



BULLY BREEDS

Truth or Consequences

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Pit Bulls: Reality versus Fear-Driven Reputation

We should begin with a quick understanding of the name “Pit Bull”. Pit Bull is not a registered breed. This name is generically used to encompass any dog who shares characteristics with over eleven American Kennel Club and United Kennel Club registered breeds, such as the American Staffordshire Terrier, American Pit Bull Terrier, Staffordshire Bull Terrier, Miniature and Standard Bull Terriers and the American Bulldog. Because these breeds branched from the British Bull-Dog, bred for the English bull-baiting sport, these dogs will be referred to as “bully breeds” throughout this article.

Despite the bad press and controversy, bully breeds have sweet temperaments. They just want to be with their human guardian all of the time. In fact, they are known for their affinity towards children. After testing the temperaments of over 185 dog breeds in 24 years, the American Temperament Test Society rates American Pit Bull Terriers and American Staffordshire Terriers above 80%, which is higher than the national average, concluding that bully breeds have the best overall temperament. Bully breeds are often used for search and rescue, ambassadors for bite prevention courses and as therapy dogs. Most recently, they were asked by NASA to assist in the shuttle tragedy. Some of the more popular bullies, which have been a part of our American culture are: “Nipper”, the RCA dog; “Stubby”, the United States Army sergeant during World War I, who held a German spy captive until U.S. troops arrived; “Petey”, The Little Rascals’ companion; “Tige” of the Buster Brown Shoe Company; and “Spuds Mackenzie”, of Bud Light.

Although originally bred to fight bulls and other dogs for human sport, bully breeds were never bred to be human aggressive. In fact, they are admired world-wide for their undying love for their human family. Bully breeds, by nature, are wonderful family pets because they are great with children; although bully breeds can look intimidating to those unfamiliar with dogs, they are known NOT to be good watchdogs because they greet most people with loving affection. Bully breeds are intent on getting what they want. Whether a warm spot on the bed or bulldozing through the forest on a search and rescue mission, these dogs are persistent. Because of this drive, the bully breed is not for everyone. He needs a committed guardian, who will be consistent in his training and will provide him with daily exercise.

Best Friends Animal Sanctuary’s dog expert, Sherry Woodard, says “more people need to learn about the breed and make sure these dogs get into the right hands so we can change the reputation of pit bulls. In the right hands, pit bulls are fabulous dogs.”

Core Issues: Drugs, Dog-Fighting, Abuse and Lack of Knowledge/Training

With the recent horrific stories of dog attacks in the press, it is evident that dogs are not always being paired up with the responsible guardian. Katie Dinneen, director of animal care at the Peninsula Humane Society in San Mateo County, California and president of Bay Area Doglovers Responsible About Pitbulls (BADRAP) states that “unethical people have not only tolerated aggression toward people, but have encouraged it and have been breeding for it... these people have taken an element of (bully breeds) and turned it on people”.

Backyard breeders are specifically breeding for more aggressive strains for dog fighting, drug dealing and macho status symbols. Dinneen says there are “others – ignorant, not really mean people – who think it’s okay to have Pit Bulls guarding their business property”. She explains that bully breeds should not be used as guard dogs because “once these dogs start something, they don’t stop”.

Jean Donaldson, founder of, and instructor at, the San Francisco SPCA Academy for Dog Trainers, and author of many dog books, tells us in The Culture Clash, that there is an “incredible stigma attached to dogs who bite, as though they have character flaws and are qualitatively different from dogs who have never bitten. They are not. Biting is natural, normal dog behavior” (James & Kenneth Publishers, 1996). Any dog can bite or attack; after all, they are animals. According to Julie Richard, a writer for Best Friends Magazine, “Dachshunds and Pomeranians have killed infants; cocker spaniels and St. Bernards have ripped into children’s faces; even Labs and golden retrievers have been involved in

fatalities.” (Best Friends Animal Society, 2004). The American Veterinary Medical Association conducted a joint study with the Center for Disease Control recently and found that the top breed that was responsible for the most fatal dog bites, over a 20-year period, changes over time based on what breed is popular. Dobermans topped the list, then Great Danes, Rottweilers and now Pit Bulls. Something other than breed is responsible for attacks. These and other reported dog attacks involved any, or a combination, of the following: uneducated humans, dogs being provoked, dogs attacking out of fear or protection, or dogs who were abused.

