

# Open wounds: The tattered lives of a pit bull rampage

**'It's OK. I know these dogs.'**

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Brooks Foley heard a soft whimper and stopped still in the hallway. The sound was barely audible at first over the hiss of a shower, but it grew louder and louder until it was a heartbreaking sob.

His 10-year-old son was falling apart.

Four months had passed since the rain-soaked November afternoon outside of Cary when a neighbor's three pit bulls attacked Nick Foley. The dogs tore pounds of flesh from his arms and legs. They broke bones, slashed nerves, spilled half of his blood onto the wet grass.

With painstaking work, trauma surgeons had saved Nick's life and therapists had helped him regain much of the use of his body. His spirit, it seemed, had recovered as well: Most of the time he acted like the same goofy 5th-grader he had been before the attack.

But he wasn't the same. Chunks of muscle were missing from his limbs, leaving bone-deep divots papered over with grafted skin. The left side of his face bore two thick, half-moon scars where his cheek had been ripped open like a tent flap. And a specialist had just told the family that Nick's right hand, the one he used to hold a pen and throw a baseball, might never work properly again.

It was too much. In the isolation of the shower, unable to shield his eyes from the damage, Nick cried out:

"If it's not going to get better, why should I have this arm? I want to chop it off. I wish I could set it on fire."

Brooks understood. The dogs had gone after him, too, savaging his legs and right forearm so badly that he had retreated. He still suffered from flashbacks, tremors and a tormenting, complicated guilt. Sometimes he cried so hard that he couldn't move.

Brooks went into the bathroom and tried to comfort his shivering son, to make him believe that everything would

be all right. He just wasn't sure he believed it himself.

So it went throughout the family, throughout the entire stunned neighborhood. The trauma of that day changed everyone it touched, ending friendships, straining family bonds, casting a cloak of fear over a once-relaxed northwest suburban community.

Much of the story was untold before now.

And it all began with a knock on a door.

On the drizzly afternoon of Saturday, Nov. 5, Jourdan Lamarre came to the doorstep of the Foley house.

She was a spirited 10-year-old with coffee-colored eyes and a pageboy haircut who lived across the street. She asked if Nick could help her sell Girl Scout candy and wrapping paper. Just a few more buyers and she'd earn a prize.

"Only go to homes you know," cautioned Polly Foley, Nick's mother.

That was just about all of them. The neighborhood, an aging collection of ranches and two-stories a mile north of Cary, was the sort of place where someone would plow the next-door driveway just to be nice, or drop by to chat over a cup of coffee.

In 1998, Brooks and Polly Foley bought a beige split-level on Hunters Path as their first house, thrilled to finally sink roots in a community. Life had been a whirl from the moment the two devoted Catholics had met at Gonzaga University in Spokane, Wash.

He was from Virginia, the son of a career Marine, cool and brainy on the surface, compassionate and vulnerable underneath. She was from Nebraska, earthy and striking, with untamable black curls and a boisterous laugh that could fill a room.

They had married their junior year and two years later had their first child, Maureen, a witty, red-haired girl. Two more children—slender, introspective Alex and chunky, attention-grabbing Nick—soon followed, and the growing family moved wherever Brooks' software engineering job led them.

It was here, in McHenry County, that they finally grabbed hold of the suburban dream. They got the house, the back yard, even the dog—a pitch-black Labrador retriever mix named Java, a gift from a family friend. A dog seemed like a natural addition: Practically everyone in the neighborhood had one.

That included Scott Sword. A former tavern owner who hustled odd jobs for a living, he was tall and bulky, carrying 320 pounds that was more brawn than fat. Despite his intimidating size, he often came across as an overgrown kid, his voice crackling with boyish enthusiasm whenever he told a story.

Sword lived one street away from the Foleys, on Hawthorne Drive, in a shoebox of a house that seemed barely large enough for him, let alone his partner, Cathy Doyle, their son and daughter and a pit bull named Good Girl.

