

Forsaken No More

Reclaiming the Truth to Save Man's Best Friend



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“At perhaps no time in history has mankind been as ignorant of natural canine behavior as we are today. . .how easily we forsake the dogs rather than take responsibility for their behavior is a sad testament to how well humans fulfill their commitment to the canine/human bond. This is perhaps the ultimate act of betrayal which humans have inflicted on our canine companions - the refusal to own what is ours, what we have created.”

- Karen Delise^[1]

America is a nation of dog lovers. Dogs come in so many shapes and sizes that we often forget that they are all one species of animal. Forty-three million households have seventy-three million dogs. We spend billions of dollars each year on their care. Many of us consider dogs to be family members. We often hold our values regarding companion animals above the values of many other cultures.

There is a dark side to our relationship with dogs, however, which has become increasingly disturbing in recent decades. We have surrendered what we know about the human-dog bond and have allowed ourselves to be swept away by media reporting which is biased, at best, and which has the effect of being deadly, at worst. There is no dog more misunderstood, or more feared, in our country than the dog commonly referred to as the “pit bull.” This is our fault and it is our responsibility.

We must work to turn the tide of public opinion and perception about pit bull terriers and pit bull terrier-like dogs by debunking the myths about them through fair and unbiased shelter adoption programs which allow them to join our communities and allow people to see the dogs for what they really are and not for what they are feared to be. It’s time to reclaim the truth. It’s time to save man’s best friend.

What is a Pit Bull Anyway?

A pit bull *is not* a breed of dog. It is a term which is used to describe a group of dogs which most often include three specific breeds: the American Pit Bull Terrier,^[2] ^[3] the American Staffordshire Terrier^[4] and the Staffordshire Bull Terrier.^[3]^[4] Although there is some disagreement regarding the origins of these breeds, the organizations which register them report that all three breeds are descended from crosses between Bulldogs and Terriers in 19th century England, Ireland and Scotland.^[2]^[3]^[4] Because of the similarities between the breeds, some dogs are dual registered with more than one organization.^[5] It is universally accepted that these dogs are descended from dogs who were originally bred for “bull baiting” and “bear baiting” hundreds of years ago and that after these forms of public entertainment became illegal in 1835, dog fighting became a popular replacement.

The phrase “pit bull” is also commonly used by many people to describe a number of other dogs who are presumed, based on appearance alone, to be pit bulls terriers or pit bull terrier mixes.^[6] There are more than 20 breeds of dogs that have similar appearances and are commonly mistaken for pit bull terriers. It is almost impossible for most people to accurately identify a pit bull terrier.^[7]

^{[8][15]} (For purposes of this paper, the phrases “pit bull terrier” and “bully breeds” are used to describe these breeds of dogs and all other dogs who are presumed to be these breeds based on appearance.)

A Case of Mistaken Identity

In the Summer of 2007, animal control officers in Kansas City, Kansas, seized a dog named “Niko” from Mike and Amy Johnson for violating the city’s ban against “harboring” pit bull terriers. After Niko was seized, he remained in the custody of animal control authorities and lived in a kennel, losing weight and developing health problems. It took an eight-month legal battle and a DNA test on Niko before the city agreed with what the Johnsons (and their paperwork) had said all along: that Niko was a Boxer mix.^[9]

Even though tragic stories like this have become more common in an age of breed bans, identifying the breed of a dog (which comes from documented lineage) is normally a relatively straightforward process. Visually identifying dogs of unknown parentage, however, is hardly an accurate process. Sometimes dogs just don’t look like their parents and many dogs look like a variety of breeds, based on their mixed ancestry. Breed assignments of shelter dogs are ordinarily based on what dogs look like to someone at the shelter (such as Animal Control Officers) or based on how the dog is identified by a person surrendering a dog to a shelter.^[10] In many shelters, most medium to large size dogs with straight, short/medium length brown hair coats are cast as German Shepherds or shepherd mixes; dogs with black spots on their tongues are designated Chow mixes; and most medium sized, stocky, broad headed, small eared dogs with short hair coats are cast as pit bull terriers or pit bull terrier mixes.^[10]