Donaldson communicates that “biting and threat displays are how dogs settle both minor and major disputes and defend themselves from any perceived threat they cannot opt not to flee from. In dog culture there are no letters to the editor, slanderous gossip and backstabbing, guilty feelings, democratic institutions or litigation lawyers. There are growls, snarls, snaps and bites”.

Many professional dog trainers and behaviorists, including The National Geographic Channel’s The Dog Whisperer, Cesar Millan, site that it’s the guardian who is consciously or unconsciously creating opportunities for dogs to misbehave. That’s why it is so important to understand that the first step in dog training is to educate the guardian. Here in Atlanta, Your Best Friend™ shares wisdom from many pet trainers and behaviorists, which helps educate guardians how to be more responsible pet guardians.

“Not every time a dog bites it’s the dog’s fault,” says Judge Judy Sheindlin, when speaking about a case, where a 12 year old boy was bitten by a Standard Poodle; the boy antagonized the dog by riding his skateboard downhill purposefully in the path of the dog’s guardian, who was walking her dog on a short leash.

“Dog guardians tend to have an extreme head-in-the-sand attitude regarding the potential for biting in their own dogs. They have never done any active anti-aggression training. All dogs must be acknowledged as potential biters”, explains Donaldson. “The potential payoff is that we could, starting today, reduce the number and severity of dog bites by facing up to the problem: dogs are animals, and animals bite. Dogs are seen by many as being dangerous only if really pushed, like a pillow is dangerous only if you really go out of your way to cook up a smothering scene. Dogs, like other animals, are dangerous unless you actively intervene to make them otherwise.” Regarding euthanizing dogs that have bitten, “it is not the dog’s doing”, notes Colin Tennant, an expert dog trainer and canine behaviorist. “I don’t believe dogs are born bad. They may have strong innate drives that can run counter to human wishes, but that is still a dog behaving normally. We choose to own the dog—he has no say in the matter or how he will be brought up—so the responsibility is ours.”

The Monks of New Skete have an excellent reputation for raising and training dogs at their monastery in upper New York State. In the training manual, The Monks of New Skete. How to be a Dog’s Best Friend, the monks share their expertise. “Children should be cautioned not to scream around dogs. They should never chase a dog, even one they know...Adults who tease dogs or accept ‘dares’ to approach a dog, ask for what they get” (Little, Brown and Company, 1978). Many times people call on the Monks for training advice with their own dog. “Canine aggression is one of the most frequent problems we deal with when dog guardians bring their dogs to us.” The monks advise the guardians to seek counseling with a trainer as soon as possible before the behavior increases. When a reportedly aggressive dog arrives at the monastery, the monks begin diagnosing the dogs’ possible aggressive behavior with positive training techniques, and if

needed, attempt counter-conditioning. “It’s important to know if the dog broke the victim’s skin, or nipped, scratched, or inflicted the damage with its mouth or paws. Many times we’ve had clients report mouth bites only to discover later, when taking a case history, that the injury came from the dog’s toenails or paws and not from the mouth at all.” The monks inform us that “the lack of leadership is often instrumental in aggressive behavior” and counter-conditioning “entails a separation from the guardian, an emphasis on animated, happy training sessions, and avoidance of the cue words and hand signals the dog might have been conditioned to respond to with aggressive behavior”. The monks give specific training tips for different types of aggression. Not every time a dog bites, is he protecting, sometimes he’s just afraid, or he’s in pain. As with all training, the monks’ training tips are for the human guardian. After all, you can’t train a dog, unless you train its guardian.

