



Pit bulls battle a bad reputation

Jason Tait, Staff writer

— The pit bill was on Maria Chisholm before she knew it.

It came bounding around the corner as she stood at her mailbox on Cherry Street in Haverhill and knocked her to the ground.

The dog charged again but was met by Chisholm's barking beagle Homer. The beagle was no match. The pit bull grabbed it in its powerful jaws and thrashed it from side to side. It let go only when police shot it.

The severely injured Homer survived, but seven years later, Chisholm, 56, is still haunted by the attack and her fear of pit bulls.

"They are dangerous," Chisholm said. "People say they are harmless, but all it takes is one time."

Chisholm agrees with Bay State lawmakers who say pit bulls may have drawn enough blood in Massachusetts.

Following several high-profile attacks by pit bulls this year, including attacks on children in Boston and Taunton, a legislative committee is considering laws to control dangerous dogs, including a statewide ban on pit bulls.

Pit bull owners and breeders packed a hearing on the bill last week in Boston, arguing the breed is not innately vicious and a ban is uncalled for.

The hysteria

To detractors, pit bulls are killing machines with bad attitudes and an urge to attack.

A study by the federal Centers For Disease Control and Prevention found pit bulls were responsible for killing 60 people in the United States between 1979 and 1996, more than any other breed. Rottweilers were second with 29. In all, there were 279 human deaths by canine attack during the study period.

Lisa Peterson, a spokeswoman for the American Kennel Club in New York, said pit bulls are not naturally violent but can be turned into lethal weapons by bad owners and breeders.

"They are raising their dogs to be more like weapons and less like family pets," Peterson said.

Michael Keiley, manager of the Nevins Farm shelter of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals in Methuen, said mean-tempered pit bulls have become status symbols in the drug and hip-hop culture.

Rapper DMX posed with a snarling pit bull on the cover of his record "Year of the Dog." Pit Bull Energy Drink first promoted itself with the slogan "Attitude in a can!" And drug dealers use pit bulls to intimidate neighborhoods and protect their products, Keiley said.

"There are bad people out there who are making pit bulls scary to everyone," Keiley said.

Massachusetts would become the first state to ban the breed, but at least two American municipalities prohibit the animal — Denver and Prince George's County in Maryland.

Denver banned pit bulls in 1989 following a spate of attacks, including the mauling death of a toddler and an attack on a minister that left him with two broken legs and 70 bites. An effort to overturn the law in 2004 was defeated.

A lawmaker leading the effort to ban pit bills in Massachusetts, state Rep. Vincent Pedone, D-Worcester, has contacted people in Denver about its ban, which has survived court challenges.

Locally, Haverhill has the only law specifically targeting pit bulls. The city requires pit bulls to be leashed and muzzled when not on their owner's property and confined to enclosures at least 20 feet from the street when on the property.

Methuen considered a pit bull ban last year, but a wave of opposition stopped it.

Instead, with advice from the Nevins Farms' Keiley, the City Council passed a law to control dangerous dogs regardless of breed. In Methuen, owners of dogs deemed dangerous must insure the animal and keep it muzzled and on a leash no more than 4 feet long when off the owner's property.

In Salem, Mass., councilors rejected an outright ban on pit bulls in 2005 after owners from as far away as New Hampshire and Maine packed a meeting to oppose the prohibition.

The state Supreme Judicial Court overturned a law banning pit bulls in Lynn because of its vagueness in defining specific breeds of dogs. No simple blood or scientific test can conclusively determine a breed, and several different breeds and crosses of those breeds are commonly called pit bulls.

Pit bulls are docile animals if properly trained, Keiley said.

Of two pit bulls adopted from his shelter recently, one accompanies its owner when reading to toddlers and the other makes visits to local nursing homes, he said.

Bad dogs get the headlines

Samantha Gaylord's pit bull Leo turned on her at her home on Quimby Street early this month in Haverhill, ripping into her leg, abdomen, arm and buttocks. After the 24-year-old Harvard student locked herself in the bathroom and the dog tried to chew through the door to get at her, police shot Leo dead.

In Lawrence, a police officer shot two pit bulls attacking the couple who owned them outside a house on Lowell Street in April.

And pit bulls named Tobey and Sheba are on "death row" at the Lawrence pound after attacking and nearly killing a chow chow named Oscita as she was being walked by her owners.

Lawrence police Chief John Romero wants to euthanize Tobey and Sheba because he considers them dangerous. The owner is appealing the decision in court.

Romero said he has had a lot of experience with violent pit bulls in Lawrence and when he was with the New York Police Department, but he is undecided whether the breed should be banned statewide.

"Most of the problems we've seen associated with aggressive animals have been with pit bulls," Romero said. "But I think a lot of that has to do with the way people train and raise them."

Strong bites, severe injuries

Keiley said pit bulls are muscular dogs with strong bites that can inflict more serious wounds than other breeds.

"Yes, they are powerful dogs," he said. "That does not make them more inclined to bite."

Pedone, the legislator considering a bill to outlaw pit bulls, said pit bulls' strength is the reason he doesn't buy the argument that other breeds bite just as often.

"When these dogs do attack, it is violent and vicious and dangerous," Pedone said. "With a smaller dog you can defend yourself. You cannot do that with a pit bull."

Pit bulls can be traced back to England, where they were used by butchers and farmers to control cattle and were bred to be courageous, persistent and impervious to pain. A strain of the breed used for pit-fighting other dogs was imported to the United States in the mid-1800s.

The United Kennel Club in 1898 became the first registry to recognize the American pit bull terrier as a distinct breed.

According to the kennel club, American pit bull terriers make excellent family companions and are especially good with children. In fact, the group does not recommend them as guard dogs because they are so friendly, even with strangers.

But because they can be aggressive toward other dogs and have such powerful builds, the club cautions that pit bull terriers need owners who will socialize and obedience-train them.

Even some who agree that bad owners, not bad genes, are responsible for vicious pit bulls say there's no room for the dogs in the Bay State.

Kathy and Dennis Larocque of Lawrence lost their greyhound Smash when a loose pit bull literally ripped away their dog's chest six years ago. Dennis Larocque was walking Smash on South Broadway in Lawrence when the attack happened.

Kathy Larocque said she supports a ban on pit bulls because too many pit bull owners are irresponsible.

"I don't think these dogs are born vicious," Larocque said. "The owners should take responsibility."

She said recent attacks in Methuen, Lawrence and Haverhill reinforce her opinion.

"It's just heart-wrenching," Larocque said. "It really hurts when I read something like that."

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Photos



Lola, a stray pit bull, barks while caged at the Lawrence dog pound. Staff Photo