Sword got the dog eight years earlier, when a stranger entered his bar and offered him a puppy. The 8-week-old with a rust-colored coat was no purebred—it was later determined that she was a mix, perhaps with a splash of the Italian hunting breed Cane Corso in her background—but she was adorable. Sword and Doyle had no reservations about taking her into their home.

They named her Good Girl for her even temper and unwavering obedience. She was always around when Nick dropped by to play with Sword's son, Max. The boys had been good friends for about a year and a half, riding

bikes or playing Nintendo, and Good Girl seemed to accept Nick as one of the family.

Always looking to pick up extra money, Sword eventually mated Good Girl with a neighbor's pit bull across the street. In October 2004 she had seven floppy-eared puppies, and Sword and Doyle sold five for about \$90 each. They kept two white-coated pups for their kids, naming the female Stella and the male Petey, after "The Little Rascals" mascot he so strongly resembled.

Nick loved the dogs' frenzied energy. He and Max would play with them, coaxing them to leap up and snatch sticks the boys dangled in the air. The puppies even came to follow Nick's commands, meekly accepting a tap on the nose and a stern "No" when they tried to seize his Popsicle.

Nick's parents knew of pit bulls' reputation for violence and were nervous about Nick playing with them. But they accepted his reassurances that the dogs were well behaved.

What they didn't know, what Nick didn't know, was that Petey was developing a temper as he grew. He was barking and snapping at strangers, behavior that continued even after he was neutered.

In October, when Petey was a year old and a solid 75 pounds, a trainer dismissed him from obedience school, saying he was too volatile for a group lesson. Doyle brought him back for a private session, but the trainer, believing Petey was showing very aggressive tendencies, refused to take the leash. Doyle vowed to the trainer that if Petey didn't improve, she would have the dog destroyed.

One week later, Jourdan came to the Foleys' house. Homebound all day because of the rain, Nick was eager to join her. He slipped a hooded jacket over his T-shirt and sweatpants and bolted outside.

About 4:20 p.m., ducking raindrops, they came to Scott Sword's place. As they walked up the driveway to the side door, Jourdan would later recall, they heard growling. She hesitated but Nick reassured her.

"It's OK," he said. "I know these dogs."

He didn't, of course.

Pit bulls have a legacy of violence in their genes, and even some who think the dogs aren't inherently aggressive compare them to loaded guns.

They first appeared in the 19th Century when English gamblers, seeking an ideal specimen for the dog-fighting pits, combined the strength of a bulldog with the endurance of a terrier. The resulting mix, refined over time, was short but incredibly muscular, its tapered head equipped with powerful jaws. Above all, the dog was "game": It had the will to keep fighting until death.

The pit bull made its way to America, where blood sport enthusiasts marveled at its tenacity. In his memoir, dogfighter George C. Armitage wistfully recalled a 1916 match in which "the side boards of the pit were covered with blood, and the dogs were wrestling and tumbling all over the pit, with never the sign of a turn, or a let up in the speed."

That hostility was meant to be directed solely at other animals—owners routinely killed pit bulls that attacked their handlers—but experts say that over the last 20 years, drug dealers, gang-bangers and macho types have sought out "man eaters" to protect criminal enterprises or act as intimidating status symbols.

Kennel clubs recognize purebred strains such as the American Pit Bull Terrier and the Staffordshire Bull Terrier, but mixed breeds that share their characteristics are also generally called pit bulls. Combined, the dogs killed 76 people between 1979 and 1998, more than any other type, according to a study in the *Journal of the American*

Veterinary Medical Association.

Defenders say that's due more to popularity—there are perhaps 4.8 million in the U.S. today, among the most of any kind of dog—than to any built-in ferocity.

Randall Lockwood of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, who has studied dangerous dogs for three decades, said the vast majority of pit bulls are docile, but others are descended from hard-core attack dogs. If an owner hasn't tracked the lineage of both parents, he said, "Who knows where the breeding stock comes from?"

Sword knew nothing about Good Girl's background or that of the pit bull that fathered Petey and Stella. But aside from Petey's occasional belligerence, Sword had never seen any problems. As Nick and Jourdan approached his door, which was closed but not latched, he was watching TV with the dogs stretched out nearby.

