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BAD DOG?: No way, say pit bull owners, who insist their pets get a bum rap

By [Ryan Sabalow \(Contact\)](#)
Sunday, July 29, 2007

Petey, a flop-eared American pit bull terrier, was the iconic image of childhood mischief.

The black-and-white pooch, with a circle of grease paint penciled around his right eye, romped with various Little Rascals in the series of short films "Our Gang," filmed during the '20s and '30s.

Flash forward 80 years, and a new image of pit bulls has emerged, an image that some say has left a real black eye on the breed.

Earlier this month, Redding police officers responded to an east Redding home after a pit bull reportedly bit a man.

Before finally dying, Soldier, a 1-year-old pit bull, was run over twice by a squad car, blasted with pepper spray, zapped with a stun gun, shot once with a 12-gauge shotgun and again with an officer's handgun.

At least one Redding city councilman thinks the incident may have revealed a need for strengthening existing dangerous-dog laws, or even banning pit bull ownership altogether.

"We shouldn't be putting officers or the public in these types of positions with these type of dogs," Councilman Patrick Jones said Thursday.

He plans to raise the issue at an upcoming City Council meeting.

But are pit bulls dangerous dogs, or is it merely a media-fueled image crisis?

Bad dog

On the cover of rap artist DMX's 2003 album "Grand Champ" is an image of a pit bull very different than the cuddly Petey.

The cover depicts a muscled, brown pit bull, ears clipped, with a heavy wrought-iron chain attached to its collar. Clearly, the heavy chain is the only thing holding the dog back from attacking.

Photo Gallery

PIT BULLS



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Do you favor a ban on pit bulls?

- No, pit bulls can be great pets, and the government shouldn't be telling people what dogs they can and can't own.
- No, but I think there should be harsher restrictions on who can own one.
- Yes, though I'd rather a ban extended to all vicious dog breeds.
- Yes, pit bulls are vicious and bred to kill.

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Photo Gallery

WOULD YOU BE IN FAVOR OF BANNING PIT BULLS? ASKED FRIDAY, AT THE REDDING LIBRARY.

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Grand champ, by the way, is street lingo for an animal that's won five-straight dog fights.

Snarling pit bulls baring their fangs on rap album covers and in music videos have become as ubiquitous as women in revealing bikinis standing beside lowrider cars.

The dog breed's reputation as brutal street fighters wasn't helped when earlier this month NFL star quarterback Michael Vick was indicted for allegedly staging pit bull fights for purses in the tens of thousands of dollars.

Pit bulls also have become synonymous with headline-generating dog-mauling cases; and cities, counties and states around the country have responded by pursuing bans on the breed.

The New York Times reports that at least 100 municipalities in the country have enacted such bans. Ohio also passed a ban on dangerousdog breeds, but the law later was shot down by an appellate court.

Other counties and states have gone so far as to create dangerous-dog Web sites similar to California's Megan's



Michael Smith, 58, Redding
"No, because pit bulls are very loveable and good animals. I think the people who have a vicious pit bull and they attack somebody, they should be sentenced to the maximum time." [View gallery »](#)
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Law site for registered sex offenders. They show real-time maps of registered dangerous dogs complete with mug shots, addresses and a list of offenses, the Times reported.

Still, although animal control officials say pit bulls keep them busy in Shasta County, there have been no fatal pit bull attacks on humans in recent years, according to Record Searchlight archives.

Notable attacks, however, pop up from time to time in the north state.

Arguably the worst was in 1998, when an 11-year-old Tehama County boy lost an arm and an ear when he was mauled by a pack of dogs that included Rottweilers, pit bulls and mutts that got loose from a neighbor's property in Rancho Tehama.

Gentle giants

Haven Human Society president Norm Ryan said his animal regulation officers' statistics show pit bulls are not the most bite-prone dogs within the city limits. That dubious distinction goes to Labrador retrievers. Labs accounted for 22 bites, seven of which were serious, in 2006, according to Haven.

Pit bulls came in second, however, with a tally of 13 bites, four of which were serious. With 12 reported bites, the Jack Russell terrier was No. 3.

