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Letter: Pit bulls can be good pets

Friday, December 2, 2005

The position that Bill Gerber took in his Nov. 25 piece ("Are pit bulls appropriate pets?") about pit bulls is irresponsible. I know Bill and the good work that he does for the Animal Welfare Committee and the Mansfield Animal Shelter, but as co-founder of Mansfield Shelter Friends, Inc., a past member of the AWC and the proud owner of three pit bulls myself, I felt that I had to offer a bit more information to clarify what I see as possibly misleading and damaging information in Bill's article.

Let me start off by saying that I'm not against spray/neuter - I'm wholeheartedly for it. I'm also for a moratorium on breeding until all of the animals that are currently in shelters and foster homes find loving, permanent homes. We have way too many animals that are euthanized each day or that linger in shelters to need to "produce" more. And that goes for all breeds of cats and dogs - not just pit bulls.

The main problem that most people have with pit bulls is exactly what has lead to the myth of their horrible nature and ridiculous breed-specific legislation: people don't know what a pit bull is and they assume that any dog with a block head or a certain body type is a "pit bull."

The Animal Farm Foundation www.animalfarmfoundation.org explains as follows: "pit bull" is not a breed at all. It is a term used to describe three or four breeds including the American Pit Bull Terrier, the American Staffordshire Bull Terrier, the Staffordshire Bull Terrier, and the Bull Terrier as well as a legion of lookalikes. Since so many of these dogs are crossbred with each other and with other breeds, the term "Pit Bull" is often misrepresentative of the dog in question, as it is attached to any dog with any physical similarity to the above breeds."

Go to members.aol.com/radogz/find.html and see if you can find the pit bull. I have loved the breed for more than 10 years and I couldn't. Better yet, go to Pit Bull Rescue Central at this Web site, www.pbrc.net/poppysplace/games/AdultFindabull/findpitbull, and see if you can guess which one of the 26 different breeds commonly mistaken for "pit bulls" is actually a pit bull. It took me 14 tries and I have three I look at every day.

As is widely referenced on animal-friendly Web sites, the American Temperament Testing Society (www.atts.org) released results in 2004 that showed that more than 83 percent of American pit bull terriers, American Staffordshire terriers, and rottweilers, passed rigorous temperament testing. Not impressed? Thinking about the 17 percent that didn't pass? What about when you find out that the same percentage of golden retrievers passed? How about when you see that only 79 percent of collies or 78 percent of beagles passed? Does this make you not want to touch a beagle?

What makes pit bulls different than other dogs is their unfailing need to please their owners and an instinctive loyalty that often leads them to their death - either by the nauseating "sport" of dog fighting or by euthanasia when they do what they have been rewarded for and are then labeled aggressive and dangerous. The truth is that just about every dog gives you what you give them - if you teach them with love and train them with kindness, if you reward them for good behavior and correct bad behavior humanely, they will be good canine citizens regardless of their breed.

On the other hand, if your methods are neglectful or cruel or if you reward them for aggression towards other dogs, or worse, toward people, they will do your bidding even if it means they give up their lives to please you.

Are pit bulls for everyone? No, of course not - but neither are Yorkshire terriers, or labs or pugs. You wouldn't keep someone out of your home or away from your family because they were of a particular descent would you? It's wrong to stereotype breeds for the same reason. While you can make some generalities - like most of one breed doesn't enjoy swimming, or most of another has very high-energy levels - it's wrong to make generalities of temperament based upon negative stereotypes.

When looking at a dog - whether deciding to adopt or just passing them on the street - use common sense. Approach cautiously, ask questions of their handlers and pay

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attention to their faces and bodies for clues. And most important: don't assume anything about a dog you don't know. Just because they're cute and cuddly doesn't mean they won't try to bite you - and just because they look like a pit bull doesn't mean they will.

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