

THE LOST DOGS

MICHAEL VICK'S DOGS
AND THEIR TALE OF
RESCUE AND REDEMPTION

JIM GORANT



G O T H A M B O O K S

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Author's note: There are a few scenes in this book, particularly ones that re-create the lives of the dogs both before they were seized by the government and while they were living in shelters, that I obviously could not have witnessed or know firsthand. In those instances I've made every effort to present as close to a true version of events as possible based on conversations with witnesses, d

behavior and dogfighting experts, law enforcement officials, and shelter workers and by making extrapolations from legal documents.

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INTRODUCTION



An article I wrote about the Michael Vick dogs appeared on the cover of the December 29, 2008, issue of *Sports Illustrated*. In the weeks after, the magazine received almost 488 letters and e-mails about the story and the dog pictured on the cover, the most we got in response to any issue for that entire year. By an overwhelming majority the letters were supportive, but there were some detractors.

My greatest fear was a flood of complaints from people with friends or loved ones that had been injured or lost to pit bull attacks, but there were remarkably few of those. Most of the complainers fell into two groups. The first asked, “What does this have to do with sports?” A fair question, if you take the narrowest view of the subject. If all you want from your subscription are games and players and straight-up analysis, then that’s a legitimate gripe. I would argue, however, that what defines *Sports Illustrated* and has set it apart for more than fifty years are well-told stories that attempt to put sports into a larger perspective, to offer a deeper and broader view of how the people and events in question reflect and contribute to the larger social and moral makeup of our society. To each his own, I suppose.

The second complaint was more troubling. In its simplest incarnation it usually went something like this: “Why does it matter, they’re just dogs?” The more verbose in this camp might elaborate: “People are dying and starving every day and we’ve got bigger problems. No one cares if you kill cows or chickens or hunt deer. What’s different about dogs?”

What is different about dogs? I had not directly addressed the question in the article. On some level it seemed obvious to me, but at the same time I couldn’t put a satisfying answer to words. As I started work on this book, the question hung over my head. As I was interviewing experts, reading books on canine history and behavior, touring shelters, and talking to dog lovers, I processed a lot of the information through the prism of that question.

The answer, cobbled together from all those readings and conversations, took me back to the beginning. Men first domesticated dogs more than ten thousand years ago, when our ancestors were hunting for their meals and sleeping next to open fires at night. Dogs were instant helpers in our struggle for survival. They guarded us in the dark and helped us find food by day. We offered them something, too, scraps of food, some measure of protection, the heat of the flames. In an article about the origin of dogs that ran in the *New York Times* in early 2010, one expert on dog genetics theorized that “dogs could have been the sentries that let hunter-gatherers settle without fear of surprise attacks. They may also have been the first major item of inherited wealth, preceding cattle, and so could have laid the foundations for the gradations of wealth and social hierarchy that differentiated settled groups from their hunter-gatherer predecessors.”

Certainly, as man rose in the world, dogs came with us, perhaps even aiding the advance. They continued to guard us and help with hunting, but they did more. They marched with armies into war; they worked by our side, hauling, pulling, herding, retrieving. We manipulated their genetic makeup to suit our purposes, crossbreeding types to create animals that could kill the rats infesting our cities or search for those lost in the snow or the woods.

In return we brought them into our homes, made them part of our families. We offered them love and companionship, and they returned the gesture. From the start it was a compact: You do this for us and we'll do that for you.

Our relationship with dogs has always been different than it has been with livestock or wildlife. The only other animal that comes close is the horse, which has undoubtedly been a partner in our evolution and a companion. But a horse can't curl up at the bottom of your bed at night, and it can't come up and lick your face when you're feeling down. Dogs have that ability to sense what we're feeling and commiserate. There's a reason they're called man's best friend.

As for why our bond with them matters, there are reasons for that, too. If you hang around animal activists for a while, you'll inevitably hear repeated a famous Gandhi quote: "The greatness of a nation and its moral progress can be judged by the way its animals are treated." The idea being that in order to lift the whole of society, you must first prop up the lowest among its many parts. If you show goodwill and kindness toward those who cannot stand up for themselves, you set a tone of compassion and goodwill that permeates all.

