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For pit bulls, life can be the pits

Advocates are trying to reverse the negative impression people have of pit bulls.

By Jessica Marcy



Photo by Jeanna Duerscherl | The Roanoke Times

Pit bulls, such as this one at the Franklin County Animal Shelter, are one of the most common types of dogs in shelters, workers say.



Photo by Eric Brady | The Roanoke Times

Kasey Thomas, an employee with Angels of Assisi, adopted Keno after he'd been at the facility for six months. Advocates say people are reluctant to adopt pits.



Courtesy of Laurie Seidel

Raider is one of the lucky dogs. Found sick and abandoned near a busy road, he ended up being adopted by a loving family, but not until after a months-long effort to bring him back to health.

Laurie Seidel knew Raider was in trouble when she first saw him in the cold rain near the intersection of Virginia 419 and Starkey Road.

After he bolted into traffic, she followed him into a parking lot to observe him up close.

The emaciated black pit bull didn't look good. His ribs juttred out, his legs shook and green goop filled his eyes as he anxiously drank water from a puddle.

The Roanoke County resident called animal control and then set out to find the dog a good home. What she soon learned, though, was what many animal workers already know: Being a pit bull can often be the pits.

Among the most common dogs used in fighting, pit bulls often end up in animal shelters because they are overbred and some of their owners are more interested in the dogs' tough image than in caring for a pet, according to several animal workers.

Pit bulls and pit bull mixes last year accounted for more than 20 percent of the dogs taken to the Regional Center for Animal Control and Protection, which covers Roanoke, Roanoke County, Botetourt County and Vinton. The vast majority of the 670 pit bulls -- 87 percent -- came from Roanoke.

Once at the center, pit bulls are less likely to be adopted and more often euthanized than other dogs.

Last year, 66 percent of pits were euthanized, compared with 44 percent of all dogs, and 12 percent were adopted, compared with 25 percent of all dogs. The rest were returned to their owners.

The center does not have statistics to show longer-term trends, but the numbers improved slightly from 2006, when 67 percent of the 672 pit bulls were euthanized compared with 50 percent of all dogs, and only 3 percent were adopted, compared with 19 percent of all dogs.

Several animal workers said that attention from the Michael Vick dogfighting case has helped raise awareness about the plight of pits. But pits in shelters still pose a significant challenge. After gaining popularity in the 1980s, they began to overwhelm shelters a decade ago and continue to do so.

Overcrowding shelters

The Roanoke Valley is not unique. Pit bulls are overcrowding shelters across the state and country.

"By far, pit bulls are the most overbred, abused and neglected breed of dog entering shelters every year," Jake Roos, the kennel supervisor at the Norfolk Animal Care Center, wrote in an e-mail. He said that in shelters that admit pits, they often make up half of the dog population.

The situation is also affecting rural areas, according to Dr. Kelly Farrel, the director of the Roanoke animal shelter Angels of Assisi.

Farrel used to believe that pit bull overpopulation was exclusively an urban phenomenon -- until she visited shelters in Montgomery and Pulaski counties.

"You go to these rural shelters and you see a lot of little pit faces," she said.

She described how many shelter workers will not mention that mixed-breed dogs have pit bull in them in an effort to get them adopted.

"It's a heartbreaking story because if you get to really know pit bulls they're beautiful, intelligent dogs, and they're vilified," Farrel said.

Across the nation, pit bull rescue groups swear that they can make wonderful family pets and are working to get them adopted.

First, though, they have to improve the image of the dogs, which used to be associated with the lovable pooch from TV's "Little Rascals" or the comic strip Buster Brown. Now, they're considered the "bad animal of the day," according to Donna Essig, the president of the Franklin County Humane Society's Planned Pethood Clinic.

"It's really not about having a pet you love," Essig said. "It's about an image."

Botetourt Assistant Commonwealth's Attorney Jill Deegan expressed similar sentiments.

"I think in certain neighborhoods it's a status symbol -- you know, who has the biggest, baddest pit," said Deegan, who specializes in animal-related cases.

Pits' tough reputation stems from their connection to dogfighting, which has come into the spotlight since news of Vick's Bad Newz Kennels emerged last year. Recent Virginia legislation that was largely inspired by the Vick case has toughened penalties for animal fighting.

In Roanoke, only three cases of dogfighting have gone to court in the past 10 years, according to Mike Quesenberry, the supervisor of Roanoke's animal control unit.

But dogfighting is often complex and underreported, said Richard Samuels, the director of the Virginia Animal Fighting Task Force.

"If someone walks down the street with a gun, a person will call the cops," he said. "When someone walks down the street with a pit bull, they cross the street."

Several area animal workers worry that some pit bulls coming into shelters have fighting wounds.

Faye Hicks said many Roanoke pit bulls appeared to have fighting and puncture wounds. Hicks works as an adoption specialist and animal behavior trainer for the Franklin County Animal Shelter and used to work in the same capacity at the RVSPCA.

"I was shocked to see that in the city," Hicks said. "In Roanoke, it was almost an everyday thing."

But Quesenberry cautioned that it is difficult to determine how a dog has been scarred. Many can be wounded in encounters with other wildlife or vehicles, he explained.

Regardless, pit bulls' association with fighting has made it more difficult for them to get adopted.

"Basically people have condemned the breed instead of the deed," Samuels said. "People say, 'I don't want a killer in my house.' "

Fighting the rap

In 2006, Essig created a spay and neuter program to address the overpopulation of pits and pit bull mixes in Franklin County. The program, "No More Bad Rap: Turn Your Pit Bulls into Pet Bulls," fixed 160 dogs free of charge through a one-time grant.

The program was successful, but Essig believes more work needs to be done.

A self-described animal rescuer, Seidel knew about the problems of pet overpopulation and limited shelter space when she met Raider.

Still, she was surprised at how much effort it took to find him a good home. She spent almost two months just trying to find a shelter that would accept him.

She researched pit bulls and rescue groups and called 14 local groups to see if they would take him. Most didn't have space or wouldn't take pit bulls.

Finally, Angels of Assisi said they would help. The shelter even has a special form for pit bull adoption to ensure that the dogs are not placed in the wrong hands.

In the end, Raider's story ended up a happy one. He found a good home with a couple that have more than 10 acres of land.

When they saw Raider's photo, they immediately wanted him because he looked like a pit bull they had that died a year before.

Seidel has talked to Raider's new pet parents and couldn't be more pleased.

Raider seems to have everything a dog could want, she said: loving parents, a grandchild to play with, a cat to follow around and plenty of room to sniff and roam.

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