We need to educate ourselves about dog communication to deter the number of dog bites. Helen Sutton, certified aggressive dog rehabilitator, explains that historically certain “obedience” techniques have taught the dog to bypass their natural warning signs: snarling and growling. These techniques train the dog that warning signs are bad, so the dog immediately goes into bite mode when threatened. Learning to train dogs properly, working with the animal’s natural instincts and communication, will also deter dog bites or dog attacks.

Another way we can prevent dog attacks is to not allow dogs to be chained or tethered to a leash. Dogs need humane treatment and need to be a part of the family. If they’re not going to be a part of the family, why have a dog? Jim Crosby, Canine Aggression Expert, shares with [Your Best Friend™](#) that “dogs want to be a part of the family; they’re pack animals; when they are chained, they become very territorial of their small space. It’s where they eat, sleep, and defecate all day, everyday. If someone enters that space, the dog is likely to attack.” Dogs Deserve Better organization states on their website that “from October 2003 through June 2005, there were at least 42 children killed or seriously injured by chained dogs across the country” (www.dogsdeservebetter.com). Dennis Fetko, PhD says that “the more a dog is outdoors, the less behavioral control you have...the more you control the stimuli that reaches your dog, the more you control the responses”. He goes on to explain that “yard dogs often develop far more aggression because everyone who passes by or enters has already violated the territory that dog has marked dozens of times a day for years” (Whiskers & Wags, August 1995). Not only is a chained dog a liability, it’s inhumane.

Many of the above mentioned experts and others are communicating to us that it’s the guardians’ responsibility to raise a well-trained dog, as it is a parents’ to raise a law-abiding citizen. It’s not so much the responsible guardian making minor changes in their training that will make the biggest difference in the decreased number of dog attacks; the biggest change will be seen in the legislation and enforcement of dog fighting, animal cruelty and backyard breeding.

Solutions

Across the nation, communities, cities and entire states are responding to the media hype of dog aggression by banning breeds of dogs. This is not solving the dog aggression problem, only destroying healthy, socialized dogs and dividing communities. Because bully breeds are loving pets in responsible homes, are essential in search and rescue missions, and because any dog can attack, we can conclude that breed specific legislation does not solve the problem of dog aggression.

Jill Buckley, the ASPCA’s legislative liaison, works on the issue of breed-specific legislation. She offers alternative and better solutions to address the problem: people. She says, “it doesn’t make sense to legislate against a particular breed when it’s the training of the dog. The responsibility of the guardian to keep control and take care of it in a humane way... it means getting the dog fixed, not training it to fight, not tying it up outside. It means making it a member of the household. All those factors will determine whether a dog will be a biter or not, not specifically the breed”.

Crosby explains that we need to “educate guardians, shelters and legislators on behavior. Banning ‘things’ makes a problem worse.” He adds that a “hammer in the hands of a skilled carpenter can make beautiful furniture. A hammer in the wrong hands can murder someone”.

In Delaware County, Indiana, dog fighting is a big problem. Jill Dolon, president of the Unconditional Love Foundation (ULF) is working with the Muncie-Delaware County Dogfighting Task Force on community awareness about dog fighting. The Task is made up of animal-control officers, veterinarians and has representation from the prosecutor's office, state, county and city police. Its mission is to investigate and eradicate dog fighting in the county. They work with the prosecutor's office to prosecute crimes related to weapons, drugs, gambling, and gang-related offenses, all of which often go hand-in-hand with the dog fighting.

Dolon says "animal-fighting events are riddled with drugs, gambling and illegal weapons. Children often witness the training and even the fighting of animals, fostering in them a passion for violence, a frightening disregard for other living beings and lack of respect for the law." Although Georgia could consider screening potential adopters at our shelters for criminal records, backyard breeders are breeding for aggressiveness and selling directly to the criminal. Besides, most of the dogs that make it to the shelters are the discarded ones without the "attack" instinct.

With generations of dangerously aggressive dogs being bred in these illegal circles, communities, children especially, are at risk for increased attacks, says Dolon. She says that "education is the key to ending this horrific so-called sport" and "people need to know what to look for and where to report their suspicions." Task force co-chair Karen Gibson said because "dog fighting is usually at the center of other crimes, our focusing on dog fighting is part of a broader effort to resolve the culture of violence in our community. We want people to know violence towards animals and humans will not be tolerated in our community. The collaboration between the agencies involved is a win-win situation; the lives of both animals and citizens in our community will improve."