A small fist rapped on the door. It opened a crack.

Instantly, the tiny house was a riot of barking so loud and stabbing that it hurt Sword's ears. All three dogs scrambled toward the door, their nails clicking and sliding on the kitchen's linoleum floor.

As Good Girl and Stella slipped through the doorway, Sword managed to tackle Petey. He felt a flash of relief until the dog whipped its head around and snapped.

Sword's thumb was nearly severed. He lost his grip, and Petey broke free.

Outside, Jourdan and Nick ran screaming when the first two dogs exploded through the doorway, followed seconds later by Petey. Together the animals knocked Jourdan down, tore through her two jackets and savaged her waist and left leg.

Nick, who had made it behind a tree, returned to reach into the storm of teeth and claws, trying to pull his friend to her feet.

"Stand up! Stand up!" he shouted.

Frozen with fear, Jourdan would not move.

"No!" she said. "No! No!"

Nick tried to go for help as Sword, bleeding heavily, peeled the dogs off the girl. Jourdan scrambled to her feet and ran away, and in a blink, Petey was on Nick's heels. The boy didn't get 20 feet before all three pit bulls took him down.

Sword tried again to pull the dogs away, even biting Petey's face so hard that he broke off the gold cap from a tooth. But the animals seemed lost in a blood lust, wriggling from Sword's grasp and clamping onto Nick's arms and legs.

Sword lifted Nick in a bear hug and turned in circles, trying to keep him out of the dogs' range, but they leaped at the boy, tearing bits of flesh with every jump. As Sword tired, the animals latched onto Nick's arms. Sword felt Nick's bones snap.

Exhausted, Sword slipped on the grass and toppled over. He rolled onto Nick, trying to protect him, but the dogs kept boring into the boy, stripping muscle from his arms and legs. Suddenly, though, they disappeared.

Sword lay there, falling in and out of consciousness. Then from beneath his body came a small, spookily calm voice:

"Mr. Sword, could you please get off me?"

Nick was left facedown in the mud. He felt no pain as the grass beneath him turned red. He was thinking that if he sat up and tried to touch his arm, his hand would pass through like vapor.

*Am I a ghost?* he wondered.

The idea jolted Nick into silent panic. Another thought fluttered through his head:

*Am I going to Heaven or Hell?*

Polly was wondering where her son was and thought that somebody needed to round him up.

The Foleys had 6 p.m. dinner reservations at a Schaumburg fondue restaurant to celebrate Alex's 13th birthday. It was about 4:40 p.m., and the light was slipping away fast.

Polly peered through the big living room picture window to Jourdan's house across the street. An ambulance and fire truck were parked in front. Maybe Ed Lamarre, Jourdan's father, had thrown his back out again.

"Nick doesn't need to be there," Polly told Brooks. "Why don't you go get him?"

Ed Lamarre had dialed 911 after Jourdan had come home screaming, her left leg flayed open. The paramedics had responded quickly, but the girl, in shock, didn't tell them about Sword and Nick.

Brooks knocked on his neighbor's door. Ed Lamarre answered, staring without expression as Brooks asked for his son.

"He's not home?" Lamarre said. "Jourdan's just been bit by three dogs on Hawthorne."

Three dogs on Hawthorne. The pit bulls.

Brooks began walking on numb legs, then broke into a trot, his eyes darting left and right. He turned the corner onto Hawthorne and through the gloom saw a massive human shape sprawled on a lawn.

Brooks knew it was Sword. But an instant later he noticed the dogs gnawing on the ankles of someone who lay underneath the big man. They were tugging at a pair of sweatpants as if wrestling a chew toy.

As Brooks peered into the murk, his mind swirling with fear, the faintest outline of a thought formed in his head. The ankles, those sweatpants ...

*Nick?*

But before his brain could complete the idea, before he could call out or take a step, the dogs charged. Without a sound, they were on him.

Good Girl clamped her jaw around his right forearm, digging deep into muscle as the other dogs bit his legs. He punched Good Girl square in the face repeatedly, but she only growled and tightened her grip.

