



## Nice Doggies

by Sam Stall

So I'm running down the street, carrying a stray pit bull in my arms. She's taking it rather well, considering we only met about 30 seconds ago. She's black with white spots and weighs around 50 pounds. Her big, boxy head seems too large for her lean body. She looks like a soldier ant—or a Pez dispenser with teeth.

Why am I carrying her? Because I'm a dog-lover, and I'm trying to help her. Over the years my wife and I have helped plenty of lost or homeless canines. This is no different.

Well, it's a little different.

This adventure began about five minutes ago, when I saw the dog ambling, unescorted, down my street. I called to her but she didn't stop. So I trailed her, waiting for a chance to close in.

I caught a break when the pit spotted a man and a woman walking a puppy. She made a beeline for them. From a distance I saw her and the puppy touch noses. Her heavy tail was swinging back and forth with excitement. The couple seemed far less pleased.

"Go on, get out of here!" the guy said. Then he sprayed the pit with water from a bottle. The dog didn't even notice.

I walked up slowly, knelt down beside the preoccupied pit bull, and petted her tentatively. So far, so good. But I didn't have a leash, and she didn't have a collar for me to grab. In desperation, I took a huge swan dive into the fetid swamp of bad judgment.

I scooped her up.

So now I'm hauling this load of furry whoop-ass down the street, trying to make it home before either my arms or the dog's patience gives out.

It doesn't help that people keep shouting things at me. "That pit bull's gonna eat you up," some guy yells from his pickup truck.

"Is that your dog?" a couple of passersby ask, accusingly. When I say no, they look at me strangely. They're probably thinking, "Then what the hell are you doing?"

What the hell, indeed. I shout down the street to a neighbor, asking him to knock on my front door and get my wife to help me. This startles the pit. She writhes in my arms, raises her head toward my face, and half-heartedly claps her jaws shut. The sound turns my guts to water. I immediately put her down. She bolts off again—straight back to the harassed couple with the puppy.

Another neighbor appears out of nowhere and saves the day by slipping a leash over the pit's head. She hands me the lead. With this simple act the stray ceases to be a random, anonymous animal. She becomes, officially, My Problem.

As dictated by the Universal Code of Dog-lovers, I now have to take care of her and either find her owners (if they're worth finding) or a good home. This is nothing I haven't done many times before, with (among many others) a boxer that wandered into my yard, a collie that walked up onto our porch and peered in our front window, and one very sick basset hound that was left tethered to our front fence. I do this because I'm a big fan of dogs. I've authored or co-authored four books about them, along with numerous magazine articles. My wife and I have always owned at least two—all of them mutts, most former strays.

Because of my background, I was aware, in an academic way, of the stigma attached to pit bulls. But I was about to get an up-close look at how tough it can be to own, assist, or even appear in public with America's most-feared dog.



### Featured Menu



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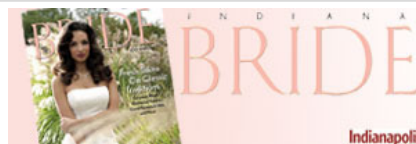


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Lately—between media accounts of dog attacks and Bart Peterson’s summer 2006 call to ban them from the city—these hapless canines have gotten lots of airtime. None of it good. According to statistics compiled by Indianapolis Animal Care & Control, in the first nine months of 2007 they were involved in 150 biting incidents in Marion County. It seems like most of those encounters became front-page news, including the May 24 assault on 7-year-old Camaya Fletcher, who was bitten several times when she got tangled in the chain of a pit bull her mother was dog-sitting. And then there was 61-year-old Jesse Stanley, who was jumped by two pit bulls as he looked over an Indy-area house he’d just purchased.

Nationwide, the bad press helped turn the dogs into sought-after macho props. Even Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick, a guy you’d think wouldn’t have to prove his cajones to anyone, got into the act, bankrolling a dog fighting and breeding operation called Bad Newz Kennels and allegedly personally assisting in the executions of eight of his “underperforming” fighting dogs.

The problem is, nimrods like Vick are everywhere. Which means that their pit bulls are everywhere, too. On any given day at Indianapolis Animal Care & Control facilities, pits and pit mixes comprise more than 30 percent of the population—more than 300 per month. Most, if they don’t carry ID, are euthanized. “We just don’t have the facilities for them,” says IACC spokesperson Media Wilson. “We work with other shelters and rescue groups, but all those places are full because they have the same problem we do.” The problem is way too many pits and not enough qualified, competent people to take them in. I can sympathize, because right now that’s my problem too.