A 2013 study published in the American Journal of Sociological Research ^[11] asked 900 participants in dog-related professions to make breed identifications based on color video clips of 20 dogs. Less than half of their identifications matched the DNA results and the study showed that the participants frequently disagreed with each other when making visual breed identifications of the same dog. More than 70% of the study participants reported that currently or at one time, their breed descriptors were used in record keeping. The results of this survey call into question the validity of a variety of data that has been collected over the decades pertaining to breed identification of dogs. “The interpretation of breed is often left up to animal control officer who are, in many cases, not equipped to make an accurate breed identification. Even vet training doesn't give us a great background for identifying breeds," explains Rob Simpson, a veterinarian at Kingston Animal Hospital in Tennessee. "DNA testing [for dogs] is in its infancy but right now it's the best technology we have to accurately identify breed." ^[12]

Lack of reliable breed identifications is consistent with the findings of Dr. Victoria Voith of Western University ^[13] and of the Maddie’s Shelter Medicine Program at the University of Florida’s College of Veterinary Medicine. ^{[14][15]} Both Dr. Voith and the Maddie’s Shelter Medicine Program conducted surveys showing that opinions ventured by those working in animal-related fields regarding the breed or breeds in a dog of unknown parentage agreed with breed as detected by DNA

analysis less than one-third of the time.^[16] Participants in the surveys conducted at both universities frequently disagreed with each other when attempting to identify the breed(s) in the same dog.^[17]

Common sense would dictate that you cannot regulate what you cannot identify. That is clearly not always the case when it comes to dogs; the numbers related to shelter deaths of dogs considered pit bull terriers speak for themselves. According to the Humane Society of the United States^[18] between five and eight million animals entered American shelters in 2012.^A Although 90% of dogs are statistically considered to be savable,^{[20][21]} millions of dogs are destroyed in shelters each year and the vast majority of dogs killed in shelters are pit-bull-terrier-type dogs.^[22] ^B This is most often the result of a de facto breed ban (in which pit bull terriers are not adopted out by shelters under any circumstances) or as a result of so-called “temperament testing” which is utilized to determine which dogs will be put up for adoption and which dogs will be destroyed.^C

How Did We Get Here?^[1]

Dogs are part of America’s rich history. Immigrants brought their dogs across the ocean along with their families and prized possessions. They soon became a fixture in our society; protecting homesteads from predators, helping on family farms and often serving as constant companions and nannies to young children who were entrusted in their care.^[5]

Although dogs have served us faithfully in many capacities for many years, we have a long history of stereotyping certain breeds of dogs during different time periods. This breed discrimination has been based on public perception and has been the result of hysteria which has had little, if anything, do to with actual dog behavior and aggression and has had more to do with the manner in which types of dogs are objectified and used for negative or illegal purposes. From the late 1800s up until the 1970s, the dogs considered to be vicious and naturally aggressive during particular decades in our history include Bloodhounds, Newfoundlands, Mastiffs, a group of dogs simply referred to as the “Northern Breeds” (such as Huskies, Malamutes and, Eskimo Dogs), Collies, Boston Terriers, St. Bernards, Airedale Terriers, Great Danes, Chow Chows, German Shepherds, Doberman Pinschers and Rottweilers. The reputation of many of these stereotyped breeds has

^A National euthanasia statistics are difficult to pinpoint because animal care and control agencies are not uniformly required to keep statistics on the number of animals taken in, adopted, euthanized or reclaimed. While many shelters know the value of keeping statistics, no national reporting structure exists to make compiling national statistics on these figures possible.^[19]

^B Although there are some statistics put forth by some individuals and organizations about the number of pit bull type dogs which enter animal shelters each year and are later destroyed, those numbers are inherently suspect. As explained above, most people (including those in animal control and dog-related professions) cannot accurately identify pit bull type dogs at all so any classification of dogs as pit bull terriers on intake can hardly be seen as accurate.