To this day, I believe Donna Reynolds, one of the founders of Bay Area Doglovers Responsible About Pitbulls (BAD RAP), a rescue organization at the center of the Vick case, said it best. "Vick showed the worst of us, our bloodlust, but this [rescue effort] showed the best. I don't think any of us thought it was possible—the government, the rescuers, the people involved. We like to think we have life figured out, and it's nice that it can still surprise us, that sometimes we can accomplish things we had only dreamed of. We've moved our evolution forward. Just a little bit, but we have, and I'm happy to have been a part of that."

I'm happy to have witnessed the effort and told the story.

PART 1



RESCUE

April 25, 2007, to August 28, 2007

A BROWN DOG SITS in a field. There's a collar around her neck. It's three inches thick and attached to a heavy chain, which clips onto a car axle that's buried so one end sticks out of the ground. As the dog paces in the heat, the axle spins, ensuring that the rattling chain won't become entangled.

The dog paces a lot, wearing a circle in the scrubby weeds and sandy soil around the perimeter of the axle. She paces because there's little else to do. Sometimes a squirrel or a rabbit or a snake crosses nearby and she barks and chases it, or she lunges and leaps after the dragonflies and butterflies that zip and flutter past.

She flicks her tail at mosquitoes and buries her muzzle in her fur, chewing at the itchy crawly things that land on her. If she's lucky she digs up a rock that she can bat around and chew on, but otherwise there are just the weeds and the bugs and the hot sun inching across the sky.

She is not alone. Other dogs are spread around this clearing in the trees. They can see one another, hear one another bark and whine and growl, but they can't get to one another. They can't run, they can't play, they can't anything. They can get close to their immediate neighbors, stand almost face-to-face, but they can never touch, a planned positioning meant to frustrate and enrage them. For some it does; for many it simply makes them sad.

Out in the field are mothers, fathers, offspring, littermates. The families are easy to spot. There's a group of sand-colored dogs, some with pink noses, some with black snouts. There is a group of red dogs, some small black dogs, a few white ones, a few black-and-whites. A handful of other colors and shapes are mixed in.

All are pit bulls and many have that classic pit bull look, stocky and low to the ground, front shoulders higher than haunches and a wide muscular chest that dwarfs narrow hips, so that they look as if they're waiting for their backsides to grow into their fronts. Their necks are thick and hold up rectangular heads. Some are bigger, as big as seventy pounds, while another group is more compact, reaching maybe twenty-five pounds. These smaller ones are actually Staffordshire bull terriers, a close relative of the American pit bull terrier.

The brown dog has a soft face, with searching eyes and an expressive brow that furls into deep ridges and undulating rolls when she's scared or nervous or trying to figure out whether she needs to be either. Her uncropped ears rise from the top of her head until they fold over, but one of them folds differently from the other, so that it hangs lower, making her look as if she's eternally asking a question.

To help fight the heat, there's water spread about in large tubs, sometimes a little dirty but drinkable. Once a day a man comes to put food in the bowls. At least it's usually once a day. Sometimes two or three days go by before the sound of his all-terrain vehicle breaks the monotony. As he gets off the vehicle and makes his way across the clearing, all the dogs run to the end of their chains, barking and wagging their tails as if they're excited to see him. But when the man actually gets close to them, they tuck their tails and skulk away. Only after he has moved on do they creep back over to their bowls and eat.

They can't see anything beyond the perimeter of the clearing, but they are not alone. Another clearing lies through the trees where another fifteen or so dogs live on chains, and beyond that, at the

edge of the woods, is a small compound with kennels, freestanding pens, and four sheds. The buildings are small and painted pitch black, including the windows. One is two stories tall, and the men who own these sheds, who live and work here, they call that one “the black hole.”



A breeze stirs the trees—scrub pines and sugar maples, a few pin oaks. The lilt of songbirds mixes with the whine of cicadas and the low, singular whoooo, whoooo of a mourning dove. The summer heat draws moisture off the Atlantic, thirty miles beyond, adding the weight of humidity to the air.

Within the perimeter of each axle there’s a doghouse. Rough-hewn plywood structures, they provide something else for the dogs to chew on and claw at to while away the hours. They also offer a break from the sun but not much relief from the heat—just as in winter they stop the wind but don’t do much to protect against temperatures that can drop into the thirties.

