

Community

Shelter Tails: Pit bulls: Friend or foe? Part 2

By Mary Esparra
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Last week, I wrote about Dakota, a 3-year-old brindle pit bull awaiting adoption at the Goshen Humane Society. My interest in the breed sparked a two-part column that I hope will open your eyes, as it did mine, to the other side of the rumors and to the sweet and gentle side to this dog.

What do our experts say?

A call-out to shelters and rescues on this topic resulted in a flood of responses. Here is a sampling of opinions on this misunderstood breed:

"I've never owned a pit bull, but the majority that come into the clinic are sweet, friendly and great with other animals and kids. Unfortunately, it's always the not-so-nice ones that make news, and we've seen our share of those, too."

— Colleen Roche, office manager,
West Point Vet Clinic

"Normal pit bulls are true clowns and great family pets. Some do not like other animals, like any other breed of dog. They are the most abused dog in this nation, due to their use as fighting machines for profit. Our shelter has adopted numerous pit bulls and pit bull mixes. One is the hostess of a bed-and-breakfast in New Jersey. Boomer, an abandoned, humongous-mouthed brute, was one of our true ambassadors for his breed who took part in a pet parade in full costume surrounded by five other dogs."

— Suzyn Barron, president
Warwick Valley Humane Society

"Do not blame the breed, blame the deed. No dog is born mean; it's how you raise them. In the last three weeks, I've had bite reports on a Jack Russell, Shih Tzu and a Lab. Shepherds and small dogs, they're the most prone in my bite reports. It's not the dominant breed (that bite). You're more apt to get bit by the small, yappy dog."

— Theresa Dougherty, manager
Blooming Grove Humane Society

"One of my best volunteers adopted the greatest pit from us. All was fine until three months down the line. Dallas became very destructive and then aggressive. The owner became fearful of his dog. The story does not have a good ending.

"Dogs are dogs. When a poodle or a cocker bites, it's a bite. When a pit bull bites, it's a rip, it's a tear. The difference being, when they go off, they go off — you're talking major damage.

"Unfortunately, the majority of people wanting to adopt these dogs do not meet our criteria."

— Linda Maresca, manager,
Humane Society of Middletown

"I've been bitten many times, but never by a pit bull or any of the bull breeds. Their natural traits — loyalty, love of their human family and protectiveness — are exploited by nefarious characters, with the intent of transforming the dog into an overly protective and loyal fighter. But a dog that has not been mistreated or exploited will make a wonderful family pet."

— Christine Martin, manager,
Oasis Animal Sanctuary

What's the poop on pits' real temperament?

According to Pit Bull Rescue Central, the pit bull is not an official breed. It is a common term used to describe a certain type of dog. There are three breeds that can be easily confused. The correct designations are: American pit bull terrier, American Staffordshire terrier and Staffordshire bull terrier.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reports that although fatal attacks on humans appear to be a breed-specific problem (pit bull-type dogs and Rottweilers), other breeds may bite and cause fatalities at higher rates. However, they do indicate that pit bull-type dogs were involved in about a third of human dog bite-related fatalities from 1981-92, and Rottweilers were responsible for about half of human DBRF reported from 1993-96.

"If they identified them (the breed) correctly," disputes Cydney Cross, president and co-founder of Out of the Pits pit bull rescue in Albany. "Any statistics are only valid if the dog is identified correctly by both people working on legislation and breed statistics."

Cross believes breed misidentification significantly adds to the bad pit reputation. Fewer than 50 percent of the dogs seeking refuge in her rescue are actually pit bulls. She also claims many reporting agencies only report incidents with pits and not any other breeds, also distorting the stats.

Out of the Pits dogs are subjected to strict and rigorous temperament testing by the American Temperament Test Society. The ATTS is a national nonprofit for the promotion of uniform temperament evaluation of purebred and spayed/neutered mixed-breed dogs.

ATTS' Web site (www.atts.org) lists the pass/fail stats on numerous breeds. The American pit bull terrier passed its tests 84.1 percent of the time, while the American Staffordshire terrier passed 83.9 percent of the time. Many breeds scored below these two, including border collies, Chihuahuas, collies, dachshunds, Dalmatians, golden retrievers, Jack Russells and miniature poodles.

