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Exactly 10 Years After Michael Vick Raid, Rescued Dogs' Legacy Endures

Today, we salute the "Vicktory" dogs — heroes who changed the world's perception not only of fighting dogs, but also of pit bulls in general.

By Jillian Blume (<http://www.petful.com/author/jillian-blume/>) April 25, 2017





<http://www.petful.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/EdLittleRedSleeping3576.jpg>

Little Red was one of the rescued Vick dogs. All photos courtesy: [Best Friends Animal Society \(http://bestfriends.org/\)](http://bestfriends.org/)

Today, April 25, 2017, marks 10 years since a [police raid on Michael Vick's property \(https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bad_Newz_Kennels_dog_fighting_investigation\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bad_Newz_Kennels_dog_fighting_investigation) turned up dozens of pit bulls in hellish conditions. A federal raid followed several weeks later.

The professional football star's high-profile arrest – and the [horrifying accounts \(http://www.villagevoice.com/news/reminder-michael-vicks-dogs-were-shot-electrocuted-hanged-and-beaten-to-death-6702521\)](http://www.villagevoice.com/news/reminder-michael-vicks-dogs-were-shot-electrocuted-hanged-and-beaten-to-death-6702521) that came out in the weeks that followed – galvanized animal lovers, drawing widespread attention to illegal dogfighting and animal abuse.

In 2007, the misconception that pit bulls were irremediable, aggressive dogs had spread throughout the United States and Canada, putting the fate of the rescued dogs in serious jeopardy.



At the time of Vick's arrest, the general policy was to euthanize all dogs confiscated from a dogfighting ring. The so-called Vicktory dogs (<http://bestfriends.org/sanctuary/explore-sanctuary/dogtown/victory-dogs>) were the first group of fighting dogs ever to go to rescue groups, fosters (<http://www.petful.com/animal-welfare/so-you-want-to-become-a-pet-foster-parent/>) and then on to adoption. These dogs changed the perception of not only fighting dogs but also pit bulls in general.

And it was Vick's champion fighter, Lucas (<http://articles.latimes.com/2013/jul/10/news/la-ol-the-flip-side-of-a-fighting-pit-bull-20130710>), his face striated with scars, who would ultimately have the greatest impact on changing the policy from euthanasia to recovery. Instead of the aggressive, dangerous animal that people expected of a fighting champion, Lucas turned out to be an affectionate, sweet dog who loved everyone he met.

Several rescue organizations, such as PETA, infamous for its rigid stance on euthanasia of homeless animals in general, publicly recommended that all of the dogs be put down. Luckily for dogs like Handsome Dan, Cherry, Georgia, Lucas, Little Red and others, a group of determined rescue organizations stepped forward to save them.



<http://www.petful.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/JohnMeryl8280.jpg>

John Garcia of Best Friends Animal Society, shown here with Meryl, tells Petful it took time for the rescued dogs to “realize they were home.”

“Shy, Terrified and Anxious”

First, the dogs had to be evaluated. The ASPCA, BAD RAP (<http://www.badrapp.org/>) (an organization dedicated to “securing the future of the American pit bull terrier as a cherished family companion”) and 3 independent behaviorists developed a protocol for testing the dogs, even though the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) opposed it.

In the long run, it was these remarkable dogs who changed the HSUS policy regarding the treatment of dogs rescued from fighting rings. Previously, the HSUS mandated that all dogs rescued from a fighting situation had to be euthanized. A summit attended by several rescue groups in 2009 led HSUS to “agree that all dogs should be treated as individuals, and they are the true victims

http://blog.humanesociety.org/wayne/2009/04/meeting_of_the_minds.html) of this organized crime.”

“The assessments were difficult,” John Garcia, the emergency response manager for Best Friends Animal Society, tells Petful in an interview. “The environment shut them down, so we couldn’t see any behavior at all.”

The dogs would flatten their bodies to the ground, called “pancaking,” or curl up at the back of their kennel and refuse to move. The goal was to get the best gauge of their personality. To the surprise of the evaluators, they didn’t find aggressive dogs.

“The dogs were shy, terrified of people and anxious. A few of them were dog aggressive, and all of them were completely unsocialized,” adds Garcia. “In January 2008, we took on 22 dogs who had the most challenges.”

The Victory dogs revealed who the real monsters are in the dogfighting world — the humans who had tortured and killed these dogs for their own amusement and profit.

Because the dogs had been starved, beaten and trained to fight other canines to the death, one of the first steps the staff at Best Friends took was to assess them for dog aggression. Surprisingly, they discovered that many of the shy dogs really wanted to be around other dogs.

“When the dogs got to Best Friends and realized they were home, they started to decompress,” says Garcia.

