

**Newsweek**

A Dog Who Was Pure Muscle and All Heart

Pit bulls get a bad name, but Esmerelda's only 'killer instinct' was to overwhelm us with affection.

By Ben Rehder

Newsweek

Sept. 17, 2007 issue - Some people love poodles. Others go crazy for cocker spaniels. When it comes to my canine breed of choice, I tend to prefer a rarer dog: the pit bull. For 14 years I owned a friendly, loyal pit bull named Esmerelda.

Ezzy—as I called her—was a gift from a girlfriend. I was 21 at the time and I'd made a few remarks, driven by testosterone, about wanting to own a pit bull someday. The truth is, I probably wouldn't have followed through on getting the dog on my own. Now I hate to think what I would've missed.

I didn't know what to expect when Ezzy arrived. Would this dog—this sweet, frisky pup—rip my throat open while I was sleeping? Would she terrorize toddlers or attack my mailman? It's bred into them, right? The killer instinct?

Well, no. Not this one, anyway. What she did do was annoy my visitors with her overaffectionate personality. She was stealthy about it, though. "Oh, pay no attention to me," she seemed to want to say. "Just continue with your conversation, and forget the fact that I'm creeping onto your lap. Just scratch my ears and everything will be OK."

Ezzy was an eager, willing companion, whatever the activity. She recognized words like "walk," "ride" and "squirrel," and reacted to them with a barking frenzy. Even the jangling of car keys could set her off.

She had some remarkable talents. Ezzy could shred an aluminum can without cutting her lips. She had the dexterity to go up and down the tight spiral staircase to my bedroom, and a knack for intimidating door-to-door salespeople (because they couldn't see her tail wagging happily).

As Ezzy grew older, she turned into quite an impressive specimen: 70 pounds of barrel-chested muscle, with a head like a chunk of granite. Was her massive jaw intimidating? Absolutely. Could she have wreaked havoc if she'd been so inclined? Without question. But she didn't have it in her.

Her lack of killer instinct became obvious when a stray cat began hanging around the house. "This cannot end well," I said to myself. I believed it was only a matter of time before the fur would fly, and there would be one cat fewer in the world.

One day, the cat became so bold he wandered in through an open door, and Ezzy was on him in a flash. The cat hunkered down and prepared for the worst. Ezzy began to wrestle playfully with him, in the same way I roughhoused with her. The cat was indignant about the situation, but he came away in one slobbery, confused piece.

In July of her third year, Ezzy began to exhibit an intense fear of loud noises that would haunt her for the rest of her days—and I got my first real glimpse of her awesome strength. It was fireworks season. When I pulled into the driveway, I didn't hear Ezzy's usual yips from the backyard. I went to investigate, and discovered a dog-size hole in the wooden fence. She'd turned the pickets into kindling.

The next time, she was left inside during a thunderstorm. When I came home, an interior door was ripped in two. There were bite marks on the doorknob. It looked like a crime scene. I found the culprit shuddering in a closet. It was like the joke about the 800-pound gorilla—but with a twist. Where does a terrified pit bull go? Anywhere she wants.

Ezzy lived longer than most large dogs, but just before her 14th birthday she suffered a stroke. Steroids helped her recover, but six months later she began to develop breathing problems, and it was obvious she didn't have much time to live.

When the final day came, my wife and I took Ezzy to our vet. At 80, Dr. Tim McLeod spoke with a gentle, pronounced Texas twang. He helped us get through it—the most difficult thing I'd ever done—with dignity and a sense of calm.

I buried Ezzy beneath the hardpan soil of my backyard, muscling my way past rocks that would've stopped me cold had I been digging for any other purpose. Ezzy had always had a bit of a stubborn streak, and I decided it was fitting I show a bit of her spirit myself.

The next morning the clinic called. Dr. McLeod had passed away in his sleep, just hours after helping Ezzy find her final peace. His funeral was packed with hundreds of mourners. But for me, it was really two services: one for a caring, compassionate Southern gentleman, and one for a pit bull that can never be replaced.

Rehder lives in Dripping Springs, Texas.

URL: <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/20643577/site/newsweek/page/0/>

[MSN Privacy](#) . [Legal](#)

© 2007 MSNBC.com