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ANIMAL HOUSE

A pit bull ban is not the answer

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Animal House

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Writing a column in defense of pit bulls is sort of like writing in favor of suicide bombers, or a plan to build a nuclear reactor down your block. People see the P-word, and assume doggie Armageddon.

I am going to try, anyway.

First, the necessary disclaimers, for those who have been through a pit bull attack or know someone who has

or - the scenario that, rightfully, sends people over the edge - are the parents of a child whose scars from such a terrifying incident are not physical as well as emotional. I am in no way trying to diminish what happened to them in that instance. And I hope justice was served, not just to the dog that inflicted the injuries, but more so to the human whose lack of responsibility was their root cause.

The impetus for this column, of course, is the pit bull ban proposed by New York City Councilman Peter Vallone Jr., who called the breed "a danger to public safety." This kind of rhetoric isn't surprising in a municipality that bans ferrets, chinchillas and hedgehogs. But it's illogical at its core.

Simply put, dangerous dogs are not a canine problem. They are a human problem. Some dogs are born with the propensity for aggression to humans, but it takes an owner to nurture such a tendency, either through outright encouragement or benign neglect.

Dog fighting, for which pit bulls were developed, requires dog aggression, and

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many pit bulls are indeed hostile toward their own kind. But the great irony is that this breed was bred for centuries not to attack humans. To fulfill their *raison d'etre*, pit bulls needed to be especially people-friendly: A dog that mauled a human in the pit - even in the heat of battle with his canine foe - was worthless, and was dispatched from the gene pool on the spot with a bullet to the head.

Pit bulls that attack people are an aberration, not an eventuality. Indeed, considering the sheer number of pit bulls that are permitted to stray in city streets, or spend eternities tied outside, the frequency of attacks is miraculously low.

But breedism is a fact of life for the pit bull, whose reputation is tinged with racial and socioeconomic associations that no one is comfortable talking about, but invariably react to. My peers in the media - most of whom can't tell a Chihuahua from a Catahoula - take every opportunity to demonize them. Pit bull maulings always get ink.

This soon becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: Every dog attack becomes the fault of a pit bull, even though the breed itself is a very diffuse one, with many different looks and styles. Sharpeis, bull mastiffs, even pugs or Jack Russells could conceivably be labeled pit bulls by disoriented victims who use reverse logic: "If it bit me, it must be a pit bull."

Are pit bulls ideal for everyone? Certainly not. They need strong, stable owners who can socialize them well to people and children, monitor their interactions with other dogs, and keep them exercised mentally and physically. But the same can be said to a greater or lesser degree for Rottweilers, German shepherds, Dobermans, Akitas, and Labrador and golden retrievers - virtually any dog of any breed.

The biggest problem with a pit bull ban is that if those who want to mold aggressive dogs are deprived of one breed, they just move on to another. There are far more ferocious breeds that could take the pit's place. Then again, with enough careless breeding and focused mistreatment, your average spaniel could be transformed into, if not a killing machine, a very adept maiming one.

A pit bull ban would create more problems than it solves:

What about pit bull mixes?

What about American Staffordshire terriers, which derive from the pit bull gene pool, but sequestered themselves long ago, and have lost the "gameness" required of a fighting dog?

Are legislators savvy enough to tell the difference between an American bulldog (really a Southern-style pit) and an English one (a breed that is about as aggressive as your average petit four)? If you toss everything with "bullie" in its name or background, kiss goodbye to such good-natured clowns as the

French bulldog, the bull

terrier, the Boston terrier

and the boxer.

People are individuals, and so are animals. Fair laws treat them as such. Instead of addressing the symptom of a problem by banning dogs made vicious and dangerous by irresponsible owners, how about dealing with the problem by making those owners truly liable in the first place?

Nothing sums it up better than that popular cliché: Punish the deed, not the breed.

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