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Life

Banning breeds - questions to ask

By Amy D. Shojai
P'Etiquette

There's nothing more tragic or devastating than to be a dog bite victim at the paws of a pet you love and trust. A human death is even more horrific. I can't imagine the terror and pain involved or the emotional repercussions the human victim (and dog owners) must face in the aftermath of such a tragedy.

My past two columns have addressed pet safety and owner education, as well as pointed out how difficult it can be to get a handle on "dangerous dog" concerns. As a result, some responses I've received from readers accuse me of being "For" pit bulls and against the victims. Others who read the same material believe I'm "against" bully breeds. If such a wide misinterpretation of my words is possible - neither of which is accurate, by the way - how can all parties agree on equitable solutions to dog aggression concerns?

One gentleman, an attorney practicing in Iowa, very politely accused me of misleading the public. Among other things, he wrote, "These dogs are relentless killing machines & Many of the victims loved their dogs and had no clue to what was about to happen."

That reinforces the need for owner education, does it not?

Another letter claimed that bull terriers had never been involved with dog attack fatalities. The writer questioned my sources and my intelligence. I've accessed a number of resources for this three-part series, but the one in question can be found from the CDC at www.cdc.gov/ncipc/duip/dogbreeds.pdf.

Last week my column asked, "What is a dangerous dog?" So many folks in the public and in the media point to "pit bulls" as the answer. In fact, there is no such breed. The term is slang used to group together three dog breeds. The American



Amy D. Shojai

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AMEX	1764.85	0.29 ▲
NYSE	7825.00	34.01 ▲
30 YR BOND	47.37	-0.03 ▼

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Pit Bull Terrier (APBT) is registered with the United Kennel Club. The American Staffordshire Terrier (AmStaff) is registered with the American Kennel Club. And the Staffordshire Bull Terrier (Staffie) is registered with both the AKC and the UKC. When talking about "pit bulls," folks rarely make any distinction between these breeds.

You can find more information on these breeds at the following Web sites which also include more links to "dangerous dog" issues and owner responsibility - www.pbrc.net, www.realpitbull.com/ and www.understand-a-bull.com/. Internet searches for "dangerous dog" and BSL will also garner an enormous amount of information from such respected sources as the AVMA, CDC and others.

Sad to say, it is not uncommon for media to blame a dog attack on a pit bull, only later to recant and identify the dog as some other breed or mix, often one that in no way resembles these bully breeds. There are more than 25 other dog breeds that often are confused with "pit bulls." Since the pit bull overwhelmingly is singled out as the breed to ban, let me play devil's advocate and ask some questions about what happens if they are banned.

What happens to the currently owned "pit bulls" and related mixes in the area? Is there a grandfather clause allowing them to be kept? Under what conditions would such dogs be allowed to remain (require insurance, muzzles, fences, microchip)? If not grandfathered, who disposes of these dogs, and how? Who decides what constitutes a "pit bull" type dog? Would veterinarians in the community be shouldered with this task? In the case of look-alike mix breeds, who bears the burden of proof and/or expense of DNA tests to identify 'pit' bloodlines? What percentage of 'pit' blood would be considered dangerous and who makes this decision?

Just for fun, take a look at the Web site www.pitbullsontheweb.com/petbull/findpit.html and test your ability to identify the "right" dog in this canine lineup. Even the recent designer dog craze has produced some 'pit' look-alikes, including the Puggle (beagle-pug cross). I doubt anyone would think of either of these breeds as inherently dangerous.

Yes, 'pit bull' type dogs have caused injury and death. So have other breeds. And the most damage logically arises from the largest, strongest animals. But will singling out these animals really make a difference in bite statistics? No one knows. There are no accurate statistics to be found. I wish there were. When one searches the literature, it becomes clear that BSL (breed specific legislature) is difficult to enact. This involves the dog owner's 14th amendment rights since addressing only one or two breeds violates equal protection rights (other dog owners have these protections).

It is also incredibly difficult to accurately identify a dog's breed to impose sanctions on owners who violate the ban. It's also often argued that banning one breed prompts certain people to seek an alternative breed for the same qualities (big, protective, aggressive). What will be the next dangerous breed du jour? There are more than 400 dog breeds around the world from which to choose, but any dog of any breed can be bred and trained to encourage dangerous qualities.

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In order to drive a car, we are required to take a test and obtain a license. In order to own a gun, citizens also must be educated and licensed. Despite these cautions, how many people each year are injured or die as a result of mismanaging either of these otherwise inanimate objects? Cars of a certain make and model (or "type" of driver) have not been banned to protect the citizenry and to suggest so is foolish.

Personally, I'd like to see required education for owners of all dogs. That, of course, would raise even more questions about who should be the teachers and how such a test should be administered. I wonder if I'd manage to qualify?

While I don't enjoy being called stupid or accused of doing a disservice to readers, I'm pleased by the response to these articles. My whole point is to shake up readers and hopefully make you think, research more and educate yourselves. When you decide to live with one of these high-profile breeds, you must protect yourself and your dog with knowledge about your own abilities and about what to expect from your dog. Being clueless is a recipe for horror.

It's not my place to say who is right and who is wrong. And pointing fingers after the fact solves nothing. I just want people (and the dogs they love of whatever breed) to be safe.

Amy D. Shojai, *CABC is a nationally-known pet care specialist certified with the IAABC, and author of more than a dozen pet books, including, "PETiquette: Solving Behavior Problems in Your Multipet Household" and "Chicken Soup for the Dog Lover's (and Cat Lover's) Soul."* She can be reached through her website www.shojai.com.

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