Some dogs, like Cherry, might be playful inside, but when taken outside, completely shut down. Cherry would pancake, trying to make himself as small as he could.

“We introduced Cherry to Handsome Dan,” says Garcia, “and they immediately started playing and acting like normal dogs. They were able to relax and have fun.” This was an extremely important breakthrough. “If a dog can get along with other dogs, it increases their chance of getting a home.”

Little Red was one of the hardest dogs they worked with. She was so shutdown, she refused to come out of her run. Instead, she'd cower in the shadows all the way in the back, as far away as she could get from her caretakers. Her trainers would go into the run with her and sit there for hours, talking and reading to her.

Eventually, Little Red got closer and closer to her trainer, until she discovered that the touch of a human being isn't only about pain; it can actually feel really good.



<http://www.petful.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/georgiajohn1825.jpg>

Garcia with another rescued Vick dog, Georgia.

Changing Perceptions

Although the impression many had at the time was that a dog trained to fight would always be vicious and dangerous, for these 22 dogs the opposite was true. It was the dogs who were afraid of people, not the other way around.

The Victory dogs revealed who the real monsters are in the dogfighting world – the humans who had tortured and killed these dogs for their own amusement and profit.

For example, Lucas was one of the 22 dogs loaded onto the Best Friends rescue van. Lucas was notorious throughout dogfighting circles as being a fierce fighter, a champion. When Garcia stopped along the way to check on the dogs, he heard loud snoring coming from one of the crates. He tracked it to Lucas, who was sleeping so soundly that not even Garcia standing there woke him up. After everything Lucas had been through, he was one of the most relaxed dogs in the van.

Pit bulls rescued from fighting rings can recover, and they can forgive. For most, the sweetness of their souls cannot be broken.

These dogs had rarely if ever seen the sun, gone on a walk, played with a toy or slept on a soft bed, let alone experienced anything associated with family life. Many of them would pancake when put on a leash, trying to become as submissive and small as possible. These dogs had never felt safe in any environment, never experienced kindness or love from a human being. The caretakers and trainers who worked with them understood that the dogs would need time to heal at their own pace.

“Some of the dogs were able to be adopted very quickly,” Garcia tells Petful. “Some of them took longer to get their Canine Good Citizen (<http://www.petful.com/behaviors/akc-canine-good-citizen-certification/>) awards,” which the court required before the dogs could become available for adoption. The court decided that 2 of the dogs would spend the rest of their lives in sanctuary at Best Friends.

“For one of these dogs, it was for his own protection. Lucas was Vick’s main fighter and very famous. These dogs are sold for thousands of dollars, and we wanted to make sure he wouldn’t fall into the wrong hands,” says Garcia.

The other dog, Meryl, had a history of human aggression. Best Friends would be her forever home. Over the years, as she healed, she became confident and loving. “She has a great life with tons of attention from everyone here,” says Garcia. Not only does she get along with other dogs, but she also enjoys hanging out with the resident cats.



(<http://www.petful.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/meryl4991.jpg>)
Meryl has lived at Best Friends (<http://bestfriends.org/donate/sponsor-an-animal/meryl>) ever since her rescue 10 years ago.

Enriching Lives

The adopters who were lucky enough to bring home a Vicktory dog all said their lives were enriched immeasurably.

They learned that pit bulls rescued from fighting rings can recover, and they can forgive. They can still love people and come to trust them. Pit bulls, even those forced to fight to stay alive, are not inherently evil. For most, the sweetness of their souls cannot be broken.

Their abusers, however, are a very different story. Those involved in the dogfighting world have no sense of morality, compassion or conscience. They do not have “poor judgment,” as Michael Vick has stated (<http://www.cbsnews.com/news/michael-vick-i-blame-me/>). Rather, their behavior is intrinsically who they are and who they will continue to be.

Michael Vick walked out of jail and continued his life. “Playing another year is very important just for my psyche, just to get it out of my system, to go out with a bang,” Vick said in a 2016 interview (http://www.nj.com/giants/index.ssf/2016/06/michael_vick_wants_to_play_another_season_go_out_w.html). For his victims, these dogs will be recovering from his abuse for the rest of their lives.

The strength, joy and resiliency of these remarkable pit bulls made them all heroes. Ten years later, some have passed on. But we can all still learn a lot from each and every one.

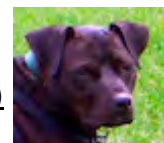
NEXT: Updates on some of the Vicktory dogs:



(<http://www.petful.com/animal-welfare/vick-dogs-2017/2/>)



(<http://www.petful.com/animal-welfare/vick-dogs-2017/3/>)



(<http://www.petful.com/animal-welfare/vick-dogs-2017/4/>)