The dogs, which are currently involved with these types of crimes, can be relocated into therapy or foster programs, where they can be rehabilitated. Animal behaviorist Helen Sutton states from experience that "dogs that have been trained to fight can be rehabilitated with positive training methods by a professional". Once in loving homes, even after much mistreatment, bully breeds have been known to bounce back to their joyous selves. "Horrible things have happened to these dogs, and they are still trusting of people, loving, affectionate and social, explains Dinneen. "They have the ability to forgive and forget". Don't put the dogs in the middle. The punishment needs to be directed at the guardians. A mild fine will not be enough for those who are involved in high dollar dog fighting and other federal crimes.

The real problem in dog aggression is not the breed it's the people who use them for dog-fighting and other crimes. Thanks to Georgia Senator Robert Brown, animal abuse is already a felony in the State of Georgia. We should redirect our efforts towards enforcing laws against animal abuse since the core problems of dog attacks are criminals who feed the market for dog fighting and drug activity. Chaining dogs should be legislated against and enforced. Inhumanely tethering a dog leads to unnecessary dog attacks. Backyard breeding needs to be investigated and eliminated. There is a market for breeding dogs for inhumane purposes. Legislating against backyard breeding, bully or any other type of dog, is a great start to stopping the problem of dog aggression.

We also need to train the police what to look for and how to enforce it. Eric Sakach, the director of the Humane Society of the United States' West Coast Office, who has spent 19 years focusing on dog fighting and dangerous dog issues, travels worldwide to teach police about dog fighting and the need to make investigations of it a priority. Sakach is an opponent of breed-specific legislation and says, "Cops are more likely to enforce things they've been trained on." Probation boards could adopt a condition to not allow those on parole to own or possess an animal. Having a dog at the home, allows the one on probation to flush drugs down a toilet, while the dog is barking. In addition, we need steeper penalties for those who misuse dogs. Personal responsibility has disappeared in our society. It's time to be accountable for our actions. We need to be accountable for our actions by placing blame on the real criminals, not the dogs.

After several pit bull attacks in Council Bluffs, Iowa, the city council focused its legislation on humans as the problem, rather than the dogs. They instituted a three-strikes law for guardian/guardians, listing a host of offenses for animal abuse and care. The local police intend to enforce the ordinance.

Another way to protect the public is to educate them. With approximately 65 million owned dogs in the United States, we should work with the media and school systems to inform children and the general public

about dog aggression, ways to identify and report it, prevent aggression and how to be your own dog's best friend with positive training techniques. Your Best Friend™ provides an educational video for kids and adults on how to be safe around dogs. Most reported dog bites are on a child by their family dog or a friend's dog. Many of them can be prevented with education.

Another Perspective on Breed Specific Legislation

According to Howard Margolius, an advocate for "pit bulls", breed bans and restrictions have been attempted for 35 years. "Nowhere has breed specific legislation reduced criminal activity or protected the public from dangerous dogs. Thirteen states now prohibit breed discrimination laws." (www.PetitionOnLine.com)

Breed specific legislation (BSL) does not address the problem; understanding and addressing the core issues does. The core issues of dog attacks are drugs, dog fighting, animal abuse (including chaining dogs), lack of training/knowledge and illegal breeding. BSL is a knee-jerk reaction to media hype and negative public perception of bully breeds.

Enacting a Bill, where "it is unlawful to own, keep, or otherwise possess a live pit bull dog," punishes the innocent, responsible bully breed guardian from having a loving member of the family. Making it unlawful to own a pit bull dog will not prevent the criminal acts of dog fighting, animal abuse, drugs and gambling. Enacting this bill divides the public, driving them out of the state, and does nothing to stop dog aggression.

