

## My Sportsman: BADRAP

# The caretakers of Vick's dogs are the real heroes

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By George Dohrmann

*Sports Illustrated will announce its choice for Sportsman of the Year on Dec. 3. Here's one of the nominations for that honor by an SI writer. For more essays, click [here](#).*

If one were to pick the anti-Sportsperson of the Year, it would be the easiest of choices: **Michael Vick**. Say what you will about the misdeeds of **Tim Donaghy**, **Pacman Jones** and **Isiah Thomas**, but those three have nothing on Vick, the admitted dogfighter and puppy killer. It is fitting then that my Sportsperson(s) of the Year comes from among those having to clean up Vick's mess.

There are 31 dogs once owned by Vick currently housed in shelters around Virginia, another three in upstate New York and 14 in Northern California. The people who care for those dogs daily deserve some recognition, and they are my choice for Sportsperson(s) of the Year.

**Tim Racer** and his wife, **Donna Reynolds**, are among those currently caring for dogs confiscated from Vick's kennel. They run an organization called Bad Rap (Bay Area Doglovers Responsible About Pit Bulls). People have strong opinions about Pit Bulls. Many believe the breed should be banned in the United States; others (like Racer and Reynolds) remember when it was America's most popular dog.

They believe Pit Bulls are gentle creatures at their core. Set aside your feelings on Pit Bulls for a



Racer (left) and Reynolds (with Honky Tonk) are caring for dogs once owned by Michael Vick.

Photo courtesy of Annie Truitt

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moment and consider only this: Racer and Reynolds awake every day and try to "give these dogs the life they should have had," Racer says. "People use the word 'rehab' but we don't. We say 'healing.' We are fixing them physically and then emotionally by giving them food, water, basic training, socialization and structure."

Racer and Reynolds have worked with animals in various positions for more than a decade. Both are into found art; they simply don't like to see things thrown away. In 1999, they started Bad Rap after charting the increase in abandoned Pit Bulls on the streets and in shelters. They speak at conferences and hold Pit Bull-specific training classes in the Bay Area. "We're not bleeding hearts," Reynolds says. "We know that there are certain dogs that have to be euthanized. But some can be healed, fixed up, and then we can find good homes for them."

When I visited Racer and Reynolds recently at their craftsman home on a quiet street in Oakland, Calif., I was greeted at the door by a blind, white 10-year-old Pit Bull named **Honky Tonk**. When the couple brings foster dogs into their home, Honky Tonk, one of the first dogs they rescued, is the first dog introduced. "He is so stable that other dogs just relax around him," Reynolds says. While I interviewed the couple, Honky Tonk licked my hands and arms and eventually climbed up on to the ottoman near me and nestled into my lap. Soon, he was snoring.

I don't know if any of Vick's dogs can ever been as gentle as Honky Tonk. It may be that most of them can't be "healed" completely, that they will be put down once Vick's case concludes. But I like that Racer and Reynolds and others in New York and Virginia are tending for these animals no matter how much time they have left. They are cleaning their bedding, giving them Kongs (toys), clipping their nails and making them feel loved.

Canine experts say one reason Pit Bulls are such good fighters is that their desire to please their owners is so strong they will do whatever is asked of them. Michael Vick didn't deserve that level of commitment. Racer, Reynolds and the others now caring for the dogs do. They also deserve to be Sportsperson(s) of the Year.

*Agree with this selection? Give us your pick for Sportsman [here](#).*

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