



The Oregonian

Vicious rumor

Pit bulls' image is the breed's worst enemy, and the normally people-friendly dogs swamp shelters

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Maui is one of the most joyful dogs you could meet, greeting you with a wriggle that won't stop.

But, more often than not, when people meet a dog that looks like Maui, they don't notice her wagging tail. Instead, they fear her -- because Maui is a pit bull.

The perception of pit bulls often is that they're some sort of cold-blooded killers whose supernatural jaws will snap any living creature in two.

Pawsitively Pit Bull (www.pawsitivelypitbull.org), a Portland nonprofit group, is trying to change that image, adopting pit bulls facing death in shelters and providing information and advocacy for the breed.

"When we got Maui, she was scared, aggressive and she'd had at least one litter," Darren Linder, Pawsitively Pit Bull president, said, shaking his head in frustration. "You can't ask these dogs to tell you their stories."

Maui won the canine equivalent of the lottery when the nonprofit took her in. Even in dog-friendly Portland, most people won't consider adopting a pit bull.

"We're overwhelmed with the numbers," said Mike Oswald, Multnomah Animal Services director. There were 1,264 pit bulls and pit bull-mixes in the county shelter in 2006, almost 30 percent of all dogs the shelter handled. And while roughly 85 percent of the other dogs were reunited with their owners or found new homes, only 40 percent of the pit bulls did.

Multnomah County isn't alone. Pit bulls account for up to 80 percent of the dogs in big city shelters.

How did we become so awash in pit bulls? And how do we get ourselves out of this mess?

Some of the blame might go to media coverage of the last 20 years. In her book, "The Pit Bull Placebo: The Media, Myths and Politics of Canine Aggression" (Anubis Publishing, \$24.95), Karen Delise chronicles the coverage of "vicious" breeds through American history. Remember when we were all terrified of Doberman pinschers? And Rottweilers? Now it is pit bulls.

A media sensation

The press has been the worst for pit bulls, though. A barrage of news stories for the last 20 years has portrayed these dogs as evil, blood-lusting creatures.

"Our monsters need to be increasingly terrible in order to keep pace with a society that's easily bored," the New York writer said.

A 1987 Time magazine article, "Time Bomb on Legs," said, "It's as if the vicious hound of the Baskervilles that burst upon Sherlock Holmes out of the fog has returned to haunt the streets of America."

Similar coverage, repeated in television reports, magazines and some newspapers, created an unparalleled mythology about the breed, Delise said.

And bad press, in the case of dogs, leads to rising popularity. Her book chronicles the rise and fall of negative publicity about Dobermans and Rottweilers -- and a mirrored rise and fall in their registration statistics with the American Kennel Club.

Pit bulls aren't registered with the AKC, but there is no doubt their numbers have increased in the last 20 years. In 1986, for example, they were just 6 percent of the dogs that came into the Multnomah County shelter system.

And it's not the most dog-friendly people who are attracted to dogs with bad reputations.

"The image is directly responsible for who wants this dog. When collies became famous because of Lassie, they appealed to a certain portion of the population," Delise said. "Every time the media prints one of these articles that says these dogs want human flesh, you are only putting these dogs in the hands of people who will put these dogs at risk and will abuse these dogs. It's a vicious cycle."

However, the graphic reporting of the dog-fighting scandal surrounding Atlanta Falcons quarterback Michael Vick might be a step in the right direction for this breed. This time, the dogs were portrayed in part as victims. **Truth vs. myth**

Pit bulls are large, powerful dogs. They started out as farm dogs and butcher's dogs, but many have been bred for dog fighting for more than 100 years, and there is no doubt that dog-to-dog aggression is a problem.

"One hundred percent are not dog-aggressive, but I'd say that 85 percent are more dog-aggressive than the average dog," said Amanda Gribben, executive director of Pawsitively Pit Bull.

Many pit bulls have to be the only dog in a home. Many aren't good candidates for doggie day care or dog parks.

That's a big consideration for owners.

The breed is overwhelmingly people-friendly. At dog fights, owners of the opposing dogs often bathe the dogs before the fight and don't get bitten even in that environment.

Too many pit bulls are chained outside, and some are abused. A dog of any breed is likely to become aggressive toward people with that kind of treatment. **An active breed**

Pit bulls are very active, athletic dogs that need an outlet for their energy.

Just ask Diane Williams. Her adopted pit bulls, Macko and ZoZo, are 12 years old and have slowed down a lot. But they still go swimming three times a week for an hour each time, and they still go on long walks.

But that's nothing like when they were younger, and Williams bought a specially designed dog cart for the strong, energetic dogs to pull. Every day, she would ride on the cart through her Belmont neighborhood to give her dogs the chance to use their muscles.

Not every pit bull has their energy, but many are very busy dogs. They can be great agility competitors, weight-pull competitors and jogging companions. There is a program in Washington state that's training pit bulls to become narcotics-, explosives- and arson-detection dogs for law enforcement.

An active dog takes more commitment but also bring a special kind of bonding with their owners. "These dogs are my heart. I wouldn't trade them for anything," Williams said. **A community response**

The fact remains that the number of pit bulls being born overwhelms the demand for the dogs. Officials of area shelters meet regularly and have identified pit bulls as the top priority for community outreach.

While most people spay or neuter their pets, this often isn't true of pit bulls. Plans are in the works for a special spay/neuter program targeting the breed.

The bottom line is to see these animals as dogs. Smart dogs, active dogs, powerful dogs -- but dogs.

"These dogs need patience, consistency and love," Pawsitively Pit Bull's Linder said.

Just like any dog.

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