Curled up in their little houses the dogs look and listen and sniff the air. They are incredibly intuitive creatures. They learn by watching—trainers sometimes let young dogs watch experienced dogs in action so they see how to behave. They can detect odors 100 million times more faint than people can. They can hear sounds at a broader range of frequencies than humans, and they can hear them from four times as far away. People who train dogs for search and rescue contend that dogs can hear a heartbeat from a distance of five feet, which gives them insight into the mood and disposition of the people and animals they come in contact with.

As pack animals, they are keenly aware of the behavior of those around them. One dog can tell when another is thinking and intending simply by observing the way he acts. When two dogs meet, there is a detailed ritual of movements and gestures. The way they hold their ears, tail, head, their posture. Everything means something. Attitudes, feelings, intentions, dominance, and submission can be established immediately. So can a challenge.

Dogs understand what’s expected of them. When people are around, dogs see what wins them rewards and praise and what leads to scorn. Something deep inside of them, woven into the very fabric of their being, a genetic impulse, compels them to please those around them. But sometimes, the things that men want from them cut against their natural inclinations, setting off an internal chain reaction of anxiety and uncertainty, triggering hormones and nervous system fluctuations. When they are extremely scared, dogs secrete a powerful musk that other dogs can smell from great distances.

The things they see and hear and smell have an impact on them, too. Studies have shown that if two mammals are placed side by side in boxes and the first one is given electric shocks, just by listening to the suffering the second one produces identical brain waves and nervous system activity; the trauma isn’t limited only to the animal that’s experiencing the pain.

Out in the field is the little brown dog with the floppy ear—none of the dogs know what’s happening around them, but they do know something isn’t right. They’ve seen things they are not supposed to see. They’ve heard terrifying sounds and they’ve smelled fear and pain drifting in the air. The brown dog lays her chin on the ground and exhales. Her brow folds into a furry question mark. The afternoon is fading and the heat has begun to fade too, but little else is certain.

Sometimes men come and take a few of the dogs away. Sometimes those dogs come back tired and panting from running and running. Sometimes the dogs come back scarred and limping. Sometimes

they come back looking the same, but acting completely different. Sometimes they don't come back at all, as if they've simply disappeared. As if they've vanished into a black hole.

IT'S NOT EASY TO get to 1915 Moonlight Road. Branching off of the two-lane country highway that curves up through the tidelands, Moonlight Road looks more like a driveway than a street, a narrow unlined stretch of blacktop that twists into an old-growth stand of trees. The houses along the road are sparse—worn trailers, single-story cabins and larger suburban manors pop up in clusters of two or three, separated by cornfields, woods, and open expanses.

Driving west on Moonlight Road, the house appears suddenly, its white shape set off against a tree line that rises beyond it. It sits close to the road, directly across from the Ferguson Grove Baptist Church (Pastor J. D. Charity), a white clapboard building without a cross on it that sits in a clearing. From the front, the white brick appears bright against the black roof. A peaked portico with long columns and large, arched windows give it a distinctive architectural twist. Inside there are five bedrooms, including a master with a fireplace and a hot tub.

A six-foot-tall white fence surrounds a yard thick with broad-leafed Bermuda grass. Outside the gate at the end of the driveway there's a camera and an intercom. Motion sensor lights hang on the garage. The flower beds are tidy and neat, dotted with trim young shrubs. In the backyard a boat sits on a trailer. There's an aboveground pool and a full-length basketball court complete with white painted lines and glass backboards that can be raised and lowered.

The house looks like any one of a half dozen others on the street, another newly risen McMansion that signals the country's burgeoning real estate economy and provides a plush home base for some happy, anonymous family. But the property extends well beyond the pool and the unmarked white fence. It twists back into the dense woods where several dozen dogs sit chained to car axles and fox sheds stand among the trees, nearly invisible from the road because they are painted pitch black.



Michael Boddie was still a teenager when he began dating a girl who lived across the courtyard at a housing project in Newport News, Virginia. Her name was Brenda, and by the age of fifteen she had borne the couple's first child, Christina. A son, named after his father, followed the next year, and then another son, Marcus, came four years later. By the time the pair married, in 1989, they'd added a fourth. That last child, Courtney, took the name Boddie, but the three older kids, who were ten, nine, and five, stuck with their mother's maiden name, Vick.