"Stop!" Brooks screamed. "Stop!"

Until that moment, no one else in the neighborhood had seen what was happening. Some heard barking and shrieking but figured it was only the sound of kids and dogs playing.

Brooks' shouts finally roused their attention. Debby Rivera saw the dogs and went to the end of her driveway, banging a heavy frying pan with a metal spoon. Gerd Gerdes and Jim Dunn ran to the skirmish with baseball bats and swung hard at the pit bulls' heads.

"[The dogs] were possessed," Rivera recalled. "[The bats] would knock them down, and like cartoon characters, they would shake their heads then go right back to biting even worse."

The pit bulls ripped at the men's legs. At last, though, the dogs retreated a few yards, making wide circles around the bodies lying in the grass.

As the injuries piled up, paramedics at Jourdan's house, unaware of the carnage on Hawthorne, called the 911 dispatcher to request a sheriff's deputy.

"Hi," the 911 dispatcher said to a sheriff's department operator. "I need you for a dog bite victim."

"Okay," the sheriff's operator said. "We don't handle dog bites. Animal Control does. They do the reports for those."

"What about if it's a case where..." The 911 dispatcher paused. "You don't handle them at all?"

"We don't handle animal complaints at all. It's all Animal Control."

"OK. I'll pass that on," the dispatcher said.

As Gerdes and Dunn stood guard, Brooks remembered the ambulance parked at the Lamarres' house. He wrapped what was left of his shirt around his mangled arm and staggered home to get help.

The half-thought that had been forming was gone. That wasn't Nick on the lawn. It couldn't be. His son was still out there.

Reaching his house, he opened a side door and shouted, "Go find Nick! Go find Nick!" Then he crossed the street and slumped down on the bumper of the ambulance that had come for Jourdan. He was pale, breathing heavily. His jeans were shredded. Deep wounds criss-crossed his arm.

Polly moved toward her husband, but he put up a hand and yelled once more for her to find their son. The pit bulls were on a rampage, he said, and Nick was missing.

Polly rushed to Hawthorne Drive, screaming Nick's name in a voice she didn't recognize. More than a half hour had elapsed since the attacks began. A woman who had happened upon the scene in her SUV was on the phone with 911 dispatchers when she saw Polly walk past.

"Lady! Lady!" the woman called out. "Will you please get in my truck?"

Ignoring her, Polly moved toward the shapes on the lawn. One of them had short legs. The thick brown hair was matted with rain and blood. Polly's eyes traced the familiar curve of the hairline and the straight line of the little nose, a near match of her husband's.

"Oh my God," she cried. "That's my son, that's my son, that's my son..."

She saw Nick's back rise and fall and knew he was alive. He slowly turned his head and his left cheek flapped open.

Polly, always squeamish at the sight of blood, willed herself not to faint.

"Mom's here, Nick," she called out. "I'm not going to leave you. Mom's here."

Before she could get closer, two of the pit bulls returned. They circled Sword and Nick, sniffing at them, but locking their eyes on Polly. She slowly stepped back. The dogs left, silently vanishing into the darkness.

Polly collapsed on her knees and whispered a desperate prayer.

"You gotta help me, Jesus. You gotta help me."

By 4:50 p.m., paramedics had realized there were more victims and made a second request for help from the sheriff's department.

McHenry County Deputies Kyle Mandernack and Ed Maldonado were asked to respond to a dog bite on Hawthorne Drive. Routine business, they thought. But six minutes later, when they arrived at Sword's house, they saw men with baseball bats, horrified neighbors and, on a lawn, two bloody figures.

The Cary Fire Department and ambulance crews were already there. Matt Hanus, who lived three blocks away, was using his pickup truck to barricade the dogs in Sword's house, where they had retreated. Hanus revved the engine and honked the horn whenever one appeared in the doorway, trying to frighten it back inside.

Paramedic Sue Pencava was first to reach Nick. She asked him if he was in any pain. He said no.

Pencava was amazed. She'd seen many terrible injuries on the job and knew full well how the body reacted to shock. But Nick's calm was beyond any explanation she could imagine, save one.

