

## **Pit bull owners defend their animals against stereotype**

*By David Phelps  
The Natchez Democrat*

NATCHEZ — So you're in the market for a dog.

You don't want a little toy dog but you also aren't looking for something your guests will mistake for a lion.

A dog that will be loyal to you and your family, but not so much so that grandma's in danger when she comes over to visit.

And you'll take a pass on a dog with a lot of hair, thanks.

Well, sounds like you're looking for an American Staffordshire terrier, or one of its nearly identical cousins, the Staffordshire bull terrier or the American pit bull terrier.

The three breeds are collectively referred to as pit bulls, a name that may have inspired that sharp inhalation of breath you heard from yourself.

Come on, you loved Spot from "Our Gang," didn't you? And Spuds MacKenzie, the original dean of partyology? Pit bulls both.

OK, you shouldn't believe everything you see on television.

But, according to defenders of the breed, you also shouldn't judge pit bulls by the actions of the demented few who breed and train them exclusively to fight.

Originally, the English bred the dogs to help handle cattle and hogs and were prized for their loyalty, courage and athleticism. Unfortunately, the very qualities that made it such a useful dog in the English fields led to its being abused in the fighting pits.

Today, there is much controversy surrounding the breed, which is viewed by many as vicious maulers of children and anyone else that gets within their reach.

Defenders of the dogs say this is unfair and that dogs will do whatever they are trained to do, be it good or bad.

Bobby Cox has owned pit bulls for more than 20 years. He raised his children alongside of them and said he never had any problems.

"Training is everything," he said. "You could train a Lab(rador retriever) to attack people. I never found mine (pit bulls) to be aggressive, but you could train them to be."

He pointed to police dogs that attack on command — German shepherds, mostly — in making his point.

So why all the fuss about pit bulls?

“I think the reason for that is because they’re big dogs and they have big heads, they’re equipped for that.”

The “that” being biting.

And it’s those who train them to use their natural equipment who are the bad guys, advocates say.

And training isn’t limited to preparation for the ring.

Let’s say that, out of consideration for your family and neighbors’ safety, you decide to keep your pit bull outside on a chain in the yard.

“Put any dog on a chain, that’s not a good thing. It makes them angry, aggressive and potentially dangerous,” Concordia Animal Welfare Shelter director Lisa Smith said.

It’s negative reinforcement like this, along with hitting and yelling, that make dogs — no matter the breed — act like they are treated.

Smith herself owns a pit bull and said it gets along well with her other dogs and cats. She acknowledged that the breed is more susceptible to aggressiveness than some other breeds but said training them with positive reinforcement makes the dogs perfectly good pets.

“Look at the orcas at Sea World, they don’t train them with shock collars; they use positive reinforcement,” she said.

So that pit bull snarling from a chain in the neighbors’ yard is really just a big sweetheart with a questionable owner and all it needs is a big hug, right?

Not so fast.

If you live near a dog that you suspect is mistreated or could be a danger to you or others, local law enforcement officials encourage you to call them.

Some of the pit bulls rescued from bad homes — and almost all of those rescued from fighting rings — are too far gone to go out for adoption.

But a surprising amount pass a temperament test endorsed by the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and can be adopted out to loving families.

And if you decide to look into getting a pit bull, either from a breeder or a rescue, the rescue and advocacy Web sites give lots of advice for consideration.

A lot of the best advice, however, comes from Mandy Wise, a volunteer at C.A.W.S.

“You should have a lot of space, maybe an acre in the front and back yard,” Wise, 11, said.

“If you want an inside dog, have a play room where you can move the furniture. If you don’t have enough space, I don’t think you should have a big dog.”

If your new pit bull is to be a second dog, Pit Bull Rescue's Web site advises against having same-gendered dogs. And Wise counsels to "love both dogs equally; it's like kids."