The family lived together in a three-bedroom apartment in a housing project in the downtrodden east end of Newport News. Michael Boddie did three years in the army, then found work as a painter and sandblaster at the shipyards. The couple's extended families helped raise the kids while Brenda finished high school then took a job, first at a Kmart, then as a schoolbus driver.

Boddie has insisted that he was around throughout his kids' lives, but Michael Vick has described him as something more like an uncle: an older male relative who helped support the family but came and went randomly and for varying periods of time. Vick has also said that his father struggled with drugs, and Boddie's history does show a drunk driving charge and a stint in rehab.

The kids, by most accounts, stayed out of trouble, at least as much as possible for someone growing up in the Ridley Circle apartments in a town that had been nicknamed Bad Newz. Sports were diversion. The Vick children spent a lot of time at the Boys and Girls Club of Greater Hampton Road. Michael, who everyone called Ookie, showed great athletic ability, first in baseball and then in football. He followed in the footsteps of an older cousin, Aaron Brooks, who was a star quarterback in high school, then at the University of Virginia, and in the NFL.

Four years younger than Brooks, Michael Vick went to the same high school to play for the same coach, Tommy Reamon, a former NFL player himself. After Vick's freshman season, that school, Homer L. Ferguson High, closed and both he and Reamon moved on to Warwick High. At Warwick Vick showed off the strong arm and blinding speed that would make him a star and earn him a choice of college scholarships. He picked Virginia Tech, in large part because it was relatively close to home.

After sitting out his first year to develop his game, Vick emerged as the Hokies' leader during his red-shirt freshman season in 1999. The first time he stepped on the field, he scored three touchdowns in little more than a quarter of play and went on to lead the team to an 11-0 record and the national championship game. His team lost that game to Florida State, 46-29, but Vick's renown only grew. During the season he set multiple records, finished third in the Heisman Trophy voting, and energized the sport with visions of a new type of player—a hyperathletic do-it-all quarterback who could win games with his arm or his legs or both. Suddenly everyone in football had a Michael Vick fixation. They were either watching the real Vick or looking for the next one.

The following season Vick did nothing to hurt his reputation, although an injury caused him to miss parts or all of three games, and the Hokies lost the one contest he sat out fully. Still, he guided the team to a 10-1 record and was named MVP of the 2001 Gator Bowl as he led his team to a win over Clemson.

Vick was now twenty and fully grown. At two hundred pounds and slightly less than six feet tall, he was thick yet compact. His large brown eyes and small wide nose were offset by a strong jaw that made it look as if he had an underbite. Topped off with a goatee, the total effect of these traits was to give Vick an appearance that, while handsome, could fairly be described as almost canine.

Although he had two years of eligibility left, Vick decided to skip the remainder of his college career and enter the 2001 NFL draft. He was taken first overall by the Atlanta Falcons, which signed him to a \$62 million contract and received an almost instant return on its investment. The next year, Vick's first as the full-time starter, he made it to the Pro Bowl and led the Falcons to the playoffs for the first time in four years. Vick returned to the Pro Bowl and the playoffs in 2004 and the Falcons rewarded him with a ten-year, \$130 million contract, making him the highest paid player in the league at the time. Another Pro Bowl season followed in 2005, and he flourished off the field, too, ringing up endorsement deals with Nike, Powerade, Kraft, Rawlings, Air Tran, EA Sports, and Hasbro worth multiple millions.

Like many young athletes, especially those who've grown up poor, Vick spent his money freely. He bought cars and jewelry and toys. There were numerous houses, including one in Atlanta, Georgia; a condo in South Beach, Florida; a place he bought for his mother in an upscale section of Sussex, Virginia; and another house he was building nearby. He paid for his father's drug rehab in 2004 and gave the old man a few hundred bucks every few weeks to keep him going. He supported a wide range of family and friends, handing out Escalades to his inner circle. He also purchased a fifteen-acre tract of land in Smithfield, Virginia, a small town in rural Surry County. The address was 1915 Moonlight Road.

