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Pit bulls get bum rap, Humane Society says

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MURRAY — There was no excessive barking, no biting and no visibly aggressive behavior among the dozen happy, playful pit bulls and pit-bull mixes hoping for a new home.

The pleasant scene was exactly what the Humane Society of Utah wanted in a special gathering Friday to illustrate that often-feared dogs, if properly trained, are lovers not fighters.

Gene Baierschmidt, Humane Society of Utah executive director, said pit bulls are the most difficult breed to place. Of the 150 total adoptable canines in the kennel, 12 are pit bulls, dogs he says are a victim of perception.

"Any breed is capable of biting," he said. "The biggest biters are cocker spaniels."

There are misconceptions about pit bulls, and the only real problems arise from owners who train their animals to be aggressive, Baierschmidt said.

"There is a continuing debate about pits, and some cities have even enacted bans on private ownership of these dogs," he said. "But they've gotten a bad reputation because irresponsible people have exploited the very characteristics that can also make them loyal, affectionate pets."

Specifically, he says, the dogs are eager to please their human caregivers. If they fall into the hands of people who take advantage of the animals' strength, energy and devotion to train them as fighters, they will, indeed, become aggressive and dangerous.

In fact, he said, the dogs will submit to horrifying suffering and abuse in undergoing such "training" because they believe that's what their owners — who represent pack leaders to them — want.

But Baierschmidt said if a pit bull has a structured environment, and a person establishes a positive leadership role and provides plenty of exercise as an outlet for the dog's energy, the pit bull can become an affectionate, gentle companion that craves human attention and thrives on belly rubs.

Coincidental to Friday's pit bull party, A.J. and Tiffany Lumsden drove more than 100 miles from Green River, Wyo., to adopt one of the dogs.

"I love pit bulls," Tiffany Lumsden said, adding the female pit bull, Daisy, they were adopting is patient and gentle and will remain that way. They plan to rename her Kona.

"I believe it's not the breed," she said.

Jessica Almeida, a Humane Society behavioral specialist, said poodles can be trained to be mean, but they won't be as threatening.

Almeida gives every pit bull in the society's care an intensive behavior assessment before it's made available for adoption.

Baierschmidt said he is surprised at how many people who really like a certain dog and then are shocked and back off adopting it when they find out it's a pit bull.

"We don't discriminate against any breed," he said. "Each animal is evaluated as an individual. Our goal is certainly not to exacerbate the pit bull's bad reputation by placing questionable dogs for adoption. On the contrary, we're making every effort to show the public what a wonderful potential this breed has to be a family pet when it is responsibly trained and cared for."

Notwithstanding, improperly trained or untrained pit bulls may attack and make nasty headlines when they do. Last month in Magna, a man killed two roaming pit bulls that threatened a family's safety. A pit bull last November injured a small dog and its owner in an attack in Salt Lake City.

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