The black-and-white pit bull lies in my front yard, panting. My neighbors gather to inspect her. When my wife carries our 9-month-old son out, a retired surgical nurse from a few doors down physically pushes her away. “Get that baby back,” she warns. “I’ve stitched up too many kids to see that happen to him.”

I’m at a loss. Keeping her is out of the question. Besides having our hands full with a toddler, I have to think of our current pets. One, a crotchety old terrier, is dog-aggressive. The other is Trudy, a pit mix herself. (We’ll get back to her later.) Suffice it to say, neither appreciates unexpected guests.

My wife calls Stacy Coleman, the co-founder and president of a local pit-bull advocacy group called Indy Pit Crew. By chance, I’d run into her a week earlier at a pet store. She comes right over and does a quick assessment, checking to see if the dog is pregnant, in heat, or carrying an ID microchip (no, no, and no). Coleman guesses the pit is maybe a year old.

I ask if she knows of anyone who could take her in for awhile. She says there’s no one. Anywhere. In the entire city. She herself is caring for a litter of pit-bull puppies and their sick, emaciated mother. They were taken from a backyard breeder in Speedway who kept them in a stifling, padlocked, 3-foot-by-3-foot wooden storage shed in the middle of summer.

“I’ve already got several dogs I had to turn away,” she says grimly. “Welcome to my world.”

The sun fades. The neighbors drift off. The dog gazes up at me as I stroke her massive head. Something has to be done.

I play for time. I call our vet and arrange accommodations at his clinic for \$44 a night. A neighbor offers to drive us there. The pit rests her head on my leg as we sit together in the back seat. Somehow she manages to get her leather leash into her mouth and nibbles on it for a second, shearing it cleanly in two.

We drop off the dog and leave. On the way home I think about what my vet said a while back about the breed. He is, to put it mildly, not a fan. He thinks they’re a particularly poor choice for people with young kids. “I don’t have an ax to grind with pit bulls,” he told me. “But there are too many better choices. And by that I mean dogs that, if a child walks across its tail or jumps on them or whatever, nothing’s ever going to happen.”

To be fair, my vet thinks lots of dog breeds, from Rottweilers to Chihuahuas, make poor choices for people with little ones in tow. But he can’t say enough about his two favorites, Labrador retrievers and golden retrievers. I see plenty of both in my Broad Ripple neighborhood. With a tennis ball or stick clutched in their gentle mouths, they tag alongside their human companions, waiting patiently for their owners to marry and relocate to Zionsville. I heartily agree that they’re great dogs. Friendly, easy-to-understand, no surprises. Kind of like the canine version of Jay Leno.

But the thing is, I’ve never cared much for Leno. Same goes for Labs and goldens. They’re a bit too perfect, a bit too by-the-numbers for my tastes. I much prefer an underdog with lots of personality, a canine version of Chris Rock, if you will.

Here’s my dirty little secret. I actually like pit bulls. A lot. Admittedly, that appreciation took a very long time to bloom. Seven years ago, I’d have pegged them as unpredictable killers. In a breed guide I authored, I blithely dismissed them all as “bear traps with legs.” But that was before I knew them personally.

My introduction to the breed was entirely random. They just started showing up on my street. One day my wife and I were sitting on a neighbor’s porch when a distraught woman approached us, asking if we’d seen her dog. Fighting back tears, she told us, in a slightly embarrassed tone, that it was a pit bull. She was terrified that whoever found her “big baby” would keep him and use him for fighting. “But he’s not a fighter,” she sobbed.

A bit later she walked by again, much happier. The dog was by her side. He was brown, very friendly, with a muscular body that looked like it was carved out of granite. My wife got him a bowl of water. After he finished, he slimed both of us with dog kisses.

I had another random encounter three years ago, as my wife and I drove down Broad Ripple Avenue on Christmas Eve around 11 p.m. We spotted two huge snow-white pits padding around the Applebee’s parking lot. My wife bailed out on the sidewalk and called to the dogs while I tried to find a parking space. Yes, I know how unbelievably stupid this sounds. As I watched the two dogs thundering toward my wife, I fleetingly wondered if I was about to become a widower. But the duo, a male and a female, just wanted to be petted. The only reason we didn’t take them home was because we couldn’t wrangle them into our car. The male, who easily topped 80 pounds, had a head wider than a shovel blade. I’m dumb, but not that dumb. Still, we made calls to area vets as soon as possible, trying to find their home. The female was reunited with her owner the next morning, but the male’s, so far as we know, was never located.