THE RED DOG PULLS hard against the leash, straining to rush up the path and see what lies beyond. It is the first time she's been out of the clearing, off her chain and axle, in weeks. She is nervous though, too, and regularly looks up at the man holding her, trying to read some sign of what he has in mind. She sniffs the air for a hint, intermittently wagging and holding her tail down.

They emerge from the trees into a compound of kennels and small black buildings. The dogs in the kennels begin to bark, rushing forward to press their faces against the chain link as she goes by. Her tail and ears droop, as if they're being blown flat by the force of the barking. But she hasn't eaten in three days and her hunger drives her forward. She can smell food and hopes that she will be getting some.

The man steers her toward the biggest shed, the two-story one. As they step inside, the door swings closed behind them, and the sound of the barking becomes more distant, then dies down altogether. The man grabs a small rope that hangs from the ceiling in the corner of the room. He pulls it and with a loud squeak a staircase descends from above. The man carries the little red dog up.

At the top he flips a switch and bright lights flood into a small, open room with a square of carpet in the center, maybe sixteen feet by sixteen feet. The carpet is a light color, a sort of off-white, and there are dark blotches on it. It's not attached to the floor and the edges curl up a little. For the little red dog, the smells are overwhelming. There have been many people here, many dogs. The remnants of sweat and blood and urine and fear mix in the air, and the dog's insides churn with anxiety and concern.

She hears barking outside the shed, and in a moment there are noises downstairs. Another man emerges from the staircase carrying another dog. The red dog does not recognize this dog, but, like her, it's a female and it's about eighteen months old.

The man puts the red dog onto the carpet and the other dog is placed on the carpet opposite her. Both dogs sniff the air. The red dog licks her snout and shifts her weight from side to side. Instinctively they are drawn toward each other but the men get in between them. The one who brought the red dog up from the clearing stands over her, clapping and yelling, "Let's go, let's go, let's go!"

Two other men have come up the stairs, and they stand around the carpet. They begin to shout and yell well. The man puts his hand on the red dog's face and shoves her backward. She comes back toward him and he does it again. He grabs her by the muzzle and shakes her face from side to side.

The red dog remembers all the days she spent chained up in the clearing, face-to-face with other dogs she could not quite get to. Frustration and fear and anger and the instinctive need to defend her territory begin to stir within her. Her stomach turns with hunger. The men's voices mix with the riot of smells. The dogs outside begin to bark again. The other dog lets out a low growl, her own fear and aggression surging. The leashes go tight as the men back off and the dogs begin to pull toward each other. The little red dog lets out a strong bark that echoes off the plywood walls.



Dogfighting is everywhere and nowhere. The Humane Society of the United States estimates that there are forty thousand dogfighters in the country, and yet most people are untouched by it. They wouldn't know a pit bull if they petted one in the park, they never read about dogfighting in the local paper, and they've never been anywhere near an actual dogfight. The practice cuts across all sorts of demographic distinctions: age, race, class, economic status, education, profession. Dogfights have been uncovered at Ku Klux Klan rallies and at inner-city drug raids. Busts have netted unemployed urban teens and suburban professionals—teachers, doctors, lawyers.

Some of the mystery results from the varied faces of dogfighting. At the most basic level, it's a guy with a dog, some wannabe tough who wants to let his pet prove his manhood. These are often random clashes in alleys and empty lots that may have little riding on them but the owner's pride—and the dog's life. These owners have probably done little to prepare the dog for the match other than mistreating it to make it aggressive and maybe feeding it some drugs.

The next level up might be the guy who keeps a few dogs, trains them a bit, and puts them in prearranged fights. He's not running a business; it's more of a pastime, but he's trying to make a few bucks on the action. Those first two groups make up the vast majority of dogfighters, which is why they remain so hidden from view—they're small-time, random, and by their very ubiquity they blend into the woodwork.

Then there are the professionals. They have a full stable of dogs, thirty-five or more, which they raise for the specific purpose of fighting. They use elaborate training methods and equipment mixed with backwoods wisdom. They feed the dogs high-end food, supplements, and sometimes even steroids. When they get a winner, they breed it and sell the pups for high fees, hoping to establish known lines of fighting dogs that can fetch even more money.

