

The Daily Times

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## **A lover or a fighter?**

[By Carlina Villalpando](#)

The Daily Times

Published August 16, 2005

Probably no dog is more misunderstood than the pit bull, and no one understands that more than the many pet rescuers and animal rights' activists who attempt to defend the breed.

Dog trainer and rescuer Diana Ross, who owns D&D Concepts, said bully breeds — which include a variety of bulldogs and pit bull types — don't deserve their reputation. Bad owners — not bad dogs — are to blame for the bad rap, she said.

"Pit bulls are just dogs. They're powerful, strong-willed dogs, but they're good-natured and easy to train," Ross said. "It's the people who take them and train them to be mean that are to blame."

It's no wonder the breed is so maligned. Pit bull Web sites are all over the Internet, and many of them feature irresponsible breeders bragging about how large and aggressive their dogs are. Many of them, Ross said, fight their bulls for sport.

"The people that fight pit bulls would (fight) other breeds," Ross said.

Nancy Parker-Simmons, executive director of Utopia Animal Rescue Ranch in Medina, concurred.

"No dog is naturally mean. People make dogs mean," Simmons said. "Any dog can hurt someone or bite someone. It depends on what their owners train them to do. If they're trained to kill or be killed, what else can they do?"

To add to the problem, Ross said many bull-type dogs are abandoned because their owners are not fully prepared for the responsibility of owning a dog. Instead of taking the time to handle and train the dog, she said, they give up and either let the dog go undisciplined or abandon it.

Both Ross and Simmons have rescued all types of breeds from all sorts of unthinkable circumstances. They take dogs that many would call "viscous," and transform them into obedient, lovable creatures.

One of their most recent successes is Mama, a three-legged pit bull, who was found more than a year ago in downtown Austin, where she lay beaten-up and dying. They suspect Mama was a victim of pit fighting.

"The dog was completely torn up. Her back leg was dangling," Simmons remembered. "No one knows for sure, but we thought maybe she had been trained to fight or that she could have been used as a bait-dog."

"Her leg was shattered and full of bite-holes," Ross added.

Nursing those wounds was the easy part. The real healing to recondition her away from fighting started only weeks ago, when Ross temporarily took in Mama to give her one-on-one attention. The process, Ross said, involved common sense and a balance of love and discipline.

When Mama came to Ross, she was aggressive. She avoided people and she growled and bit at the other dogs — a reflection not of her natural temperament, but of how she had been treated, Ross said.

"People don't realize that psychologically these animals are like people," Ross said. "They need to be loved and touched. Flood her with attention and love. If you do that for a month, you're going to have a different dog."

Now, more than two weeks since Mama came to Ross, she appears to be a "completely different dog." She has returned to Utopia Rescue Ranch, where she is waiting to be adopted.

"She's happy now," Ross said. "She's learned she doesn't have to fight, and she doesn't want to fight."

While Simmons and Ross probably are more sympathetic to bully breeds than most people, they are not alone in their opinions. Research also has confirmed that bully breeds are not more aggressive than other breeds.

In fact, the American Temperament Test Society, an organization that provides breeders an "objective means for evaluating temperaments" has proven that among all breeds, bully breeds have some of the "softest temperaments." In both 2002 and 2003, according to the ATTS breed statistics, the American pit bull terrier out performed the golden retriever, a breed noted for its gentle temperament.

Ross said understanding the truth about temperaments is crucial to dispelling "breed-specific dog legislation" and negative publicity associated with many breeds of dogs. Both threaten responsible pet-owners' rights, she said. Currently, Texas is one of only a few states that have laws preventing breed-specific legislation.

"Lets put the blame where it should be put, and hold the right people responsible," Ross said. "It is unconstitutional to outlaw ownership of pit bulls as some cities have done."

Information about all breed temperaments is available at [www.atts.org](http://www.atts.org), and information about breed specific legislation is available at [www.pbrc.net](http://www.pbrc.net). For more information about pet rescue or training, call Ross at 257-0565.

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