"I just felt that God had taken him to a special spot away from all the pain," she said later.

Handguns drawn, the deputies emerged from their cars and devised a quick plan: If the pit bulls stayed in the house, they'd wait for animal control. If the dogs came out and offered a clear shot, they'd try to kill them.

The deputies jumped into the bed of the pickup truck, switched to heavier weapons—a slug-firing shotgun and a CAR-15 assault rifle—and waited.

With the front yard momentarily clear, the paramedics loaded Sword into one ambulance, and after rolling Nick in a sheet, lifted the boy into another.

"Where are you taking him?" Polly demanded.

"Who are you?" one of the paramedics asked.

"I'm his mother."

"Is he allergic to anything?"

"No."

Polly had only a moment to try to reassure her son, telling him she would see him at the hospital, before the paramedics slammed the doors and pulled away.

For 45 minutes, the pit bulls scuttled in and out of the house, venturing only a few feet from the doorway before turning back under a barrage of air horns and sirens. Finally, Petey rushed the truck.

"I have to take this shot!" Mandernack shouted, pulling the trigger. A 2-inch lead slug tore through Petey's chest. Wounded, he lurched away.

The other pit bulls charged. Maldonado shot Stella, and she reeled into Sword's backyard and crumpled to the ground.

Mandernack fired, hitting Good Girl. She ran down Hawthorne Drive before a Cary police officer shot her again. She fell down but struggled to get to her feet.

"It was still growling and snapping and showing its teeth, the whole nine yards," Mandernack recalled. "When it got up, that's when I took the final shot and put it down completely." The only dog left was the injured Petey. Mandernack soon found him one street away, pitifully scratching at a front door as if asking to come inside. Mandernack killed him with a shotgun blast.

The echo of the final shot died away about 5:43 p.m., almost an hour and a half after Nick and Jourdan had knocked on Sword's door.

A knot of people formed in the middle of Hawthorne Drive, their faces illuminated by police spotlights. Six of their neighbors had just been taken away by ambulances. One of them, they had heard, might die.

They asked police repeatedly for more information and traded eyewitness accounts. They told a gaggle of reporters that their neighborhood was friendly and close-knit, but away from the cameras the first stirrings of discord surfaced.

Most of them had known Sword's dogs. The pit bulls had never been the subject of Animal Control complaints, and some insisted they had always seemed sweet-tempered, wagging their tails around other people and pets.

But with the blood still slick on the lawn, others contended the dogs had sometimes appeared uncontrollable, roaming unleashed on Hawthorne as Sword unsuccessfully tried to wrangle them inside.

A chill had descended with the night. Nobody was sure what had happened, or what might come next. There were still plenty of dogs in the neighborhood.

And some of them were pit bulls.

The ambulance bearing Nick sped toward Advocate Good Shepherd Hospital near Barrington. He was there within 16 minutes, wheeled into the emergency room with blood soaking through his sheet.

Dr. Steven Rivard, a seasoned ER veteran, had stayed past his shift to determine whether Nick's injuries were serious enough to warrant a transfer to a Level One trauma hospital, which handles the most desperate cases.

He unraveled Nick's bandages and gasped.

The answer was obvious. Good Shepherd wasn't set up to handle this. Nick would have to go to Advocate Lutheran General in Park Ridge, the closest hospital with a major trauma center.

First, though, the doctors and nurses stabilized Nick. They put an IV line beneath his collarbone—his arms were too damaged—to give him fluids, blood and painkillers. They cleaned his wounds and wrapped him tightly in soft bandages so that only his mouth and eyes remained uncovered.

Nick remained quiet. He was awake, alone and terrified, but his composure astounded the men and women trying to save his life.

"He didn't say, 'Where am I going? Where's my mom?' all the things he should have said," Rivard recalled.

As he was pushed from the ER on a gurney, Nick opened his eyes, looked up and said: "Thank you."

The doctors and nurses waited until the ambulance had left. Then they walked to an empty bay, closed the curtain and wept.

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