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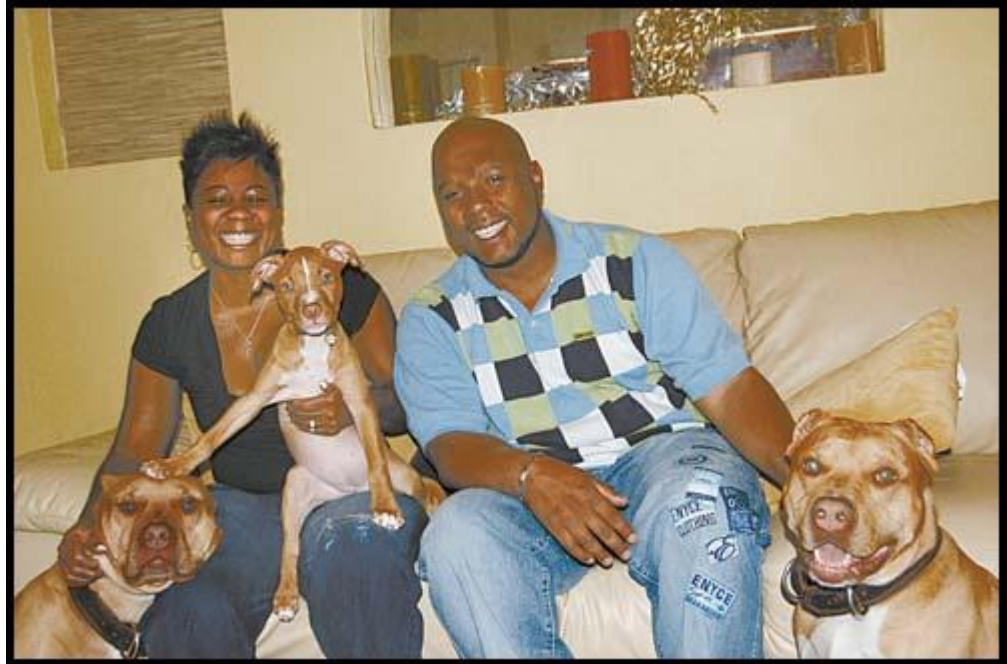
Pit bulls battle stereotype

By Hillary Wundrow
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Loving care can make dogs gentle

What does Rachel Ray and the City of Beloit have in common? Well, they both have pit bulls.

Even though the meaty dogs get a bad rap for being aggressive, people are still breeding, adopting and loving them. Like it or not, pit bulls are here to stay in Beloit and their owners couldn't be more proud. Behind every pit bull is its own unique tale.



Staff photo by Hillary Wundrow

Zack and Pattie Dotson, employees for School District of Beloit, want to break the stereotype of the mean pit bull. They are the parents of a deaf and albino pit bull named Jake. Tara Fleming and Donta Evans hold their three red nosed pitbulls. Dollar, 5, Baby, 3, and a little puppy named Queen bound through the house and are bed hogs.

"He's just a big ol' baby," Dotson said.

Anyone can see the connection between Zack Dotson and Jake. Because Jake is deaf he always tries to keep either a paw, tail or head on his owner. Jake walks with Zack by day and hogs his bed by night.

"He just stays with you," Zack said.

Pit bulls have always been there for Zack. He got his first one while working in a shipyard in Vicksburg, Miss. A few years ago when his rottweiler couldn't make it back up the hill after a fishing trip, Zack Dotson knew it was time for a pit bull puppy.

When he saw the albino puppy, he knew it was the one. Jake was so cute Pattie couldn't say no and ended up holding him like a baby. Soon Zack was dropping Jake in his jacket pocket and taking him around.

"He was just that little," Zack Dotson said.

Zack knew if Jake ever got in a fight with another dog, it would trigger his fighting instincts. He also noticed Jake staring hungrily at the neighbor cat out the window. Because Zack said pit bulls were bred to fight with other dogs, he always made sure to correct the dog right away. One time the puppy growled at him when

Zack came near his food dish.

"I straightened him out," Zack said.

When Jake reached 89 pounds, Zack stopped feeding him burgers and steaks.

"He was looking like porky the pig," he said.

Because of their constant attention, the Dotsons say the dog couldn't be gentler. Jake often rides along in the car. One day a bank teller gave Jake a treat while he visited the drive-up window.

It breaks the Dotsons' hearts when they think of people fighting pit bulls for money. Pattie said one time a dead pit bull was found in a garbage bag in a dumpster near her workplace.

One day while traveling down south, someone offered to buy Jake. Zack suspects it was for fighting.

"I wouldn't sell him for a million dollars," Zack said.

"I think it's important to get the message out that not all pit bulls are mean and vicious," said Anji Lannon. "A pit bull is like any dog. Any dog can be mean."

Lannon never expected she would end up pregnant with a pit bull. She was working at the Turtle Tap one night when a customer said he wanted to get rid of his pit bull. She was nervous about taking on the responsibility, but worried about the dog. One day the man drove the dog to the park in his van.

"It was covered in fleas," Lannon said.

Lannon and her boyfriend, Ben Kane, have worked hard to restore the dog's health and named him Reggie. A friend of Lannon's runs a rescue for pit bulls, so Lannon knew how many unwanted ones are out there. She also knew the importance of raising them well.

Although her dog is energetic, smart and friendly, he is hyper and needs plenty of exercise.

"He's kind of a shark. It's perpetual motion at all times," Lannon said.

Some Beloiters enjoy a dog with a strong spirit, even if it means extra work walking them and getting their energy out.

Donta Evans decided to get a red nosed pit bull to overcome his fear of dogs five years ago. Although his fiance Tara Fleming was a little nervous about it, she couldn't say no when she saw the puppy.

"He knew I'd fall for him," Fleming said.

These days the couple has Dollar, 5, Baby, 3, and a little puppy named Queen bounding through the house. Although their friends think they are crazy to have three red-nosed pitbulls, the couple plans to put them in their upcoming wedding, bow ties and all.

The couple has absolutely no fear of them. Nieces and nephews ride them bareback and Fleming carts the puppy around like a newborn.

"The veterinarian told us we would never be able to keep two pit bull boys together and we've proved them wrong. They do everything together, sleep, eat, drink and play. They listen so well that we have taught them to shake your hand," Fleming said.

Despite their lovability, Evans admits his pits have a guard dog instinct and strong jaws.

Evans, however, likes having guard dogs. He has even wiggled the door knob pretending to be a burglar to make sure the dogs would react. He knows if someone broke in, they probably wouldn't survive.

And that's okay for Evans. He likes the animals for what they are. He walks them daily to help get rid of their energy. By nightfall, they are three big babies.

"Pit bulls are given a bad name it's all in how you raise them and that goes for any pet, if you teach them to be mean they will, and if you teach them love they will love," Fleming said.

Fun facts

Radio host Ira Glass has a pit bull as well as comedian Jon Stewart and actor Michael J. Fox.

The pit bull terrier and rottweiler are often considered to contribute the most to the serious injuries caused by dog attacks and are the most common breeds that insurance companies will refuse to insure.