"What, are we going to ban Jack Russell terriers, too?" Ryan said, laughing at the idea of a ban on pit bulls.

Similarly, Charlie Johnson scoffs at the idea of pit bulls being deadly killers, and he shared a story to illustrate the gentleness of the American pit bull terriers that he breeds.

The 37-year-old Oak Run man said that recently a father and his toddler son came over to have a look at a litter of puppies, birthed by his now 3-year-old red nose pit bull he calls Little Mommas. The family wanted to buy one.

He said as he and the father talked, the boy walked up to the dog, who was sitting by herself chewing on a bone. The boy, for no apparent reason, slapped the dog in the eye.

Little Mommas, Johnson said, simply got up, turned her tail to the boy, plopped back down and

continued munching on her bone.

It's his dog's gentle nature, Johnson says, that leaves him so incensed when he sees news reports portraying pit bulls as killer beasts.

"When you see them in the news, they don't show the dog sitting next to a cat and licking it," Johnson said. "They don't show the pit bull in someone's lap being nice."

Mayra Morris, the program manager at Shasta County Animal Regulation, does not favor a breed-specific ban for much the same reason.

"I get mad at people saying all pit bulls should die," Morris said, after sticking her fingers into a young pit bull's kennel at the Shasta County Animal Shelter. The pooch licked her fingers.

"We get a lot of pit bulls in here that are nice dogs."

Morris said county animal control officers do pick up their share of pit bulls in the county because it's a popular breed, but they also pick up plenty of aggressive retrievers, heelers and other popular dogs, too.

To demonstrate her point, she walked back to the shelter's quarantine area where dangerous dogs are kept. Of the six or so dogs, among them a chow, a lab, and a jittery little terrier mutt, there was just one pit bull mutt that looked mostly like a Labrador retriever.

"It can't be breed discrimination," Morris said of a possible pit bull ban. "It has to be about the actions of the animal."

A law with teeth

When told that the Shasta County Animal Shelter didn't have a single pit bull in its quarantined dangerous dog area, Ryan said that's hardly the case within the city limits.

"You should see my quarantine kennels," he said. "Of the 14 (dangerous dogs) here, seven of them are pit bulls or pit bull mixes."

Ryan said he's no pit bull hater, either. He used to own pit bulls, which he said he trained not to be aggressive.

But the problem, he said, is that there are many pit bull owners who like the feeling of having an intimidating-looking dog. Others, such as drug dealers, actually want them to be aggressive, he said.

Ryan opposes a ban on the dogs, but he said his animal control officers would enforce it if the city passed such regulations.

Others, like 48-year-old Cottonwood dog trainer Susan Welch, say that pit bulls can make good pets for those who are dedicated enough to extensively train them.

She said she wishes animal shelters would offer a course on safely training pit bulls before they're adopted.

She thinks a ban on the dogs would lead to a situation where city officials target breeds based on the latest hype.

As for the criminals and others who want the dogs to hurt humans or other dogs, she doesn't think a ban would do anything to stop them from owning pit bulls.

"The laws don't mean anything to those people anyway," she said.

Reporter Ryan Sabalow can be reached at 225-8344 or at rsabalow@redding.com. The Associated Press contributed to this report.

Redding dog bites by breed in 2006

So, you think your dog wouldn't hurt a fly? You might be surprised to see this list of dog bites reported to Redding animal control officers in 2006:

1. **Lab** — Minor bites: 15, Major bites: 7, Total bites: 22.
2. **Pit bull** — Minor bites: 9, Major bites: 4, Total bites: 13.
3. **Jack Russell** — Minor bites: 9, Major bites: 3, Total bites: 12.
4. **Heeler** — Minor bites: 3, Major bites: 8, Total bites: 11.
5. **Rottweiler** — Minor bites: 4, Major bites: 4, Total bites: 8.
6. **Terrier** — Minor bites: 6, Major bites: 2, Total bites: 8.
7. **German shepherd** — Minor bites: 5, Major bites: 2, Total bites: 7.
8. **Dachshund** — Minor bites: 2, Major bites: 3, Total bites: 5.
9. **Spaniel** — Minor bites: 1, Major bites: 4, Total bites: 5.
10. **Australian shepherd** — Minor bites: 1, Major bites: 3, Total bites: 4.
11. **St. Bernard** — Minor bites: 1, Major bites: 2, Total bites: 3.
12. **Husky/Malamute** — Minor bites: 0, Major bites: 3, Total bites: 3.
13. **Lhasa Apaso** — Minor bites: 0, Major bites: 3, Total bites: 3.
14. **Akita** — Minor bites: 1, Major bites: 2, Total bites: 3.
15. **Doberman** — Minor bites: 1, Major bites: 2, Total bites: 3.
16. **Weimaraner** — Minor bites: 1, Major bites: 1, Total bites: 2.
17. **Basset hound** — Minor bites: 1, Major bites: 1, Total bites: 2.
18. **Miniature pinscher** — Minor bites: 2, Major bites: 0, Total bites: 2.
19. **Chihuahua** — Minor bites: 2, Major bites: 0, Total bites: 2.
20. **Mastiff** — Minor bites: 1, Major bites: 1, Total bites: 2.
21. **Boxer** — Minor bites: 1, Major bites: 1, Total bites: 2.
22. **German Shorthaired Pointer** — Minor bites: 1, Major bites: 1, Total bites: 2.
23. **Afghan** — Minor bites: 0, Major bites: 1, Total bites: 1.
24. **Yorkshire terrier** — Minor bites: 1, Major bites: 0, Total bites: 1.
25. **Poodle** — Minor bites: 0, Major bites: 1, Total bites: 1.
26. **Beagle** — Minor bites: 0, Major bites: 1, Total bites: 1.
27. **Golden retriever** — Minor bites: 0, Major bites: 1, Total bites: 1.
28. **Chow** — Minor bites: 0, Major bites: 1, Total bites: 1.
29. **Bouvier des Flandres** — Minor bites: 0, Major bites: 1, Total bites: 1.
30. **Pekinese** — Minor bites: 0 Major bites: 1 Total bites: 1.
31. **Mini schnauzer** — Minor bites: 0, Major bites: 1, Total bites: 1.
32. **Cocker spaniel** — Minor bites: 0, Major bites: 1, Total bites: 1.
33. **Border collie** — Minor bites: 1, Major bites: 0, Total bites: 1.

Source: Capt. Lee Anne Smith, Redding Animal Regulation

Comments

Posted by Yocal on July 29, 2007 at 6:06 a.m. ([Suggest removal](#))

Labs would be outlawed ahead of pits? Then the Jack Russell's would need to be targeted next, since they have 12 bites for the year, then those dangerous heeler's would have to go next, and it would only be a matter of time before we arrived at your pets breed, and had driven dogs into extinction altogether. Patrick Jones, get a clue, before this city's dog owners rally to have you banned!

Posted by NorthStateBicyclist on July 29, 2007 at 6:33 a.m. ([Suggest removal](#))

It's funny, because the real issue we have in the county are dogs that bark all day long and the owners seemingly don't hear it or ignore it to the consternation of their neighbors.

So, the noise another example of irresponsible animal owners. The real issue is animal control by the owners...not more laws.

Posted by johnharris on July 29, 2007 at 6:42 a.m. ([Suggest removal](#))

Ryan, reporting the quantity of bites without also reporting the corresponding quantity of dogs is misleading. What matters is the tendency of a given breed to be aggressive (which is the entire point of your article). I would guess that the population of labs far exceeds the population of pit bulls and that on a per-head basis, bites are more frequent among pit bulls.

What also matters, though, is the capacity for harm. It may be the case, for example, that lions in captivity attack less frequently than cocker spaniels. That will be of little comfort, of course, to the lion keeper.

Pit bulls were bred for specific, now-obsolete purposes and by their nature should not live except under lock or chain among any children and non-owning human beings. Arguments extolling their cute looks or sweet temperaments are vain. Lions, and tigers, and bears are cute, too. Parents who keep pit bulls around children are reckless.

I would not suggest that all pit bulls be killed - that would be inhumane. They should no longer be bred, however, so that they become extinct.

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