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## Commentary

### Victor Landa: Blaming the dog for master's misdeeds

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#### San Antonio Express-News

Let me start by saying that in the deeply divisive and highly partisan matter of cat persons versus dog persons, I am squarely on the side of dogs. I am a dog person, always have been.

Let me also say that in the matter of pit bull terriers, I am emphatically in favor of harsh and decisive penalties when they are raised to be aggressive.

There is a well-worn adage that it's not news if a dog bites man. But on Sept. 28, when a pit bull attacked two 9-year-old girls playing on their front lawn, the incident was noticed by all the local news outlets.

Maybe the media attention was stirred by the fact that two little girls were the victims of the attack. Along with babies, the elderly and the handicapped, little girls are perceived to be among the most defenseless among us. So when two 9-year-olds are attacked, in their own neighborhood, we become collectively incensed.

A word now about pit bulls. I will always defend the noble nature of dogs, regardless of breed. Our family includes a Jack Russell terrier that has the run of the house. So I know that dogs, when properly and responsibly cared for, will give undying loyalty and companionship.

Pit bulls are no exception. But I also know that specific dog breeds were developed for specific purposes. And in the case of pit bulls, they were bred to be aggressive.

It's believed that pit bulls are descendants of mastiffs, which caught the attention of Roman emperors who favored them as war dogs. These mastiffs cross-bred throughout Europe and eventually became favored by butchers who used them to keep cattle under control. That bulldog lineage was crossed with the terrier, known for its persistence and focus. It is said that one dog could keep a bull in check by relentlessly biting at it and pestering it.

That trait, as human beings would have it, became spectacle, and the dogs were pitted against all manner of animals for the entertainment of the spectators. That practice is said to have included rats that were dropped into a pit, and the dogs were made to compete for time and quantity of rats killed.

Sometimes the dogs were pitted against each other, and it was considered great sport. Hence the name pit bull. This is hardly the heritage of a hunting dog or a herder whose instincts are honed and honored to benefit its master.

The easy thing is to blame the dog for its aggressiveness. As if the animal had a choice. And it's hard to deny the fighting nature of this breed which, to this day, is victimized in cruel sport. We have the recent and highly publicized case of NFL quarterback Michael Vick, whose career has been seriously affected by his penchant for dogfighting.



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Vick bred the dogs and organized the fights on his expansive property. He is now having to reckon with the law and has lost all his commercial endorsements.

So we can't solely blame an animal for its nature, especially when we know that dogs also have a naturally tender side. The law is clear on this: Domesticated animals are the responsibility of their owner. This is why we have leash laws. But even then, as happened last month, dogs can breach their leashes.

I must add that in the case of pit bulls, the dogs are twice maligned. First, they are made to be aggressive; some owners ignore their more noble nature and raise them in conditions that foster their fighting spirit.

Second, they've become media villains. Pit bulls are not the most frequent aggressors against humans. I believe that distinction belongs to Rottweilers. But pit bulls have been characterized in the media as a symbol of a scrappy nature. It doesn't help that some owners favor these dogs precisely because of their tendency to be aggressive.

What doesn't make sense to me is why some people will breed and nurture pit bulls to be aggressive with no other purpose than aggressiveness itself. If just for the sake of the two 9-year-old girls, this kind of irresponsibility should be forcibly deterred.

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