

## Out of the Wild

It's hard to imagine them wild, these dogs that gingerly take treats from human fingers. Sometimes, a kind of emptiness in their eyes reminds us they were once strangers to our world. Less than a year ago, these basenjis lived as a feral pack. Today, after months of rehabilitation, they sit on command.

Last January, officials rescued the pack of 33 dogs from a field in Wimauma, and handed them over to a basenji rescue group, Basenji Rescue and Transport. The dogs have spent months learning how to live in civilization – adjusting to things like garage doors and human touch. Although most of the basenjis have already been adopted, 10 of them still live with Seminole-based Pam Hamilton, the Florida coordinator for Basenji Rescue and Transport. Among them are Ali, a red-and-white basenji with long legs and a habit of boxing with his paws, and Hogan, a tricolor who loves showing off his ability to “sit.”



*Ali, one of the rescued basenjis, relaxes in Pam Hamilton's backyard on December 20.*

All the dogs are striking: sleek-coated animals with curled tails, prick ears and almond-shaped, kohl-rimmed eyes. They still carry the regal bearing of their Egyptian ancestors, who were prized by the Pharaohs and immortalized in hieroglyphics. Even the Great Pyramid of Khufu depicts the curly-tailed dog as early as 2700 B.C., according to Susan Coe in her book "The Basenji: Out of Africa to You." Basenjis are known as a barkless dog, but they possess a medley of vocalizations including snarls, yodels, and occasionally a short woof resembling a bark. They also howl. Sometimes, the members of this pack tilt their noses skyward and bay an eerie sound that's a cross between a wolf and a fire siren.

The 33 rescued basenjis had more in common with wolves than most dogs. For four years, they lived without human contact, fenced into an abandoned 5-acre field. Males like Pogo, a muscular basenji with a fluffy tail and one wild blue eye, may have survived by killing their competition, Hamilton theorizes. Smaller males didn't make it. They lived outside the rituals of domesticated dog life: no squeaky toys, dog beds, vet visits or baths. But they did know about

kibble. Their owner, James E. Holland Jr., occasionally dropped off huge bags of Purina dog food. Neighbors worried about the dogs, especially during the cold weather, says animal services spokesperson Marti Ryan. When temperatures plunged in January, the pack took shelter in deep burrows it had dug in the earth under piles of leftover construction debris.

That's when Hillsborough County Animal Services intervened.

It was a cold, dark day. At 3 p.m., it felt like night. Officials struggled to corral the dogs, shadow shapes that streaked across the field and hid in above-ground concrete drains or packed together for protection.

"This was a siege, and they knew it," says Ryan, who helped with the rescue.



*Once a timid puppy, Hogan is now one of the friendliest pack members.*

The dogs didn't know they were being rescued. All they knew was fear.

In the shelter, the fear returned every time they heard the hundreds of other dogs bark, every time carts rattled down the hallway, every time they bumped into a metal dog dish. Six-month-old Hogan flattened himself under his cot and growled whenever someone came by. He was one of the smallest male dogs in the pack and would have been eliminated by the larger males if no one had rescued him. But he didn't know that.

Volunteers fed the basenjis treats and fell in love. Jackie Sieg volunteered with Basenji

Rescue and Transport while on vacation from Indiana. She had no intention of adopting a dog until she glimpsed Big Daddy, a 40-pound, red-and-white basenji with a leonine personality. She kept thinking about him. But he wasn't ready for a home just yet.

When shelter workers placed crates inside the kennels, the basenjis crept inside to hide. They didn't know the crates would transport them to Hamilton's property to be rehabilitated. That's where rescue dogs face their inner demons, Hamilton says.

Hamilton didn't start out as a basenji-lover. After her two beloved, well-trained Samoyeds died, she decided no other dogs could live up to their perfection. So she went for the bad boys of the dog world: basenjis. Basenjis are smart, independent and mischievous. They can also be destructive, ripping up furniture or carpeting if they're bored or left alone. After adopting two of her own basenjis, Hamilton fostered dogs through Basenji Rescue and Transport. But this year, her dedication to the breed was tested when the rescued pregnant females gave birth to 29 puppies, temporarily leaving Hamilton with a total of 51 feral basenjis to foster and re-home.