^C “. . .temperament testing requires skill and training that is not often a priority for shelters; the results vary depending on the environment in which the test is conducted. . .it can and often does result in dogs being executed when they are not really aggressive.”^[20]

historically been a result of their use for some negative function (such as guarding or fighting) or as a result of being subjected to harsh environmental conditions and physical abuse.

How easily our opinion regarding different breeds of dogs is influenced is demonstrated by three breeds of dogs. In the case of Bloodhounds, the reputation of the dogs (from the late 1800s to the early 1900s) as being fierce came not from actual reports of attacks, but from sensationalized stage versions of Harriet Beecher Stowe's novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which were not true to the novel. In those versions, a pack of Bloodhounds chased an escaping slave, baby in tow, across the frozen Ohio River. In the 1920s, the German Shepherd was seen as having no redeeming qualities until a dog named "Rin Tin Tin" appeared in a number of silent movies and public opinion about the breed changed primarily as a result of one dog. The association of Doberman Pinschers with Nazi guards during World War II automatically led people to believe the dogs were some type of super-predator, even though the German Army used many other breeds of dogs - and in spite of the fact that breed was also used by the United States Marine Corps for valiant purposes.

Those dogs we now think of as pit bull terriers were quite popular and enjoyed an excellent reputation in the United States up until very recently. They were considered all-purpose dogs who appealed to a wide variety of owners and who functioned as guard dogs, farm dogs, hunting dogs, police dogs, traveling companions and house pets. Pit bull terrier type dogs show up in hundreds of turn of the century photos, flanked by loving family members. World War I posters displayed illustrations of American Pit Bull Terriers as proud mascots of neutrality and bravery.^[5] The most decorated war dog of that time was an American Pit Bull Terrier named "Sergeant Stubby."^[23] A pit bull terrier-type dog named "Tige" helped sell Buster Brown shoes^[24] and 'Pete the Pup' from Our Gang fame was one of the first to be duo-registered as a UKC American Pit Bull Terrier and an AKC American Staffordshire Terrier.^[5]

Regardless of the breed, consistent in our history with dogs is a dark side to the human-canine relationship. Each time a breed of dog has been portrayed as vicious, there has been an immediate increase in the number of substandard owners of that breed which has led, in turn, to more reports of aggressive behavior because of the dogs' use for negative functions. Karen Delise, the Founder and Director of Research of the National Canine Research Council, states the following in her authoritative book, *The Pit Bull Placebo: The Media, Myths and Politics of Canine Aggression*: "The bane of any breed is popularity. As seen time and time again, when a breed becomes exceedingly popular, especially if the breed has a negative function attached to it, there will be a significant increase in substandard and unsuitable owners . . . fatalities are directly associated with the increased popularity of these breeds among substandard owners."^[1]

Media Bias Distorts Reality

From the late 1800s until the 1980s, media reports about dogs involved in attacks on people were not breed-biased. Newspapers focused on the circumstances which led to the attack and the breed of dog, if known, was simply one of the reported facts. Factors such as excessive heat, teasing, chaining and abuse were included in news reports of dog attacks to explain behavior. All of this changed three decades ago and a new era of the super-predator began.