The fights, arranged months in advance, ride on significant wagers, up to \$20,000 or \$30,000 per match, although they can sometimes shoot even higher than that, into the hundreds of thousands. Dogfighters need the long lead time to train their dogs, a six-week period of seasoning called "the keep" which not only gets the dog in shape but attempts to prime its aggression. The exact mix of drills and work-outs and even chemical supplementation is where a dog man, supposedly, shows his true skill, and so each man guards the elements of his approach as if they were ingredients in a sought-after recipe.

There are occasional off-the-chain fights, in which two dogs are simply taken off their restraints and allowed to go at it without any preparation or restrictions, but most clashes follow a general set of practices established more than a hundred years ago, the so-called Cajun Rules, which give all the fights a similar form. A neutral party holds a deposit from each fighter, usually half or one-third of the bet. Upon arrival the dogs are weighed and if one is overweight the fight is forfeited and the owner loses his advance. After the weigh-in each handler washes the other man's animal, to make sure there are no drugs or poison on the fur that could hinder his dog.

The pit itself is usually a square of anywhere from twelve to twenty feet, with low walls around it to keep the dogs inside. A carpet is laid on the floor to help the dogs get traction, and sometimes a light-colored rug is chosen to make the blood more visible. The dogs enter the pit with a referee and one handler for each. There are diagonal "scratch" lines in opposite corners, and the handlers hold the dogs behind the line. When the referee calls "Fight," the dogs are released and they charge toward each other.

The handlers remain in the ring, urging the dogs on. The dogs fight until one turns sideways and disengages, at which point the handlers take the dogs back to their corners. The dog that turned away is released and if it charges back toward the other dog, the fight continues. If it fails to reengage, or

unable to, the fight is over. Otherwise, the battle goes on until one of the handlers calls the match. can be over in ten minutes or it can go on for hours. When it's done the winning dog usually gets immediate medical treatment. The losing dog might. Or it might be killed.

Fights and dogs are celebrated through an underground network of magazines and Web sites. A secret world filled with coded language, clandestine meetings, and black market trade. Such publications are not necessary to carry out the fights, but the participants can't help but brag. Although many of the sites post disclaimers saying that they don't promote any illegal activities and that all the stories are fiction, they have provided peeks into the gruesome world of dogfighting. A now-defunct Web site for Keepem Scratchin' Kennels described a fight between Little George and Virgil: "Virgil started out fast and tore a gaping hole in Little George's chest. Within the first ten minutes it looked like he was going to put him away." As the dogs continue to struggle, heat becomes a factor and causes a turn of events. "Little George started coming back into the fight and got Virgil down for a little while. But the more George tried to put on Virgil, the worse Virgil bit him right back into the gaping hole that he opened in the beginning of the fight. As they were standing up battling it out, you could see the blood dripping out of his chest like you turned on the spigot." Eventually, the blood loss gets the best of Little George. "Little George had weakened and went down. He had a hole in his leg. Virgil was chewing on his head to get him off and it sounded like he was chewing on his knuckle bone."

Here's another, from the book *The Complete Gamedog* by Ed and Chris Faron, that describes two men trying to treat a dog after a fight, which gives an even more visceral sense of what these dogs are forced to endure:

She was so physically busted up that it was necessary to take the kennel crate apart to get her out of it. We spent the next hour or so desperately trying to save her, but nothing we did helped. [The other dog] had destroyed her face so badly that her sinuses were crushed, her whole face was pulsing up and down as she breathed and air was bubbling out of the holes of her muzzle and around her eyes. The last thing Jolene did before losing consciousness entirely was throw up an incredible amount of blood. We couldn't figure out how she could have swallowed so much. We carefully pried open her mouth and peered inside with a flashlight and it was then we saw just how badly she was hurt. There was a big hole between her eyes—big enough on the outside to stick a dime into, and this hole went clear through her skull, emerging in the roof of her mouth just in front of her throat. A thin trickle of blood was running down her throat, she must have been hemorrhaging throughout the fight. We sat there helplessly, watching our pride and joy take one last faltering breath, and then Jolene was gone.

