

BY RUTHANN ROBINSON

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CROWN POINT | A dog psychologist said he's trying to give 15 rescued pit bulls a fighting chance to be adopted.

Maybe a poor choice of words, given that the canines came to the Lake County Animal Control Center in May after police busted what they said was a dog-fighting ring at a Gary firefighter's Calumet Township home.

But Curtis Scott's heart is in the right place.

The certified "canis familiaris" (or domesticated dog) counselor from Chicago has been training center workers to help socialize the rescue dogs -- at no charge to the center.

It's working. Three of the dogs have been placed and two more have homes waiting for them next week.

Scott's methods are simple.

He rewards good behavior and ignores bad.

To get the often hand-shy dogs comfortable with human interaction, "We present our hand underneath their chin with a treat," Scott said.

Workers bring the pit bulls in two at a time into a room for about 30 minutes of play time.

As Petey and Ivey jumped all over each other, playfully trying to tackle each other to the floor, Judy Bonaventura marveled at how far the dogs have come.

"When we first started we kept a Taser in here in case they started fighting," said Bonaventura, rescue coordinator at the center. "Now it's been replaced with a can of Cheez Whiz."

Scott rewards the animals for playing nice by squirting a morsel of the

processed cheese food into their mouths. Soon, the animals are jumping all over him begging for a treat.

But Scott is judicious in his Cheez Whiz use.

"Sit," Scott urges.

When the dog jumps up, Scott ignores him.

Scott said every breed is different in their style of play.

"This play in a doggie park would be considered aggressive because a lot of dogs don't play this way," Scott said, nodding at Petey and Ivey tussling. "This is normal play for a pit bull. They play very rough. They're like sumo wrestlers."

Progress being made

Dog psychologist Curtis Scott is working with 15 pit bulls believed to have been used in a dog-fighting ring. Three of the dogs have been placed and two more have homes waiting for them next week. The basis of Scott's method involves rewarding good behavior and ignoring bad.