By the middle of the 1970s, there was emerging public awareness of the blood sport of dog fighting in America. Dog fighting became a crime in all states in 1976 (even though it had been illegal in most states since the 1860s^[25]). In 1976, the Animal Welfare Protection Act was amended to make trafficking in dogs for the purpose of dog fighting a crime.^[26] As dog fighting got more attention from law enforcement authorities, it also got the attention of the media. This is when the true demise of the pit bull terrier reputation began. Rather than follow the type of media reporting utilized for a hundred years, the media began to focus on the dogs, rather than the people who abused and objectified the dogs. “In a society of violent video games . . . gang warfare, drug abuse, serial killers [and] terrorist bombs. . . we [have become] increasing more difficult to shock. Our monsters need to be increasingly terrible in order to keep pace with a society easily bored by our own species’ violent acts. . .”^[1]

As had happened with other breeds in the past, the sensationalized, almost comic-book type of reporting about pit bull terriers whipped the general public into a frenzy and attracted even more unsavory owners who hoped to capitalize financially on this new super-predator. Myths of pit bull terriers with “super-canine powers” and deviant anatomy began to dominate news stories.^[1]^D The birth of the Internet only served to make matters worse for the pit bull terrier. The Internet “has allowed for instant access to highly publicized media accounts of individual cases of dog attacks. Editorial columns about the vicious nature of certain breeds, dog-bite attorneys’ web sites filled with photos and statistics about dog attacks, quotes from politicians and outraged citizens about the nature and behaviors of certain dogs, and sensationalized headlines of dog attacks all seemingly offer instant and ample ‘proof’ of the vicious nature of certain dogs. To many people these Internet sources are perceived as a reliable and accurate source of information on what they believe to be a recent epidemic of canine aggression.”^[1]

In 1986 there were over 350 newspaper, magazine and journal articles printed about the pit bull terrier in the United States.^[1] “Over a decade later, the media is unrelenting.”^[1] In 2006, more than 2,800 articles headlined the “pit bull.”^[1] Reports about attacks by dogs other than pit bull terriers seldom garner more news coverage than a local paper whereas reports involving dogs believed to be pit bull terriers are consistently reported in hundreds of national and international newspapers and are covered by major television news networks, including CNN, MSNBC and

^D All of these myths have since been exposed as having no basis whatsoever in fact: pit bull terriers do not have locking jaws, do not clamp with their front teeth and grind with their back teeth, do not have a greater bite force than other dogs, are not impervious to pain and do not attack without warning or when unprovoked.^[1]

FOX.^[1] "Clearly a fatal dog attack by an unremarkable breed is not as newsworthy as a non-fatal attack by a Pit bull," says Karen Delise. "This biased reporting is not only lethal to an entire population of dogs; sensationalized media coverage endangers the public by misleading them about the real factors in canine aggression."^[27]

The Wrong End of the Leash

The public hysteria created by the media hype caused people to demand that something be done about pit bull terriers; leading politicians to enter the fray and focus on the wrong end of the leash^[28] by concentrating on the dogs and not on the people responsible for their behavior. Relying upon myths of canine superpowers and on emotional pleas from constituents (often while completely disregarding expert opinions), politicians began taking steps to either ban pit bull terriers or severely limit the circumstances under which people could own them. By the end of the 20th century, more than 200 cities, communities and counties had enacted breed bans or restrictions against pit bull terriers or any dog that was viewed as having "pit bull characteristics."^[1] "Not only was ridding the community of pit bull terrier-looking dogs touted as a cure-all for dog attacks, but at least another 26 breeds of dogs would be banned or restricted as 'dangerous' in communities across the country. Some breeds with no documented cases of severe or fatal attacks in the community (or even throughout the country) were banned. Many communities touted breed bans to be a pre-emptive strike, banning an entire breed *before* it had a 'chance' to attack."^[1]

Failure to produce a reduction in dog bite-related injuries in jurisdictions where it has been imposed^[29]^[30] has caused the support for Breed Discriminatory Legislation (BDL) to fade in recent years.^E There have also been legal ramifications related to BDL. The Department of Justice guidelines for the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) state that it is contrary to the Act to deny a disabled person equal access to public facilities based upon the presumed breed of their service dog.^[31] This has exposed municipalities with BDL to litigation costs when they have attempted to deny such access based the presumed breed of a person's service dog.^[32]