But what really turned around our thinking was Trudy, whom we adopted by accident two years ago. I say “by accident” because when we got her as a puppy, we were told she was most likely a combination of Chihuahua and terrier. She’d been found emaciated, covered with fleas, and tied to a cinderblock in an abandoned house. When we first saw her she weighed five pounds and was roughly the size of a Beanie Baby. “We don’t think she’ll get

much bigger," her foster mom assured us.

Six months and about 50 pounds later, we knew that the only way Trudy could have any Chihuahua in her was if she'd eaten one. She has a reddish coat, the vague outline of a German shepherd's saddle on her back, and the wrinkled brow and dark, soulful eyes of a pit bull. She even displays many of that breed's more endearing behaviors, of which they really do have quite a few. Like her full-blooded brethren, she enjoys sitting on people's feet, running around the yard in big loops at warp speed (pit owners call these "zoomies"), and generally acting like a clown.

Of course, she also has other, more familiar pit-bull traits. She is freakishly strong. And her bite—well, I've never seen anything like it. We buy special compressed-Nylon chew toys for her that are so hard you could use them to hammer nails. Trudy can grind one down to a stub in a couple of weeks.

Why would I let such a powerful dog live in my home? Because Trudy has never used her teeth on anything but her toys. She can bite through sheet metal, yet she sleeps with a spit-soaked teddy bear and was once chased out of our yard and into the house by an unusually loud cricket. This is no accident. We worked diligently and carefully to make sure she was socialized and trained, so her aggressive tendencies never manifested—if they ever existed.

That's why I shake my head when someone tries to portray all pits as natural-born killers. Because I've never met one that's even remotely like the animals they describe. And I've met plenty, in plenty of dicey situations. In fact, my experiences have been so positive that someday, if circumstances permit, I'd like to own one. Or probably two. Granted, they're not the easiest-to-manage pets in the world. They need considerable training, exercise, and supervision. And like all breeds, they have their own peculiar issues. But they're also goofy and fun—kind of like Curly from The Three Stooges, if Curly worked out for a really long time with free weights. (And no, I don't want one for a macho crutch. I understand that my numerous shortcomings are far too intractable for a dog, any dog, to fix.)

My opinion of pits is, needless to say, not the mainstream view. This is driven home to me during the days following my apprehension of the black-and-white stray. While she cools her heels at my vet's office, we search Central Indiana for a new owner. No dice. Anyone willing to take in a wayward pit already has one. Or two. Or 10.

So how did it come to this? Why is helping a pit bull so different from helping any other kind of dog?

Every pit is an individual, but some traits are common to most of the breed. Because of their fighting background (they were developed around the early 19th century to fight in pits against bulls and dogs), they can be aggressive toward other dogs. Some can be highly aggressive. This is why pit-bull experts recommend keeping them out of dog parks and never walking them unleashed. "This isn't the kind of dog you're going to turn loose at the Broad Ripple Bark Park and let the chips fall where they may," says Rebecca Stevens, executive director of the Humane Society for Hamilton County (and the owner of a pit bull).

Perhaps because fighting dogs were constantly handled before, during, and after bouts, their owners—if they wanted to live—used specimens that were docile with humans as they were savage with four-legged opponents. Animals that displayed human aggression of any sort, for any reason, were usually killed on the spot. Thus, well-bred, well-socialized pit types have traditionally shown scant interest in attacking people.

In late 19th- and early 20th-century America, pit-type breeds were considered ideal family pets. Buster Brown's dog was a pit, as was Petey from The Little Rascals. Helen Keller, Fred Astaire, and John Steinbeck owned them, too. Back then, if you told the average person that these dogs were vicious killers, he or she would have scoffed. But if you'd mentioned bloodhounds (one of the most gentle animals to walk the Earth), they might have cringed. The breed's use as a plot device in Uncle Tom's Cabin gave it an undeserved reputation for bloodthirstiness.

By the 1940s the German shepherd got its turn to be vilified. Then in the 1970s it was the Doberman pinscher, followed by the Rottweiler. Finally, in the 1980s, the pit bull began its moment of infamy. Why? Because, to put it simply, they look scary. The pit bull's resolute jaw made it very attractive to macho posers who wanted to trade in their Dobies and Rotts for something even more menacing-looking. "They were originally bred for fighting, and have very high pain tolerance and an incredibly strong jaw," says Dr. Andrew Luescher, director of the Animal Behavior Clinic at Purdue University. "And because they have terrier in them, they have a very pronounced predatory aggression. That's what's used for fighting. They train them to redirect that aggression toward other dogs. That's really not normal behavior, but they train them that way."

