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Given Reprieve, N.F.L. Star's Dogs Find Kindness



Garrett Davis for The New York Times

John Garcia, a caregiver at the Best Friends sanctuary, tries to teach abused dogs to trust people.

By JULIET MACUR
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KANAB, Utah — A quick survey of Georgia, a caramel-colored pit bull mix with cropped ears and soulful brown eyes, offers a road map to a difficult life. Her tongue juts from the left side of her mouth because her jaw, once broken, healed at an awkward angle. Her tail zigzags.

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Another Chance for Vick's Dogs

Scars from puncture wounds on her face, legs and torso reveal that she was a fighter. Her misshapen, dangling teats show that she might have been such a successful, vicious competitor that she was forcibly bred, her new handlers suspect, again and again.

But there is one haunting sign that Georgia might have endured the most abuse of any of the 47 surviving pit bulls seized last April from the property of the former Atlanta Falcons quarterback [Michael Vick](#) in connection with an illegal dogfighting ring.

Georgia has no teeth. All 42 of them were pried from her mouth, most likely to make certain she could not harm male dogs during forced breeding.

Her caregivers here at the Best Friends Animal Society sanctuary, the new home for 22 of Mr. Vick's former dogs, are less concerned with her physical wounds than her emotional ones. They wonder why she barks incessantly at her doghouse and what makes her roll her toys so obsessively that her nose is rubbed raw.

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"I'm worried most about Georgia," said the Best Friends veterinarian Dr. Frank McMillan, an expert on the emotional health of animals, who edited the textbook "Mental Health and Well-Being in Animals." "You don't have the luxury of asking her, or any of these animals: 'What happened to you in your past life? How can we stop you from hurting?'"

"So here we are left with figuring out how to bring joy to her life," he said of Georgia, known to lick the face of anyone who comes near. "We want to offset the unpleasant memories that dwell in her brain."

Mr. Vick, once the highest-paid player in the N.F.L., is serving a 23-month sentence in a federal prison in Leavenworth, Kan., for bankrolling his Bad Newz Kennels dogfighting operation and helping execute dogs that were not good fighters. Dogs were electrocuted, hanged, drowned, shot or slammed to the ground, according to court records. Two mass graves with the remains of eight pit bulls were found on Mr. Vick's property in rural Virginia.

Pit bulls seized from illegal fighting operations are usually euthanized after becoming property of the government. The [Humane Society of the United States](#) and [People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals](#) recommended that Mr. Vick's dogs be euthanized, but many animal rescue organizations urged the prosecutors to let the dogs live.

The government agreed to give them a second chance after Mr. Vick agreed to pay \$928,073 for evaluation and care of all the dogs. They were seen by animal experts, who named the dogs, and were eventually dispersed to eight rescue organizations for adoption, rehabilitation or lifetime care in sanctuaries, where they have been neutered. Only one of the Vick dogs was euthanized for aggression against people.

Best Friends, which is caring for more dogs than any other organization, received about \$389,000. Many of their dogs are expected to be adopted after they are rehabilitated and matched with the right families. Vick's 25 other dogs are in foster care all over the country.

"This is a great opportunity to highlight the fact that the victims in the case are the animals themselves," said Rebecca J. Huss, a Valparaiso University law professor, animal law expert and court-appointed guardian for Vick's dogs.

Bay Area Doglovers Responsible About Pitbulls, or BAD RAP, which helped evaluate the dogs, has 10 in foster care. Donna Reynolds, the group's executive director, said, "There are dogs that are able to handle and survive the past with a good attitude, then ones that are going to be shut down and not take it anymore."

"Best Friends got the dogs that pretty much aren't going to do so well," she added, noting that those dogs included the known fighters and Mr. Vick's champion pit bull, Lucas, who, by court order, will live out his days at the sanctuary.

Once Abused, Now Pampered

Life at Best Friends is nothing like it was at Mr. Vick's property on Moonlight Road in Smithfield, Va., where many of the dogs were found chained to buried car axles. They slept on concrete. Their water, if any, was kept in algae-covered bowls. Most were underfed. Some showed recent lacerations.

Here, they live in a 3,700-acre sanctuary that is covered by juniper trees and sagebrush, and surrounded by canyons and red-rock formations. They have food called Canine

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Caviar, squeaky toys, fluffy beds and four full-time caregivers. The caregiver on the night shift curls up with the dogs for naps.

They are assigned to an area of the sanctuary called Dogtown Heights, what Best Friends calls a gated community. Vick's dogs have their own building with heated floors, sound-absorbing barriers and skylights. Each has an individual dog run because, for now, the dogs must remain isolated, for safety's sake.

Little Red is a tiny rust-colored female whose teeth were filed, most likely because she was bait for the Bad Newz fighters. Handlers cannot explain why loud noises make her jumpy.

Cherry, a black-and-white male, has what seems to be chemical burns on his back. His file at Best Friends says he loves car rides and having his backside rubbed. But like many of Mr. Vick's pit bulls, he is petrified of new situations and new people.

Oscar cowers in the corner of his run when strangers arrive. Shadow runs in circles. Black Bear pants so heavily that he seems on the verge of hyperventilation.

