

the Animal Insider

A FREE PUBLICATION FROM ANIMAL OUTREACH, INC. • FALL 2008



Guilty by (Breed) Association

By Carla D'Errico

In many areas of our state, a conversation is taking place about how to reduce dog attacks on humans and other dogs. In some of these discussions, breed specific legislation is becoming the proposed—even endorsed—solution. A breed specific law is one that is based on the breed of a particular dog, as opposed to the conduct of the specific dog. These laws are overwhelmingly targeted at American Pit Bull Terriers, American Staffordshire Terriers or other "pit bull-like" breeds.

The number of fatal dog attacks on humans in the United States rose from 30 in 2006 to 35 in 2007, with Pit bulls committing 53% of those attacks in 2006 and 60% in 2007.

Meanwhile, pit bulls constitute only 2 to 9% of the overall dog population in the USA. Proponents of specific breed bans and restrictions say these measures will help stop the violence, others question whether this legislation is the answer, citing inconclusive studies, loving pit bull pets, and the role of the pet owner in the problem.

Why Pit Bulls?

Every dog breed has traits specific to that particular breed. Pit bulls have historically been bred for their fighting prowess. The breed originated in Britain in the 1800s, when bull dogs were used in the gambling sport of bull baiting, a method of attacking bulls that was eventually outlawed by British Parliament. After the outlaw of bull baiting, dog breeders began a search for an aggressive breed that could be used for sport dog fighting. They bred bull dogs with terriers and created a breed that was characterized by aggression, a high pain tolerance, bravery, loyalty, and affection for people. These were the early ancestors of today's American Pit Bull Terriers and American Staffordshire Terriers.

As with all breeds, breed characteristics appear to a greater or lesser degree in each individual animal. Not all pit bulls will exhibit these traits, and some may exhibit more than others.

An Owner's Role

Pit bulls can be aggressive by nature, but when properly trained and managed, they can also make loving, loyal family pets. The key is to be aware of the breed's characteristics and know how to control them. Laura Pakis, a dog trainer with ACME Canine in Lewis Center, includes pit bulls as a group of breeds in a category called "high caliber dogs." According to Pakis, "(these dogs) are independent thinkers who are attentive to details." These tendencies can be useful if controlled. For instance, these animals can alert their owners to intruders; however, if not managed properly, it can be dangerous if the dog believes the mail deliverer or a neighbor's child are a threat.

In This Issue

Ask Greg & Bobb

Shadows of the Night

Calendar of Events

Neutered

Homeward Bound:
Adoptable Animals

continued on page 3

continued from page 1

The fact that some pit bull owners are unaware of their pet's inherent temperament is not lost on Dave Shellhouse, Field Supervisor and Court Liaison for the Franklin County Department of Animal Care and Control. In his work investigating dog fights he has found that many pit owners seem surprised when their dog attacks. "Nine out of ten (owners) say their dogs have never done that before, that they didn't expect that," Shellhouse states. Kim Stambaugh, an animal control officer for the city of Westerville also must routinely deal with uneducated pet owners who end up surprised by their animal's behavior. "It's crazy to let the dog run loose. Trust the pet and you'll get shocked. Learn the liability factors and keep the dog fenced for the animal's and the neighbor's sake."

Many of these animals are starved, beaten, or neglected by their owners in order to hone their aggressive instinct.

Greg Schneider, a central-Ohio based trainer with BarkBusters Home Dog Training, has worked with pit bull owners seeking to increase control over their animals. The stereotype surrounding the dogs provided motivation to have complete control for both themselves and the sake of their neighbors. "If a lab were running at a child on a bike," says Schneider, "they probably wouldn't think that much of it. But if they saw a pit bull running at [them], the child would probably freak out." The highly intelligent nature of the dogs makes them easy to train, and showing excellent control and restraint over your pet should ease any concerns in your community.

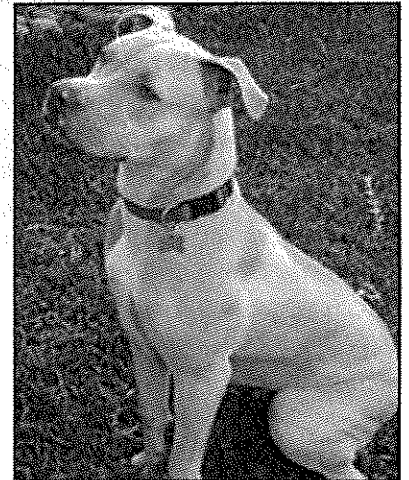
Unfortunately, the experience of a well-trained, and loving pit bull is countered by other pet owners who are specifically training them to act out on their aggressive tendencies. "The reason these dogs get bad reputations is because many of their owners believe it's macho to have a dog that is protective and barks at people, looks tough and strong. And so they purposely encourage aggressive behaviors in these dogs but they don't have control over them," Pakis states. "If you're training a protection dog, you build their confidence to be aggressive on command but they also are aware that they can't make that decision on their own. Many people who want a protection dog don't realize this, or maybe they do realize this but just don't care."

For some pit owners, the desire to have an aggressive dog leads directly to animal abuse. Many of these animals are starved, beaten, or neglected by their owners in order to hone their aggressive instinct. The national animal rights organiza-

tion People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) acknowledges that pit bulls stand out as the most abused of all dog breeds in the United States. It is because of the abuse PETA staffers have witnessed that PETA supports a ban on the breeding of pit bulls, as well as a ban on pit bulls themselves. The only caveat PETA includes is that all living pit bulls who are well cared for in responsible, loving homes should be allowed to live the remainder of their lives in peace.

A Complicated Solution

Dog attacks and animal abuse that results from pets who are improperly cared for are real community issues that need real solutions. Proponents of breed specific legislation believe that reducing the number of aggressive breed dogs will reduce the number of attacks on humans and other dogs. Opponents, such as the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (ASPCA), disagree. They note that there is no conclusive evidence that breed-specific laws make the community safer, and cite a 2003 study of the effectiveness of a Prince George's County, Maryland pit bull ban. In the study, a task force recommended repealing the ban based on the high cost per year to enforce it (\$250,000), the lack of evidence that public safety had improved, and the fact that other non-breed-specific animal laws already covered all potential violent incidences. The ASPCA supports broad-based breed-neutral policies that hold pet owners responsible for the actions of their animals among other solutions.



Animal control officers witness both sides of the debate firsthand. "I can see the positive and negative of both sides," Stambaugh states. "Having the law available gives you the ability to remove problem dogs. However, non-problem dogs have to be removed, too." Stambaugh continues, "A dog is not considered vicious until it kills someone. The question is, was it vicious before? What about prevention? Where do we draw the line?"

For more information:

ASPCA pit bull breed information:

http://www.asPCA.org/site/PageServer?pagename=pets_pitbull

Pit Bull Rescue Central (includes a link to all breed specific legislation either passed or under consideration):

<http://www.pbrc.net/breedspecific.html>

