

## Pit bull owners say rep gives breed bad rap

By Thomas Benning  
Tuesday, September 4, 2007

Steven Allison is certain Lady is the best dog he has ever owned.

“Lord, I love her,” said the Greenback resident. “I wouldn’t get rid of her for nothing.”

Lady must be a Lab, right? Or a golden retriever, beagle, poodle or any other dog that generally evokes such high praise.

Not quite. Lady is a 1.5-year-old pit bull terrier — perhaps the most feared breed in the country.

But Allison and other pit bull owners say the breed has a bad rap, that pit bulls don’t fit into the common image of fearsome, snarling, biting dogs.

“You just have to be around Lady,” he said. “She’s well-temperamented. She’s good with kids. She’s not a mean dog. She don’t bother a thing.”

Pit bulls are a complicated matter, especially in light of the federal dog fighting charges against NFL superstar Michael Vick. While pit bulls aren’t the only dogs used for fighting, they are the most commonly fought. Their association with fighting and their increasing popularity has left many unsure of how to deal with the dogs.

“Nearly every call we get is about a pit bull,” said Karen Pappas, director of Knoxville’s Animal Control unit. “The population in the city has probably doubled in the last few years. You can go on some streets and they are all up and down the street.”

In East Tennessee, animal advocates and control officers are certain dogfighting exists.

The blood sport is also the enemy of many pit bull owners like Allison or Jodi Preis of Cookeville, Tenn. Preis — who runs a statewide pit bull rescue group, Bless the Bullies — said her biggest fear is that her dogs will be stolen and put to the test for fighting.

“Either they have the fight or they don’t,” Preis said. “If they don’t ...”

Her voice tailed off, unable to finish the sentence.

Street fighters abound

There are signs of dogfighting everywhere in East Tennessee: pit bulls with scars, training equipment and reports of scattered fighting.

Over Memorial Day weekend, Hamblen County officers confiscated four dogs in a dogfighting sting. Three spectators pleaded no contest to misdemeanors, and two others will face a grand jury in September for felony dogfighting charges, said Richard Hart, a Morristown-Hamblen County animal control officer.

“Dogfighting is a problem everywhere,” said Vicky Crosetti, executive director of the Humane Society of the Tennessee Valley.

Most everyone agrees on the widespread presence of dogfighting — the Humane Society estimates 40,000 dogfighters in the U.S. — but catching the blood sport in the act is nearly impossible.

“Most of the things we get word of are street fighters,” said David Head, director of Knox County Animal Control. “But by the time we get there, they are gone.”

Said Rhonda Bender of Oak Ridge Animal Control: “We know where they are at, but we just can’t get to it.”

Animal shelters are impacted by dogfighting, too. Crosetti said the local Humane Society has never supported adopting out pit bulls.

“We don’t feel it is good for the community or the animals,” she said. “Even with responsible screening, there is no way to tell who is a dogfighter and who’s not.”

But at the Young-Williams Animal Center off Sutherland Avenue, Executive Director Tim Adams said they have a 10-step test to determine if dogs, pit bulls included, are suitable for adoption.

“Our goal is to match every dog with a good and proper home,” he said, “sometimes more properly with pit bulls.”

‘Baddest dog on four legs’

The origins of dogfighting and pit bulls are linked to 16th century butcher dogs that were raised to aggravate cattle before slaughter, said Paul Miller, former undercover agent for the Humane Society.

Over time, the spectacle of dogfighting became popular and spread, eventually to the United States in the 1860s, said Miller, formerly of Chattanooga

and now head of the Washington County Humane Society in Maryland.

In the 1980s, there was a movement to make dogfighting a felony in every state, Miller said. To convince lawmakers, dogfighting tapes were shown, which Miller said had a strange effect.

“Historically, dogfighting was only known to an underground network,” Miller said. “The public didn’t know. Then, people saw that it was the baddest dog on four legs and thought, ‘I need one.’ ”

The images from the Mike Vick situation — emaciated and scarred dogs, rape stands and allegations of electrocuted, hanged and drowned dogs — have only added to the grisly picture of dogfighting.

“There is little difference between people who abuse animals like that and pedophiles,” Crosetti said. “It is abuse of the innocent.”

In Tennessee, dogfighting is a felony and watching a fight is a misdemeanor. The U.S. Congress recently passed the Animal Fighting Prohibition Enforcement Act, to strengthen the federal dogfighting statute.

The goal of dogfighting is to win at all costs, and sometimes that means death; however, Miller, who busted a number of dogfighting rings in the 1980s and ’90s, said some professional fights are tightly refereed and that most end because of physical exhaustion.

“It is a gruesome activity, don’t get me wrong,” Miller said, “but it’s not all the blood and guts people think it is.”

Bill Stewart — former editor of the Pit Bull Reporter, a magazine for dogfighting fans — took his characterization a step further, blaming groups like the Humane Society for stigmatizing the activity.

“They think dogfighting is the most heinous crime in the history of earth,” he said. “Dogs love to fight. Dogs invented dogfighting ... Animals have become more important than people.”

Inherently dangerous?

The trepidation toward pit bulls, Preis gets that. She experienced it firsthand when she introduced her pit bull, Tiffin, to her mother.

“You should have seen the fear in her eyes,” Preis said. “I totally understand the hysteria.”

As part of her pit bull rescue group, Preis keeps 15 pit bulls, including four of her own. She said the apprehension toward pit bulls is the result of misinformation and that the breed bans popping up across the country, in places like Fayetteville, Tenn., are unfair.

“If the dogs are vicious killers, then I’m beating the statistics,” she said.

Some of those stats belong to Merritt Clifton, editor of the Washington-based Animal People magazine. He has tracked dog attacks in the past 25 years from press accounts and found that pit bulls and pit bull mixes accounted for 1,231 of the 2,291 dog attacks causing bodily harm (54 percent).

“Pit bulls are uniquely dangerous,” said Clifton, whose magazine covers animal protection issues. “There are other dogs that are more likely to bite, but a pit bull does much more damage.”

Many pit bull advocates, though, say dangerous pit bulls are the result of bad owners and brutal trainers, and they point to the American Temperament Test Society, which says pit bulls’ disposition is better than average.

“Pit bulls can be mean, but any dog can be trained to be mean,” Allison said.

Dr. Elizabeth Shull, an animal behaviorist at Appalachian Veterinary Specialists in Knoxville, said there is no such thing as a good or bad dog, but that there are “inherently dangerous dogs.”

Shull said she personally would not keep a pit bull in a home, but that if a person were fully aware and capable of handling the dangers, the dog would not likely injure anyone.

Allison tries to take as many precautions with Lady as possible. He never lets her run free, he walks her regularly and he has her crate trained. And for him, the extra effort is no burden.

“She doesn’t live up to the bad pit bull name,” he said. “She’s just a cool dog.”

Tom Benning may be reached at 865-342-6432.



© 2007 Knoxville News Sentinel