And this one, from an academic study called "The Social Milieu of Dogmen and Dogfights" by Rhonda Evans and Craig Forsyth in *Deviant Behavior*, captures not just the fight but the overall atmosphere:

The handlers release their dogs and Snow and Black lunge at one another. Snow rears up and overpowers Black, but Black manages to come back with a quick locking of the jaws on Snow's neck. The crowd is cheering wildly and yelling out bets. Once a dog gets a lock on the other, they will hold on with all their might. The dogs flail back and forth and all the while Black maintains her hold. . . .

Snow goes straight for the throat and grabs hold with her razor-sharp teeth. Almost immediately, blood flows from Black's throat. Despite a serious injury to the throat, Black manages to continue fighting back. They are relentless, each battling the other and neither

willing to accept defeat. This fighting continues for an hour. [Finally, the referee] gives the third and final pit call. It is Black's turn to scratch and she is severely wounded. Black manages to crawl across the pit to meet her opponent. Snow attacks Black and she is too weak to fight back. L.G. [Black's owner] realizes that this is it for Black and calls the fight. Snow is declared the winner.

Back on the second floor of the black shed, the little red dog rushes across the pit. The other dog charges toward her. They're on a collision course with each other and a battle that can end only with teeth and blood and pain. It's only a few steps across the ring, but at the last minute each dog veers to the side, so they don't quite meet nose to nose. Instead they circle to the right, keeping an eye on each other and passing so close that they bump. The other dog rears up and puts her paws on the red dog, who recoils momentarily, then lurches forward. They continue circling but gradually slow until they've almost stopped, shoulder to shoulder, heads turned toward each other, sniffing.

The red dog feels something pull at her neck and suddenly she's being propelled backward across the rectangle. The man with the leash is yelling at the red dog and her tail drops. To determine which of their dogs have the right stuff, fighters regularly test or "roll" the dogs, putting them in brief matches to see which have the instincts and aggression to succeed. This little red dog is being rolled and it's not going well.

Instead of facing them off across the pit, the men now place the dogs face-to-face and hold them there. The dogs bark and struggle but the men keep forcing them together. Soon, the frustration and anger and proximity do their job and the dogs begin biting at each other. The dogs rise up on their hind legs as their front legs tangle in the air and their teeth tear at flesh. The other dog is a little taller, so she gets her head on top of the red dog's and nips at the red dog's ears and clamps down with her mouth on the back of the red dog's neck. The red dog's front legs fall back to the ground and she snaps at the other dog's foreleg. The two of them tumble to the ground. They bounce up and dance around each other, snapping and bounding and rolling across the carpet. The men have gone silent. They're unimpressed. Neither dog has shown any real aggression or skill.

The red dog is carried halfway down the steps and then tossed to the ground. The other dog is not so lucky. She is tossed from the top of the stairs and rattles down the steps, landing with an awkward sound. She lets out a squeal and hops up but will walk on only three legs. One of the men hoses the dogs off, then puts them into empty kennels. There's still no food or water. The red dog paces in a small circle, then lies down. Every five or ten minutes the men bring a few dogs out of the shed and a few more in.

Before long nine dogs sit in the kennels around the red dog or stand tied to trees in the compound. Some of them have puncture wounds on their snouts or forelegs and they lick at the blood and whine. It should not be surprising that so many of them seem to have failed. One experienced law officer estimates that 80 percent of the dogs, even those raised in a professional fighting operation, won't win even scratch. That is, they won't even cross the line and engage the other dog.

Dog men don't have much use for dogs that won't fight, that don't show that instinctive prerogative to go after any other dog they meet. Such dogs represent lost income—it costs a lot to feed and house them—and so those dogs are usually eliminated.

The Bad Newz men emerge from the shed and stand talking. The red dog and the others wait in the shadows. Two of the men pull coveralls on over their clothes. One of them retrieves an old nylon leash and a five-gallon bucket out of the shed. He fills the bucket with water. The red dog sniffs the air. The smell of the food sitting across the compound is stronger than ever and she whimpers for something

eat. But the men won't even look at her or the other dogs. They move quickly and keep to themselves. ~~The red dog can sense the tension in the air, and the anxiety spreads among all the dogs, which alternately sit and pace. A few pull at their leashes and let out little half howls of protest.~~

One of the men comes toward the dogs. He grabs the one that had been in the rectangle with the red dog and fastens the old nylon leash around her neck. He picks her up and carries her over to two trees that stand next to the two-story shed. The other man ties the leash to a two-by-four that has been nailed between the trees. Once the leash is secure, the first man boosts the dog a little further up and lets go.