The American Veterinary Medical Association's community dog bite prevention report^[33] states: "[b]reed-specific ordinances, however, raise constitutional questions concerning dog owners' Fourteenth Amendment rights of due process and equal protection." In addition to lawsuits over constitutional rights, multiple lawsuits have been filed by owners in various cities who claim their dogs were wrongly labeled as one of the targeted breeds. From January 2012 to May 2013, more than three times as many jurisdictions either repealed BDL or considered and rejected it as enacted it. Massachusetts, Nevada, Connecticut and Rhode Island have recently enacted state laws that prohibit their towns and counties from regulating dogs on the basis of breed. Sixteen states now prohibit BDL.^[32] The House of Delegates of the American Bar Association has passed a resolution urging all state, territorial and local legislative bodies and governmental agencies to repeal any breed discriminatory or breed specific provisions.^[34] In August 2013, the White House, citing the views

^E BDL is also often called Breed Specific Legislation or "BSL." Since dogs are often presumed to be breeds which they are not, there really is nothing "specific" about Breed Specific Legislation.

of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, published a statement with the headline, “Breed-specific legislation is a bad idea.”^[35] BDL is also opposed by major national organizations, including the American Veterinary Medical Association, the National Animal Control Association, the Humane Society of the United States, the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, and Best Friends Animal Society.^[17]

Pseudostatistics Become Proof

In the 1970s, a significant number of studies were published in response to increasing numbers of reported dog bites and dog attacks in many areas across the United States. None of these studies conducted in the 1970s make mention of the pit bull terrier or the Rottweiler.^[36] Beginning in the middle 1980s, however, dog bite studies began to focus on only one aspect of dog bites: breed.^[36-41] The problem with the vast majority of the studies is that the “statistics” relied upon were actually numbers derived largely from newspaper stories and from the media’s often incorrect identification of dogs involved in attacks. Following a number of studies conducted by the Centers for Disease Control and independent experts, it was determined that the studies did not “identify specific breeds that are most likely to bite or kill, and thus [were] not appropriate for policymaking decisions related to the topic.”^[42] “Dog bite statistics are not really statistics, and they do not give an accurate picture of dogs that bite.”^[43] There is no scientific evidence that one kind of dog is more likely than any other to injure a human being.^{[32][42]} In fact, there is evidence to the contrary.^[44] A recent survey of the controlled study of dog bites covering 40 years and two continents concluded that no group of dogs should be considered disproportionately dangerous.^[46]

The Truth About Canine Aggression

The media focus on pit bull terriers has been so intense that many people now believe that only certain breeds of dogs are aggressive when, in fact, all dogs have the capability to be aggressive under certain circumstances. All dogs have teeth. All dogs bite. “They bite other animals, they bite each other and they bite humans.”^[1] Almost half of American households includes at least one dog.^[18] This means millions of people are in daily contact with dogs, even if we include only the members of the dogs' own households.^[46] In spite of this level of interaction, dog bite-related human fatalities have always been exceedingly rare, though they can attract the kind of publicity that creates an impression that they are more prevalent than they actually are. The annual total of such fatalities has risen and fallen with no discernable trend, while the canine population in the U.S. has continued its steady increase.^[47] Among children, the rate of dog bite-related injuries is highest for those ages 5 to 9 years, and children are more likely than adults to receive medical attention for dog bites.^[42]

“The reasons why dogs attack are often complex, but the answer to preventing dog attacks is relatively simple: humane care and control of dogs is often all that is needed to prevent most dog attacks.”^[1] In December 2013, The Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association (JAVMA) published the most comprehensive multifactorial study of dog bite-related fatalities to be completed since the subject was first studied in the 1970’s.^[48] The five authors, two of whom are on the staff of the National Canine Research Council (NCRC),^[49] and one of whom (Dr. Jeffrey Sacks)

was lead author on earlier studies of dog bite-related fatalities, analyzed all the fatalities known to have occurred during the ten-year period 2000 – 2009. Rather than rely predominantly on information contained in news accounts, as had previous studies of fatalities, detailed case histories were compiled using reports by homicide detectives and animal control agencies, and interviews with investigators. The researchers identified a striking co-occurrence of multiple, controllable factors:

- no able-bodied person being present to intervene (87.1%);
- the victim having no familiar relationship with the dog(s) (85.2%);
- the dog(s) owner failing to neuter/spay the dog(s)(84.4%);
- a victim's compromised ability, whether based on age or physical condition, to manage their interactions with the dog(s) (77.4%);
- the owner keeping dog(s) as resident dog(s), rather than as family pet(s) (76.2%);
- the owner's prior mismanagement of the dog(s) (37.5%);
- and the owner's abuse or neglect of dog(s) (21.1%).

Four or more of these factors were present in 80.5% of cases; breed was not one of those factors.

The distinction between a resident dog and a family dog was first proposed years ago by National Canine Research Council Founder Karen Delise.^[17] Resident dogs are dogs, whether confined within a dwelling or otherwise, whose owners maintain them in ways that isolate them from regular, positive human interactions. Family dogs are dogs whose owners keep them in or near the home and also integrate them into the family unit, so that the dogs learn appropriate behavior through interaction with humans on a regular basis in positive and humane ways.^[50] In the 2013 JAVMA study, 76.2% of the dog bite-related fatalities in this study involved dogs that were not kept as family pets; rather they were only resident on the property. Dogs are predisposed to form attachments with people, to become dependent on people, and to rely upon their guidance in unfamiliar situations. While it is extremely rare that dogs living as either resident dogs or as family pets ever inflict serious injuries on humans, dogs not afforded the opportunity for regular, positive interaction with people may be more likely, in situations they perceive as stressful or threatening, to behave in ways primarily to protect themselves.

The Real Deal

In spite of the breed origins, the vast majority of pit bull terriers are very far removed from their origins as dogs used for baiting and fighting. The sad truth is that pit bull terriers have often been used as fighting dogs because of their intelligence, athleticism, tenacity, strong sense of loyalty and their overwhelming desire to please humans. Pit bull terriers are often described as fun loving, spunky, intelligent, affectionate and often “quite goofy.”^[51] They are extremely loyal, bold and courageous animals.^[52] A study conducted by Banfield Pet Hospital shows that pit bull terriers are extremely popular and are one of the top 10 dog breeds identified in a recent study.^[53]

Their athletic nature makes them excel at various dog sports and activities including obedience trials, agility trials, flyball and frisbee competitions, and weight-pulling events. One of the most decorated agility dogs in recent years was “Wallace the Pit Bull” (who recently passed away due to cancer).^[54] The soft side of the breed shows up in their gushing affection for humans - a desirable trait that was very important to the original breeders of this animal and remains so today. For this reason, many pit bull terriers work as Certified Therapy Dogs in hospitals and nursing homes. The American Humane Association’s “American Hero Dog” in 2013 was a pit bull terrier named Elle from Roanoke Rapids, North Carolina who helps teach children about dog safety, reading, and overcoming prejudice and stereotypes.^[55] Yet other pit bull terriers work as search and rescue dogs, in law enforcement (as narcotics and bomb detection dogs) and as service dogs.^[56]

When we put aside the hype and hysteria, we find that pit bull terriers are actually some of the most well-behaved dogs in our society. The American Temperament Test Society conducts comprehensive behavior assessment testing (which is often referenced in reports and studies), the results of which are published annually. Studies have consistently shown that the average passing rating for pit bull terriers (American Pit Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier and the Staffordshire Bull Terrier) is consistently higher than the scores for numerous other breeds tested by the American Temperament Test Society. Some of the breeds of dogs (of comparable size to most bully breeds) with lower scores have been the Beagle, Border Collie, Boxer, Cocker Spaniel, Collie, Dalmatian, Golden Retriever, Mastiff, St. Bernard, Standard Poodle and Weimaraner.^{[57] F}