The test, which includes distractions such as loud noises and a simulated human predator attack, aims to accelerate stress levels on the dog and their recovery rate.
In operation for 12 years, Out of the Pits has tested every one of their (age 2 and older) dogs in the last six years. Their success rate?

"Ours is 100 percent, we've never had one that has not passed."

Impressive for an organization that has placed about 1,000 pits to date.

"We want to have people know the true nature of the pit bull," Cross said. "For a dog that is up for adoption, having already gotten its respected ATTS title makes the dog more desirable for adoption. It proves the soundness of the individual dog and ultimately of the breed."

So, who's really doing all the biting?

The Humane Society of the United States reports that the breeds most commonly involved in both bite injuries and fatalities changes from year to year and from one area of the country to another, depending on the popularity of the breed. Factors other than genetics play some part in determining whether a dog will bite: whether the animal is spayed or neutered, properly socialized, supervised, humanely trained and safely confined.

What's the verdict?

The way I see it, it comes down to some nature, mostly nurture. When adopting any dog, you must choose one that is right for your family. If it is a large, strong-breed dog, it is imperative to educate yourself on the breed and properly train, socialize and love him.

I probably would never adopt a pit bull, mostly because I'm partial to other breeds. I have, however, learned not to fear or pre-judge them.

Considering adoption?

Qualifications for adopting a pit bull from a local shelter vary but may include: restricting adoptions of pits to homes without any children (for safety reasons when walking such a strong breed) or only with children over a certain age; criminal background checks; stable background; adults over a certain age; having a fenced-in yard; agreeing to always fence or leash the dog; experienced owner who understands the breed; interaction with the dog in a gentle, loving way.

Pits on the Web

www.pbrc.net

www.badrap.org

www.outofthepits.org

www.pitbullsontheweb.com

Dakota update:

Three-year-old Dakota, a brindle pit bull featured in last week's Shelter Tails, might be close to getting a home. About 12 interested adopters called the shelter after reading her story, and applications have been taken on three of them.

"I can be selective at this point as to who she goes with," said shelter manager Elijah Howe. "I know she's going to find a good home."

Amy Richardson, a freelance writer living in Sullivan County, contributed to this report.

Adopted

As a result of the Pets of the Week page and the big hearts of our readers, these animals are no longer homeless:

Port Jervis: Farby, Jetta and Baby

Warwick: Rachel, Izzy, Blake, Muriel, KittyCat, Gloria and Debonaire

Blooming Grove: Chai Tea and Buttercup

Canine Sanctuary: Borris

Precious Paws: Rascal and Bubbles

Upcoming events

Adoption event, 10 a.m.-4 p.m. July 21-22, Petsmart, Middletown. Many animals available for adoption from the Blooming Grove Humane Society and Best Friends at Pets Alive. Call 386-9738.

Live animal programs, 10:30 a.m.-noon Tuesdays in August, Education Station, 1209 Route 17K, Montgomery. For ages 6-12. Preregistration required. Sponsored by Everything Animals Resource Center Inc. and the Education Station. \$12 per class. Call Kelly, 457-5690. Schedule:

- Everything Animals, "Believe it or Not," Aug. 7. Meet live animals and discover facts about them. Craft project, games, snacks, more.
- With Scales & Without, Aug. 14. Live lizards, turtles, frogs and toads along with a craft, games and a snack. For this class only, bring your own reptile or amphibian in comfortable, escape-proof carrier.
- Mammals Among Us, Aug. 21. Visit with assortment of mammals and bring your own favorite stuffed animal mammal. Craft, games and snack.
- Native American Totems and Folktales, Aug. 28. Discover animal totems, design medicine stones and totem poles. Meet live animals that represent totems, folktales about how they came to be.

Poker Run, 9 a.m.-3 p.m. Aug. 18, begins at Humane Society of Port Jervis, 202 Route 209, Port Jervis, travels through New York into Pennsylvania, crosses over to New Jersey and ends at the firehouse, Route 209, Huguenot. Two poker stops in each state, food and prizes at the end of run. \$20 per rider, \$10 per passenger. Preregistration encouraged. For registration packet, call 856-3677 or visit www.pjhumane.org.