

## THEIR REP IS THE PITS

By JULIA SZABO

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July 7, 2002 -- File this one under "h" for hard to believe: A hundred years ago, this country's most popular family pet was the American Pit Bull Terrier.

That's right - the pit bull.

What a difference a century makes. Today, the pit bull is America's most controversial dog breed, widely regarded as a snarling monster.

People have no qualms about demonizing pit bulls. The dog is so widely feared that in most animal shelters across the country, pits are not even put up for adoption; they're euthanized immediately.

So why do so many celebrities have them as pets?

"There's a misconception about pit bulls - that they're very evil dogs," said Mets slugger Mo Vaughn, the owner of two English bulldogs who is looking to bring home a new pit bull after his beloved pit Black died last year. "But a natural, full-blooded pit bull is the nicest animal in the world."

Actress Bernadette Peters says she adores Stella, the pit she adopted from the Center for Animal Care & Control (CACC) in Manhattan.

"There's something about pits," she said. "They're the most affectionate, amazing dogs. More than any other breed, they just want to cuddle and be next to you, skin on skin. I'll always have a pit!"

Vaughn and Peters are not alone.

Among the breed's many high-profile fans are author James Ellroy, TV personality Jon Stewart, Mel ("The Producers") Brooks and Anne Bancroft, rocker Stephan Jenkins of Third Eye Blind and painter Julian Schnabel, whose handsome white pit, Zeus, made the cover of Town & Country magazine last year.

"Pit bulls are the most fiercely loyal dogs," pointed out Bill Berloni of the Humane Society of New York, which has several adorable pits up for adoption. "And they deserve extremely loving owners who can match that loyalty."

It's the dogs' sense of loyalty that has, ironically, helped to undermine the breed. When abused and trained by criminals as attack dogs, pit bulls can, in fact, become dangerous - just like any other large, dominant dog. Their size and strength can make them a threat.

But the vast majority of them are pussycats.

In the early 20th century, the breed's image was very different. Back then, the pit was widely admired as a great companion, especially to children. (Petey of "The Little Rascals" was a pit).

Featured in a famous World War I propaganda poster, the pit was also a symbol of bravery and all-American virtue.

Surrounded by other dogs wearing the military helmets of their respective countries - the Dachshund stood for Germany and the French bulldog for France - our guy appears with Old Glory draped across his shoulders, above the legend: "I'm neutral, but not afraid of any of them!"

Today, because of contemporary culture's anti-pit prejudice, having one of these dogs can put an owner's loyalty to the test.

I have personally taken in five rescued pits, and most pedestrians give me a wide berth when I walk down the street with just one dog. One passer-by even commented: "Don't come near me with that ugly dog!"

Sadly, the CACC takes in thousands more pits than there are responsible homes to which they can be adopted. Every year, some 10,000 pits are euthanized in New York City alone.

The good news is that this Saturday, Peters will co-host, along with Mary Tyler Moore, the Broadway Barks dog and cat adopt-a-thon in Shubert Alley.

One of the 21 animal-rescue groups featured will be Stray From the Heart, whose founder, Beth Silberg, said about 60 percent of the dogs she has up for adoption are pit bulls and pit mixes.

Stray from the Heart's latest intake is Stevie Wonder, a 7-year-old blind pit picked up in Brooklyn.

Like the majority of abused urban pits, Stevie had been living in a junkyard, where he fell victim to dog fighters who allowed another dog to maul him almost to death.

But, true to his breed, "Stevie's a love bunny, and he adores children," said Silberg. Now he needs a caring home.

"Pits have so much personality," Silberg concluded. "They do everything in an intense way: they play hard and love hard. So many of them are terribly mistreated, but they heal quickly, because all they want is to love and be loved."

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