us, coming up for attention - just very, very outgoing."

As friendly as he is, Lucas is one of the dogs that will never be up for adoption because of his violent past. The dozens of scars that cover his body are a clear indication that he was a veteran fighter, meaning he was good enough to keep being put back in the ring as spectators gambled on whether he would tear apart another dog.

Lucas will spend the rest of his life at the sanctuary. He gets several walks a day, he's fed and has shelter.

Nachminovitch said that sounds good to most people, but the dog will still be spending the rest of his life in confinement.

But McMillan said this is a chance to see whether loving care and training are enough to rehabilitate fighting dogs. He said the program could also be a valuable step in dispelling the notion that pit bulls are innately dangerous.

The instinct to attack other dogs will take a long time to erase - if it can be done. There was a fight when one dog was mistakenly put into a kennel where another dog was already being kept. Garcia said it was a simple mistake, and the dogs were quickly separated before either was injured.

Most of the dogs will remain isolated from each other for a while longer. McMillan said handlers have brought a few of the dogs - very carefully and on restraints - together already. Some of the meetings have gone well, others were quickly halted when dogs showed warning signs as they approached.

It's going to be a slow process.

"It could be years. We don't know, but we're willing to take care of them as long as it takes," Garcia said.

PETA feels such limited contact is wrong. Best Friends maintains it's better than the alternative.

On the Web:

Best Friends Animal Society: <http://www.bestfriends.org/>

People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals: <http://www.peta.org/>

The Associated Press