Even when pit bull terriers have been subjected to the worst that humans have to offer, they are capable of defying the media hype of them as super-predators and of overcoming incredible abuse. After forty-nine pit bull terriers were seized from Michael Vick’s Virginia property in the summer of 2007, federal Judge Henry Hudson ordered them placed with eight rescue groups in five states.^[58] All 10 of the dogs placed with BAD RAP are living in homes (the majority live with other animals), seven have passed the AKC Canine Good Citizen Test, three are certified therapy dogs and one of the therapy dogs, “Jonny Justice,” also helps with a children’s literacy program.^[59] The 22 dogs deemed the most traumatized were placed with the Best Friends Animal Society at their

^F Although smaller breeds of dogs are generally considered less capable of being as aggressive as larger breeds of dogs, it should be noted that many small dog breeds also have passing rates lower than that of bully breeds, including Bichon Frise, Cairn Terrier, Chihuahua, the standard Dachshund, Jack Russell Terrier, Maltese and Yorkshire Terrier.

sanctuary in Kanab, Utah.^[58] Seven of the dogs are still at the sanctuary, but most were adopted out and are thriving in their new homes.^[60] Many of these dogs have also earned their Canine Good Citizen certification and have become celebrities of sorts as they are living ambassadors for misunderstood breeds. The Best Friends Animal Society refers to them as the, “Vicktory dogs, and with good reason. Many are now in loving homes, starting new lives as beloved family members. Some have been on TV, wowing audiences with their excellent behavior and kind, loving eyes.”^[61] Part of their journey was documented on the National Geographic show “DogTown” that followed the exploits of Best Friends vets and dog training staff for four seasons.

Where Do We Go From Here?

It’s a given that there is no quick fix for the undeserved reputation of pit bull terriers. Most people consider the media reports and information found on the Internet as “proof” of the inherently vicious nature of these dogs and we cannot simply flip a switch and regain our collective sanity about the true nature of dogs in general. The fact remains, however, that we *cannot* allow this trend to continue. We owe our canine companions better. It is up to us as communities to be responsible and to help take proactive steps in order to rehabilitate the image of pit bull terriers and to educate the public on the real reasons behind dog aggression. This will help prevent dog attacks and fatalities, and it will help people understand that aggression is not limited to certain breeds of dogs.

Getting Them Into Homes

- Shelter directors and staff (and those in management positions over shelters) should ensure that *all* dogs in shelters are given the same opportunities to be adopted, regardless of perceived breed, keeping in mind that even the most experienced shelter workers often cannot correctly identify dog breeds or their mixes. It has been proposed that it might just be easier to refer to them as “American Shelter Dogs.”^[10] Some locations have decide to no longer classify dogs by breed upon intake because breed labels are often wildly inaccurate.^[62]

- Shelters should use breed-blind, equitable, double-process behavior testing in order to *fairly* evaluate dogs for adoption. Prior to being tested, dogs should be given a chance to acclimate to the shelter for a period of days, they should be medically evaluated first and they should be given the chance to be walked outside of the building daily and interact with shelter staff or volunteers on a regular basis and away from the distractions inside the shelter. When the behavior assessment is conducted, it should be repeatable at different times and in different environments and it should accurately predict the dog’s behavior in a home. The goals of *true* behavior testing should be to screen out aggression while ensuring that dogs who are otherwise friendly but who are just scared, shy, traumatized, sick or injured are not wrongly destroyed. Assessments should not be pass/fail; any dog showing workable issues, such as resource/food guarding, can be helped and made ready for adoption by behavior rehabilitation.