This boom in poorly bred and badly trained animals continues today—with a vengeance. Animal shelters from coast to coast are full of stray, surrendered, or seized pit bulls. And some of these animals, thanks to their genetics and upbringing, really are dangerous. "The challenge that pits have right now is that they're being used so intensely for dog-fighting," says Martha Boden, CEO of the Humane Society of Indianapolis. "We have so much dog-fighting that they're being bred to have traits that none of us would want to have in a pet." The Humane Society sorts the good (of which there are many) from the bad via exhaustive temperament and medical tests.

Coleman from Indy Pit Crew knows all about those irresponsible breeders and owners. She deals with them personally and has seen dogs that were routinely tortured and beaten to make them "tougher," fed everything from steroids to gunpowder to make them "crazy," and subjected to not only backyard fights but the newest twist on animal abuse, called "trunking." Some idiot, somewhere, got the idea to toss two dogs into the trunk of a car, drive around for a while, then pop the trunk and find out which of the two, savagely brawling in stifling darkness, survived. What's both galling and telling is that these dogs almost never turn on their persecutors.

Coleman wasn't much of a pit-bull fan until about eight years ago. One day while driving home from work, she spotted a dog following a man on the sidewalk. When the man tried to kick the dog, Coleman impulsively pulled over, opened her car door, and called for it to get in. It did. "I turned around and realized it was a pit bull and that her face was bloody," she recalls. "I thought, 'Oh my God, I'm in the car with a bloody pit bull.'"

She took the dog home, rehabilitated it, named it Gertie, and keeps it to this day. Even now, however, she doesn't think of herself as strictly a pit-bull person. She helps them because they so desperately need it. Over the years she's fostered more than two dozen in her home, including one named Lilly who made headlines last winter when she was stabbed six times in the neck by her owner then turned loose to die outside a southside apartment complex. Fortunately the pit was rescued and given a new, much happier home. Coleman recently received a photo of her with her new owner. The pit was wearing a party hat.

Lilly's story is horrible, but far from unique. At Petfinder.com I peruse page after page of rescued pit bulls in need of homes. Their bios are unbelievably harrowing. Dogs found in Dumpsters with their throats cut; dogs starved

until they were living skeletons; dogs wearing neck chains so tight they grew into their skin and had to be surgically removed. "Please give this little boy a chance," one bio pleads.

I snap some pictures of my own stray, which are then posted on a couple of rescue sites. I don't expect much.

The ads for pit-bull puppies in the back of Dog Fancy take a slightly different tone. In case you didn't know, this magazine is the very paragon of a hoity-toity dog-lover's publication—the kind that features a centerfold of Chihuahua puppies in the August 2007 issue. Yet in that same issue, among the breeder advertisements at the back of the book (right next to a lengthy disclaimer about how Dog Fancy's parent company abhors dogfighting and won't run ads with even a whiff of impropriety), there are postings for several kennels with names like Raging Thunder and Web sites like Ruthlessbluepits.com. Their dogs can cost hundreds, even thousands, of dollars. All while pit bulls are executed by the hundreds, every day, in shelters nationwide.

I submit that anyone who clicks on a Web site called "ruthlessbluepits.com" is not a suitable pit-bull owner.

Actually, I'm beginning to think that the fabled "suitable pit-bull owner" is a myth. A week goes by with no leads for my stray. Every day I take the black-and-white pit for walks through the neighborhood surrounding the veterinary clinic. People in cars and on the street shoot me dirty looks. They're probably wondering where I keep my meth lab or why I've wandered so far from the trailer park.

I also do some informal behavioral testing. To check if she's food-aggressive, I bring in a couple of McDonald's cheeseburgers (no ketchup, mustard, pickles, or onions), offer her bites, and then take the food away. I finish with the same number of fingers that I had when I started. Then, quite by accident, I get to see how she reacts to another canine. One evening a vet tech brings in her dog, Elvis—some sort of Shih Tzu/poodle/squirrel mix—and lets it run around the kennel area. When I return with the pit from a walk, this mop with legs rushes up, barks furiously, jumps on its hind legs, and paws her face. In the canine world this is known as "asking for it." But the pit seems merely surprised, then amused. She playfully cuffs Elvis back. The squirrel dog wets himself and runs away.

