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Shelter reverses stance on adopting out pit bulls



Staff photo | Dan Lopez

The Metro Animal shelter has changed its policy and will now offer pit bulls for adoption. Pictured is Reno, a 3-year-old male pit bull and shelter manager Kelly Strickland at the center in Tuscaloosa on Tuesday.

By Tommy Stevenson

Associate Editor

TUSCALOOSA | Kelley Strickland would be the first to admit that pit bulls have a bad reputation.

But the Tuscaloosa Metro Animal Shelter adoption officer says that reputation is not entirely accurate and that the dogs “can be the nicest, sweetest dogs you’ll ever come in contact with.”

So, after many years of not offering them for adoption and having to put countless pit bulls to sleep, the shelter has launched a new policy of offering carefully screened examples of the breed for adoption.

“We’ve already had one adoption, and we’ve got one more ready and another that will be ready as soon as we get her spayed,” Strickland said.

The change in policy came after Strickland attended a workshop in Oakland, Calif., last year on the care and handling of pit bulls and got approval from shelter director Judy Hill to begin the program.

“We always have one or two of them here and, at one time, had as many as 16,” Strickland said. “Most of them were as nice as could be, and it just broke our heart we couldn’t find good families for them.”

Right now, the shelter is looking for a good owner for 3-year-old Reno, a brown and white pit bull that is so affectionate that Strickland had a hard time talking about him Tuesday because he kept licking her in the face as he sat on a chair next to her.

“Reno is a great dog and is going to make somebody a very good pet,” she said between wet dog kisses.

But, because some “pits,” as Strickland calls them, have been trained to be aggressive, especially toward other dogs, not all of them are suitable for adoption, nor are all people suitable to adopt them.

“We have some special rules in place for pits,” she said. “We do an on-site visit for any prospective adopter and make sure if it is a male dog there are no other males in the home. Male pits tend to be aggressive toward other males no matter what.”

The shelter also charges more to adopt a pit bull because of the extra screening, which includes checking whether a potential owner has had any complaints lodged with animal control officials.

The cost to adopt a pit bull is \$125; the cost for other dogs is \$75.

Animal shelter worker Petra Jonas said that the perception of bit bulls as aggressive and dangerous stems from their origins as dogs bred for “bull baiting,” a long-outlawed sport in which the dogs fought bulls.

After that, many were bred to fight each other, a practice much in the news lately after Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick pleaded guilty to charges related to involvement in a dog-fighting ring.

“They have a very high ‘prey drive’, and if you train them for fighting, they will be totally focused on that,” Jonas said. “If they get in the red zone there is nothing you can do to stop them. Nothing.

“They are so focused that they ignore everything else.”

In the case of pit bulls that are not trained to fight, however, the very attributes that make them good fighters can make them loyal, protective pets, Strickland said.

“A lot of people are afraid of pit bulls, and Michael Vick didn’t help at all,” Strickland said. “Pits are very intelligent and bond well with people. For some people, a pit that had had a good up-bringing is the ideal dog.”

The first pit bull adopted under the shelter’s new policy went to Jonathan Bickley, a Birmingham student, who reported Tuesday that he could’ not be happier with his new pet, which he named Tyson.

“I haven’t had many dogs in my life, but this is the best one I have ever had,” said Bickley, who adopted Tyson about a month ago. “He is very affectionate and very loyal.

“I haven’t gotten anything but compliments on him.”

Reach Tommy Stevenson at tommy.stevenson@tuscaloosanews.com or 205-722-0194.