Avoiding Litigation

According to attorney Bonnie L. Lutz (a member of the board of directors for the American Veterinary Medical Law Association), “there is not a single reportable appellate opinion in which an animal shelter was found liable for a bite by a dog that it did not own.”^[63] “If reduction in liability is the goal, refusing to adopt out certain breeds of dogs or placing blanket restrictions on adoptions of certain breeds, are not viable solutions.”^[63] A variety of breeds of dogs which are statistically more aggressive^[57] than pit bull terriers are adopted out on a regular basis by shelters and rescue groups across the country (Basset Hounds, Beagles, Boxers, Cocker Spaniels, Golden Retrievers, Jack Russell Terriers and Standard Poodles, etc.). It stands to reason then, that if suits are not brought following adoption of these other breeds of dogs, there is no reason to believe that adoption of pit bull terriers raises the potential of liability, particularly if the adoption process provides for adequate screening of adopters and efforts are made to educate the community.

In order to avoid litigation following adoption, the shelter should: 1) observe dogs while in the shelter environment, document those observations and document all information provided by the previous owner; and 2) disclose all known facts to the new guardian and transfer ownership of the dog fully and finally.^[63] This is easily accomplished using a blanket adoption agreement which contains a hold harmless provision. The agreement can also contain an assumption of the risk form which allows for specific, known information about the dog’s reported or observed history to be documented.

Keeping Them in Homes

- Adult Educational Programs. Offer free educational programs to everyone in the community to teach responsible dog ownership, promote socialization of dogs at an early age and encourage owners to make dogs part of the family (as opposed to them being resident dogs). The training can be provided with the help of local rescue groups, dog trainers, dog behaviorists, animal welfare advocates and volunteers.
- Educational Programs for Children. Most of the exposure to dog-bite injury risk can be mitigated by providing appropriate education to well-intentioned but misinformed and/or uninformed guardians, and to the public at large. Among children, the rate of dog bite-related injuries is highest for those ages 5 to 9 years.^[42] Even a single 30-minute lesson incorporated into a regular school day, taught by a dog handler, has been shown to dramatically reduce high-risk behaviors toward unfamiliar dogs in both very young and middle-school children.^[46]
- Bully promotion programs. Working with pit bull terrier rescue groups and advocates, develop an outreach and intervention program for the local community serving the unique needs of pit bull terriers and pit bull terrier mixes. Programs like this exist in a number of regions to educate the general public regarding the misunderstanding of the breeds’ needs, to offer potential adopters advice and education about the breed and to encourage people to see their pit bull terriers as ambassadors to the community, with the potential to change public opinion.

Making People Feel Safe While Getting to the Roots of Canine Aggression

- Enforce dangerous dog laws (as opposed to breed specific legislation.) Rather than try to regulate the dogs, we must regulate the people who own them and who are responsible for their care and behavior. The best way to do this is by enforcing existing dangerous dog laws and by gauging the effectiveness of those laws over periods of time so that they can be modified to address true sources of canine aggression. Model dangerous dog laws are available for us to emulate, and they seek to individually identify potentially dangerous dogs based on a history of that dog's and owner's behavior and reported incidents.
- Enactment/strengthening of laws that restrict the tethering, chaining and penning or caging of dogs. (As indicated above, a 2013 study revealed that almost 80% of dogs involved in fatal attacks were not family pets and were kept as resident dogs.^[48])
- Enactment/strengthening of laws regarding dogs running at large that require spay/neuter after multiple violations. (As indicated above, the 2013 study also revealed that more than 80% of dogs the dogs involved in fatal attacks were not spayed or neutered.^[48])
- Encourage voluntary spay/neuter and help educate/inform the public about organizations or programs that promote low-cost spay/neuter in the community. In many communities, people are not aware of the health benefits of having their dog sterilized and are unaware of programs which provide financial support for low income families. Still other communities have nonprofit or low cost spay/neuter clinics which provide service to anyone, regardless of income.

“It is long past time for us to rethink our policies about dog attacks and the role humans play in this inter-species relationship. We owe it to the future safety of our children and communities. We owe it to our canine companions.”^[1]

We owe it to ourselves.

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