The American Kennel Club states their belief in guardianship responsibility on their website. "The AKC believes that dog guardians should be responsible for their dogs. We support laws that: establish a fair process by which specific dogs are identified as "dangerous" based on stated, measurable actions; impose appropriate penalties on irresponsible guardians; and establish a well-defined method for dealing with dogs proven to be dangerous...The American Kennel Club strongly opposes any legislation that determines a dog to be "dangerous" based on specific breeds or phenotypic classes of dogs." (www.AKC.org)

When breed legislation is passed, insurance companies often respond with large policies and prohibitions. Do we think criminals are registering and taking out insurance policies on their dogs? Again, the law-abiding citizen is the one who suffers because they are the ones who register their pets with the county, build the fence around their yard, and spend the extra money on assessment and training for their pet.

Not only does BSL misidentify the core problem, by placing blame on a dog based on his physical appearance, and not his temperament, it will be costly to the city and the taxpayers to enforce such a discriminatory law with an increased need for kennels, euthanasia, officers, administration and court battles. Prince George County, Maryland reviewed their aggressive dog law, and concluded, in a 300+ page report, that the law was costly and ineffective. They recommended to lift the ban because it punished the responsible dog guardians and did nothing to the irresponsible dog guardians, who are the real problem. Breed specific legislation does nothing to educate or protect the citizens from dangerous dogs. Any dog can be dangerous.

All dog guardians should be educated on the importance of neutering all of their pets. Among many medical benefits, neutering a male dog eliminates the interest in roaming by 90% and aggressive behavior against other male dogs by 60%, according to the webpage (www.y2Spay.com). Peninsula Humane Society in San Mateo, CA offers free spay and neuter services for "pits" and "pit" mixes after citing that neutered (pit bulls) are less aggressive and are less likely to roam. The United States Humane Society notes theoretically, one unspayed female dog and her offspring can produce over 67,000 pups in six years (www.hsus.org). With tax dollars paying to euthanize one healthy, adoptable pet every seven seconds, why not consider encouraging spay and neuter programs for all pets?

No one needs the government to dictate what they are required to do to their family members. If the guardian is held responsible for his or her dog, then the guardian will take the necessary precautions when having their dog in public. If the public is educated about approaching dogs, then they too will take the precautions when approaching one.

In sum, we should not put the dogs in the middle, by legislating against them. We should seek and punish those who are taking advantage of a dog's nature to assist in criminal activity. We should also enforce laws

against animal cruelty, legislate against and enforce backyard breeding and chaining dogs; we should encourage spay and neuter programs and educate the public about how to approach a strange, or familiar, dog. Remember, it's not the breed, it's the behavior and the guardian's responsibility. It's not a small fine for those who break the laws, which are already in place to protect the public and their pets, it's a steep punishment for the guardian to fit the real crime.

Suggested Media:

MAGAZINES AND MAGAZINE ARTICLES:

[Bully Breeds](#), Volume 21, Fancy Publications 2002.

Richard, Julie "Dangerous Breeds" [Best Friends Magazine](#), September/ October 2004, Best Friends Animal Society 14 -17, 45.

Richard, Julie "Bad Dog...or Bad Rap?" [Best Friends Magazine](#), November/December 2004, Best Friends Animal Society 14 -17, 47.

BOOKS:

Donaldson, Jean. [The Culture Clash](#). Berkely: James, 1996.

Little, Brown and Company. [The Monks of New Skete. How to Be Your Dog's Best Friend. A Training Manual for Dog Guardians](#). Boston: Little, 1978.

WEBSITES:

[www.Y2Spay.com](#) provides on-line resources for veterinary professionals regarding sterilization of domestic animals.

[www.Understand-a-Bull.com](#) provides a comprehensive look at bully breeds and breed specific legislation.

[www.AKC.org](#) is the home page of the American Kennel Club

[www.DogsDeserveBetter.com](#) educates the visitor about chained dogs and the movement to ban this inhumane lifestyle.

[www.Channel.NationalGeographic.com/channel/DogWhisperer/Cesar.html](#) Read the biography of Cesar Millan.

[www.YourBestFriend.tv](#) is a television program that shares wisdom on how to adopt, train and care for domestic pets.