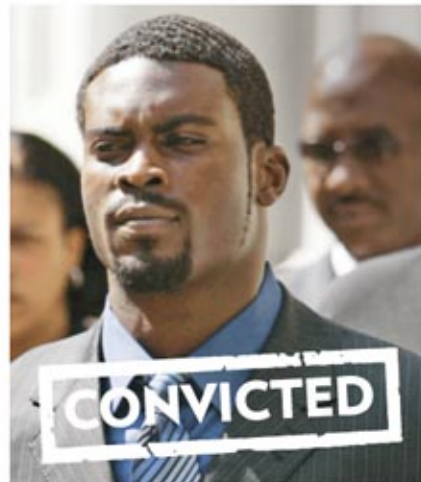


A HAPPY ENDING FOR MICHAEL VICK'S DOGS



Former NFL star Michael Vick is serving 23 months in prison for running an illegal—and incredibly cruel—dog-fighting operation. But 47 of the pit bulls Vick bred for killing have been granted freedom, and many are thriving **BY CHAMP CLARK**

LOVED AT LAST

Eager to please their owners, "pit bulls are the most resilient dogs," says trainer Tim Racer (with Donna Reynolds and five of Vick's dogs).

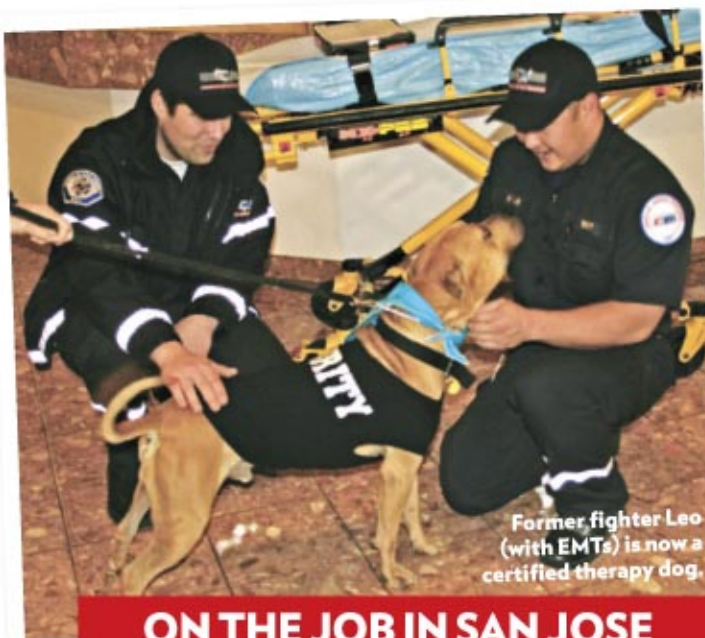


The police who raided the Bad Newz Kennels owned by Michael Vick—once the highest-paid star in the NFL—couldn't believe what they found: 49 terrorized pit bulls, many malnourished and nursing injuries while chained to old car axles scattered in the woods of Surry, Va. Investigators uncovered the buried remains of dozens of dogs that had been drowned or hanged, simply for being unwilling fighters. But justice was served. Last December federal judge Henry Hudson sentenced Vick, 27, to 23 months in prison. In what animal rights activists are calling a precedent-setting move, the judge also ordered Vick to pay close to \$1 million for victim restitution and

lifetime care and rehabilitation of the 47 surviving pit bulls. (One of the dogs rescued by police was later destroyed due to ill health, another because it was aggressive.) "These dogs are almost always euthanized," says Rebecca Huss, a Valparaiso University law professor and special guardian appointed by the court to evaluate and place each animal. "This is the first time on a federal level that dogs seized in a fighting operation have been given this kind of second chance."

One thriving beneficiary of the judge's compassionate decision is 2-year-old Hector, visibly scarred from his days at the dog-fighting operation but today basking in the affection he gets at Bad Rap, a pit-bull rescue orga-

nization in Oakland, Calif., one of eight groups chosen by Huss to rehab the former fighters. At his weekly training sessions, Hector learns the basic obedience and social skills denied him by Vick. "It's like a light has been switched on," says Donna Reynolds, who founded the group with her husband, Tim Racer, in 1999. "It's a complete turn-around." Hector has already been approved for adoption, though Judge Hudson has mandated a six-month waiting period before the dogs permanently move in with families. In the meantime Hector is free to romp and play. Says Racer: "If Michael Vick could see what's happening here, I'd hope he'd find it in his heart to say, 'Wow, look what they've done with my dogs!'"



Former fighter Leo (with EMTs) is now a certified therapy dog.

ON THE JOB IN SAN JOSE

"Leo was bouncing around like a caveman at a tea party," says Marthina McClay, founder of the Our Pack pit-bull rescue shelter in Los Gatos, Calif., of the battle-scarred 2-year-old male she took in last December. Two months later Leo, the only one of Vick's dogs she is working with, has transformed from fighter to gentle healer: Once a week he works as a certified therapy dog with stroke victims at a San Jose hospital. McClay says Leo relished learning the skills he needed for this role, like keeping still when an alarm rings or riding an elevator. "The patients are drawn to Leo and his lovey-dovey eyes," says McClay, who hopes one day to place Leo with a family. Hospital staff have already bonded with him. Says McClay: "They call him 'Dr. Leo.'"

THE GOOD LIFE IN UTAH

A muscular 65 lbs. with scars on his face, Lucas would never be mistaken for Snoopy. But at Best Friends Animal Sanctuary in Kanab, Utah, the pit bull finally has a chance to explore his inner beagle. "His favorite thing is to relax on top of his doghouse," says Michelle Besmehn, dog care manager at the new home for 22 of Vick's most damaged canines. "The dogs came here abused and scared, but Lucas never seems to feel sorry for himself." Some may be adopted, but most, like Lucas and Meryl, a female who snapped at a vet, will likely live on the 3,000-acre property for good. A few may even blossom into stars: The National Geographic Channel will follow the dogs on its series *Dogtown*.

Best Friends trainer John Garcia with a Vick dog named Meryl.