For a moment, the dog lifts upward, her back arching and her legs paddling the air. Her head spins as she looks for the ground. Then her upward momentum peters out and she begins downward. Four pounds of muscle and bone accelerate toward the earth. The rope pulls. The dog's head jolts to the side and with a single yelp, she is dead.

The other dogs in the yard spring to their feet: the ones that had been brought up from the clearing that morning, the ones that lived in the kennel, the ones inside the shed. They bark and howl and run back and forth, pulling at their leashes or bouncing off the walls of their enclosures.

Even as they do, the other man approaches a second dog, one that had been injured and that now lies meekly on the ground. He carries him to the bucket and then holds his back legs in the air. One of the other men takes the dog by the scruff of the neck and plunges his head into the water. The dog shakes and flails, splashing water out of the bucket, but he is unable to shake free and within a few minutes his body goes limp. He's tossed into a wheelbarrow.

In all, four dogs get the bucket and four the leash, although not all of them are as lucky as the first dog. Some of them swing from the rope, gasping and shaking, eyes bulging, blood trickling from the corners of their mouths as they slowly strangle. Even when they are finally cut down, they are not quite dead, so they too have their heads stuck into the bucket.

Still, this is not the worst of it. This is not what happened to the red dog.

A BLACK DOG WITH brown specks runs free. Her name is BJ and she's a border collie-golden retriever mix. As she moves across the grass, her ears flop and jangle. When she catches up to the bounding tennis ball she's chasing, she knocks it down with her paws and then clamps her jaws onto it. She prances back across this suburban Maryland yard and drops the ball at the feet of the man who threw it, Jim Knorr.

Knorr is a big man, with wide shoulders and a broad chest. His handshakes are nearly full-bodied affairs, as he almost lunges into them. As he does, his strong chin juts forward and his mouth creases into an easy smile. His receding hairline adds to the sense of openness about his face, as if he's a right up front—forward and forthright.

It's an odd countenance for someone who's spent his life lying, or as they call it in law enforcement, working undercover. Knorr is a senior special agent with the USDA's Office of the Inspector General, a position he has held longer than anyone else—ever. That's because he's never put in for a promotion and whenever one has been offered he's turned it down. He never wanted to give up “the greatest job in the world,” being a field agent. “There's no better feeling,” he says, “than catching the bad guys.”

It's far from what Knorr imagined for himself growing up in Prince George's County, Maryland, the son of a Navy engineer and a nurse. At the University of Maryland he studied agronomy and golf course management, and after school he landed an internship at Columbia Country Club in Chevy Chase.

At the course, Knorr had two basic responsibilities. The first was to drive the grounds at dawn, rounding up and burying all the birds that had died overnight from eating pesticide-infected worms. After that he would check each hole and make sure there was nothing in the cup, a chore made necessary after a prominent female member had reached into the first hole to retrieve her ball and pulled out a used condom that had been deposited there overnight. For this he had to wake up at 5:00 A.M. He understood the concept of paying his dues, but still.

One day he told his older brother, Michael, about his professional frustration. Michael, a Secret Service agent, suggested he look into the Department of Agriculture. Not many people realized it but the USDA had its own investigative unit, and Jim, with his agronomy background, might be perfect for it. Jim made a few calls and finally spoke to the man who ran the department. Knorr was told he would need to get a criminology degree. So he returned to the University of Maryland and one year later he had a second diploma. He then pestered that USDA official so relentlessly, “the guy hired me just to get me to stop calling.”

In the early days he ran sting operations designed to catch people using USDA-issued food stamps to buy drugs and launder drug money, and he threw himself into the work. Although he was a typical suburban dad who lived in a tidy house with his first wife, Debbie, and their two kids, he let his hair and beard grow and set off to work in the morning in an old green army jacket.

He developed two cover stories to explain how he got the food stamps. Sometimes he would claim that he worked for the printer who produced them, and other times he told drug dealers that his girlfriend worked at social services, and she swiped them. Working undercover, he once bought a kilo of heroin for \$100,000 in food stamps, then busted the dealer and tracked the stamps to see where they

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