All but one of the Vick dogs at Best Friends wear green collars, signaling that they are good with people. But Meryl, who arrived with a rap sheet, wears a red collar.

She was aggressive toward the veterinary staff at a previous shelter. When Best Friends evaluated her in November, she lunged at a veterinary technician, snapping at him three times. By court order, she must stay at Best Friends forever.

Mr. Vick paid \$18,275 for the lifetime care of each of his dogs here but one. Denzel was deemed highly adoptable, so his fee was only \$5,000.

The actual cost for personnel and medical staff to care for the dogs, said Best Friends officials, is much higher at the sanctuary, a no-kill, nonprofit facility for 2,000 animals. For example, Denzel needed a blood transfusion to treat a tick-borne virus. Donations must make up the difference.

Bred to Be Friendly

John Garcia, the assistant dog care manager of Dogtown, which houses about 500 dogs, said pit bulls that are withdrawn or aggressive toward humans break his heart because they are bred to be people-friendly. "With most of these dogs, even Meryl, their actions are based on fear," said Mr. Garcia, who communicates with the dogs in soothing baby talk. "The biggest job we have with these guys is teaching them that it's O.K. to trust people. It may take months or years, but we're very stubborn. We won't give up on them."

Because the dogs are still adjusting to their surroundings, it is difficult to predict how many of them will become adoptable. They arrived Jan. 2 from Richmond, Va., on a chartered airplane, stressed after eight months in shelters. In initial evaluations last September, many lay flat and looked frightened. Now, many respond to caregivers by wagging their tails and giving sloppy kisses.

"They have improved by light-years," Mr. Garcia said, adding that it would take patience and a lot of time for these dogs to be happy and safe in an adoptive home.

Caregivers walk the dogs several times a day and spend time in their kennels, praising and caressing them. It is progress when a dog like Cherry does not need to be carried, because he is afraid to walk on a leash. It is monumental when Shadow approaches them instead of retreating.

"We want to get them to understand that being around people isn't necessarily a bad

thing; that we won't hurt them," Mr. Garcia said. "The worst thing we could do is push them too hard, too fast."

Mr. Garcia, an expert in working with aggressive dogs, said getting some of these pit bulls accustomed to other dogs would be the toughest task. Initially, 10 were evaluated as aggressive toward other dogs.

So far, there has been only one fight. Layla was put accidentally into the same dog run as Ray. She immediately attacked, biting his shoulder in a death grip.

One of their main caregivers, Carissa Hendrick, pried Layla's jaws from Ray. She said it would take a lot of positive reinforcement to teach these dogs to coexist.

"There's just so much we don't know about them, and that's frustrating," Ms. Hendrick said, adding that she wished she could talk to the men involved in Mr. Vick's operation to find out what these dogs have endured. "Oh, Ellen Belly, what happened to you?"

Ellen arrived at Best Friends overweight, looking more like a sausage than a fighter. She was a breeding dog but had spent time in the ring. One side of her face droops from nerve damage, but she is still affectionate and loves to offer her belly for rubs.

Lucas was Vick's champion, a 65-pound muscular brown dog with a face mottled with dark scars. He is so friendly and confident that his trainers suspect he was pampered.

"I bet you ate steak every day, didn't you, Lucas?" the caregiver McKenzie Garcia, who is married to John, said. "I bet they took care of you because you made them money."

Every Vick dog here has a Personalized Emotional Rehabilitation Plan. Caregivers rate each dog in several categories. How fearful was Little Red today? How confident was Black Bear? How much did Meryl enjoy life?

Recording the dogs' progress will help Dr. McMillan, the veterinarian, track their well-being. "DogTown," on the National Geographic Channel, also plans to follow the progress of several of Mr. Vick's dogs, including Georgia.

"The successful rehab rate for these kinds of dogs is unknown because nobody has ever studied it until now," Dr. McMillan said. "You might see an incredibly friendly dog, but does that dog's personality change over several weeks, over several months, after psychological trauma? Are they hard-wired to be aggressive, or can they change? What's the best way to work with them?"

The plan is to determine how to keep these dogs happy, even if a real home is not in their future.

Coping With Past Trauma

Whether Georgia will find happiness is a big question. Dr. McMillan said she exhibited behavior that might be coping mechanisms for past trauma.

Georgia gnaws on her doghouse. She flipped her bed over so much that her handlers removed it. When toys are around, she often ignores people. Georgia, who was called Jane at Bad Newz Kennels, was sold to Mr. Vick in 2001 to help start his dogfighting business. She is thought to be his oldest dog, but her handlers can only guess that she is about 7. Dogs' ages are usually estimated by examining their teeth, but she has none.

Having those teeth extracted, Dr. McMillan and other vets said, must have been excruciating. Even with medication, dogs are in pain after losing one tooth, which may take more than an hour of digging, prying and leveling to pull.

"These dogs have been beaten and starved and tortured, and they have every reason not to trust us," Mr. Garcia said as Georgia crawled onto his lap, melted into him for an afternoon nap and began to snore. "But deep down, they love us and still want to be with us. It is amazing how resilient they are."