The animal's terrified overreaction doesn't seem all that different from the general public's take on pit bulls, though I do not mean to belittle this fear. I know a few people who were on the receiving ends of attacks (one involving a pit, the other two not), and it changed their lives completely. In a heartbeat they went from loving dogs to fearing them. I'm sure that if it happened to me, or to someone I love (the horrific story of Amaya Hess—the Indianapolis toddler who was savagely mauled by a pit—comes to mind), I'd quickly lose my clinical detachment. I might even be writing a different article right now.

As of September, Indianapolis Animal Care & Control had investigated 866 dog bites in the city. Pit bulls and pit-bull mixes accounted for 167 of those reported bites, a little over 19 percent and the most bites of any other breed, not counting the 194 bites attributed to mutts, mixes, and strays. Labrador retrievers and Lab mixes tied with German shepherds and German-shepherd mixes for the second-highest number of bites (69).

Statistically, it's clear that pit bulls are involved in a disproportionate number of incidents—though the odds of having such an encounter at all are quite low. The odds of a human hurting or killing a pit bull seem much higher. It happens many times, every day.

After a week of boarding at my vet's office, my black-and-white pit seems no closer to finding a permanent home. And then, out of the blue, one of the vet techs calls to ask if she can take the dog home for the night. After grilling her about her experience with dogs—which turns out to be extensive—I say yes, absolutely. The next day she says that a friend of hers, who already has a pit, met the dog and would like to adopt. My wife and I call the woman and quiz her thoroughly about her motivations. Her current pit is a neutered male with uncropped ears, and it doesn't have a stupid name like Felony or Diesel. I arrange to meet her. She's leading the black-and-white pit, who clearly adores her. So I sign off and leave the meeting feeling relieved.

Mission accomplished. I managed to save one pit bull. But in the six days it took me to do that, approximately 60 others were liquidated at Animal Care & Control. How many of them, I wondered, were good dogs that only needed a second chance with a better owner?

Which brings us to the central problem: overpopulation. As even the most hardcore owners and breed advocates will admit, there are just too many pit bulls out there, and not enough responsible people to take them in.

A pit bull, to put it simply, is not for beginners. They belong in the hands of owners who can invest a great deal of time socializing, training, and exercising them. "This is a dog for a seasoned pet-owner, not a first-timer," says Stevens from the Hamilton County shelter. "And it's not a breed for anyone who's not serious. People will say you're crazy. They may think you're irresponsible just for having the breed. Family members might refuse to come to your house. You may not be able to get homeowner's insurance or live in certain places. You have to know what you're getting into."

The problem is that pits are being bred by people who, mildly put, don't have their best interests in mind. Generations of work to keep them from attacking people is being subverted by poor breeding, starvation, and torture. Many experts think a breed ban (which has already been done in Denver and Miami) isn't the answer. In fact, when Mayor Peterson pushed for a breed-specific ban in Indianapolis last summer (spurred specifically by the Amaya Hess attack), he found that he lacked enough support in the City-County Council to get it done. Instead, the Council passed a dangerous-dog ordinance, which took effect on January 1, 2007. The ordinance calls for penalties, including fines up to \$1,000, for owners of dogs that injure a person or another animal.

Most dog advocates suggest that the best solution would be to strictly enforce mandatory spaying and neutering for all dogs. That, plus stiff, strictly enforced penalties for neglectful owners and jail time for backyard breeders, would end the pit-bull overpopulation problem in a few years. Heck, it would end the entire stray-dog problem in a few years.

But that hasn't happened yet. Until it does, the arms race to create ever more intimidating dogs continues. Now that every bone-thug who wants a pit bull has one, there seems to be a new desire to build something even scarier. This is typically done by crossing pits with other big breeds to create larger, more powerful hybrids, one of the dumbest ideas in the history of dumb ideas. The problem is that while the typical pit carries serious inhibitions against attacking humans, the animals it's crossed with, including Neapolitan mastiffs, presa canarios, and others, usually don't. Some, in fact, were created to kill people. The final result of such experimentation can be like Frankenstein's monster—enormous, powerful, and prone to turning on its creator.

This is happening right now, in backyards and basements all over Indiana, though ironically Coleman thinks this ratcheting up of the canine arms race may lead to the salvation of pit bulls. "We're seeing an evolution of dogs

being bred to be bigger and more powerful," she says. "Eventually it's going to become so obvious that it's a different animal that they won't even be called pit bulls anymore."

It's been weeks, but during idle moments my mind still drifts back to the black-and-white stray. I hope she has a good life. I try not to think about the hundreds of others who never will. I figure I'll help out by keeping an eye on my street, waiting for the next friendless pit bull to amble by.

I don't think I'll have to wait long.