While Hamilton and her father took turns bottle-feeding four puppies from an orphaned litter, the adult wild dogs settled into the kennels on her property. Her home was a training ground for the dogs, a secure and quiet place to confront their fears. One by one, Hamilton stroked them with soft towels until she was able to massage them with bare hands. Within a week, Hogan stopped growling. Today, he's the friendliest dog in the pack.

For a feral basenji, home is a warm burrow. The dogs took turns digging under an old oak tree while others sat nearby for moral support, eyes squinted against flying dirt.

"It's all about teamwork," Hamilton says.

Some of the dogs didn't stay in their new burrows for long. After a couple of months, Big Daddy was ready to move into his permanent home with Sieg.

"He's a real joy," says Sieg, describing him as "easy going" and "mellow."

He lets her wash his face, brush his teeth and even clip his nails. He sleeps with her every night.



*Pam Hamilton rewards the rescued basenjis with treats on December 20.*

Hamilton's 10 remaining rescues aren't ready for pedicures just yet, but they're getting close. On Hamilton's property, a chain link fence still separates the rescued basenjjs from the tame dogs. If not for the fence, nobody could tell the difference. The once-feral basenjjs blink sleepily in shafts of sunshine and rummage for acorns in the dirt. Portal, a lanky tricolor puppy born from a wild mother but raised by Hamilton, is fascinated with the feral pack. When Hamilton isn't looking, Portal sneaks into the "wild"

side. Maybe, as Hamilton says, the puppy appreciates the orderly hierarchy of the pack. Or maybe it's because she remembers where she came from.

Either way, Hogan knows how to take advantage of the situation. He gets Portal to fetch him things from the tame side. Sometimes she'll slip him a favorite ball through the chain link fence.

Nine months after being rescued, the basenjjs jostle for space to greet guests at the gate. Hogan and Ali are the only ones brave enough to press cold noses onto visitors' feet, camera lenses and even ballpoint pens. Ali stretches out his paw and boxes the unfamiliar pen. Hogan bites it, hoping it's a new bone. The

more skittish dogs keep a safe distance between themselves and the pen, jumping back at the slightest noise.

In a strange world, the dogs find comfort in rituals. Hamilton keeps things orderly, especially dinner routines. At dusk, she puts the dogs in separate kennels to avoid mealtime chaos. She pours kibble into 10 paper bowls, which make less noise than metal dishes so the dogs aren't afraid of them. Outside, a basenji rattles the bars of his kennel.

"Patience!" Hamilton calls out. "They know what time it is."



*Pogo's talent is jumping.*

Patience isn't in the basenjis' vocabulary. Hogan and Pogo whine.

Ali sticks a paw through his kennel, pleadingly. Even Hamilton's Arabian stallion Hhari (spelled with two H's), who usually stomps placidly in the corner of his pasture, peeks his head over the fence to see what the excitement is all about. Unable to stand the delay, Pogo leaps 6 feet in the air and launches off the side of his kennel. Jumping is one of his talents.

For the dogs, it's just another meal. For Hamilton, it's a training opportunity. She enters every kennel and wraps a leash around the dogs' bodies before they eat, so they'll associate leashes with positive feelings. Chiku, a nervous female, freezes at the touch of the leash. Her tail slinks between her legs.



*Hamilton with Hogan.*

"They act like they're broken with a leash on," says Hamilton, coaxing a stiff-legged Chiku to walk toward her dinner bowl.

After the dogs have finished their kibble, it's time for a reward. Every night, they crowd around Hamilton as she tears up the paper bowls and hands them bits to shred. Basenjis delight in shredding things. A few of the dogs flop on the ground and chew the bowls between their paws. Others retreat behind the oak tree with their trophies.

“Oh Hogan, what was wrong with that piece you dropped on the ground?” asks Hamilton, handing him a bigger portion.

It is now dark. The basenjis are still busy investigating small rustling sounds in the yard – except for Ali, who curls up next to the fence, as close to the tame side as he can get. It’s almost time for him to enter our world.