



The author, pictured below, came across this stray pit bull and was frightened at first. But the dog quickly won him over.



Defending the Pit Bull

Don't believe everything you read and hear, says the author. Pit bulls get a bad rap **By Jay Young**

FROZE. IN MY PATH WAS A PIT BULL THE SIZE OF A SMALL SHEEP. Should I run? Should I back away slowly? Do I look it in the eyes or not look it in the eyes? I was scared.

It was impossible to feel frightened for long, though; the smiling jowls, wagging tail, and one ear that sat erect while the other slumped lazily over a sparkly brown eye were almost comically cute. I went to one knee and gently held my hand out for her to sniff. She came immediately to me and licked at my face as if I were the last Popsicle in the Mojave Desert.

A check of the rental office revealed that no one in the

apartment complex owned the perky pooch, so I let her hang out with me all day. That night, as I lifted her into an Animal Control paddy wagon, I whispered to her, "Don't worry, I'll visit you every day until I'm allowed to adopt you." I was blissfully unaware of Charlotte-Mecklenburg's no-adoption policy for pit bulls. I had just sentenced my new dog to death.

Animal Control's no-adoption policy is just one example of the bad rap that pit bulls get. To listen to news reports of pit bull attacks, it's easy to believe that it's entirely deserved, but those of us who have owned and cared for these intelli-

Petey, of *Little Rascals* fame, was a pit bull with all of his original body parts. Try finding anybody with a Petey phobia.

gent, affectionate animals know a different side of the story.

Pit Bull Rescue Central is an Internet-based grass-roots organization dedicated to providing responsible education regarding all things pit bull. PBRC acknowledges that pit bulls came into existence thanks to humans who wanted to create fighting dogs. According to its Web site, www.pbrc.net, "In the same way that Labradors were bred to retrieve birds, pit bulls were bred to face other dogs in mortal combat. Not to strongly emphasize

this fact would be negligent."

Marcy Setter, who chairs PBRC's Marketing and Public Relations Committee, argues that it is because of this several-hundred-years-long breeding practice that pit bulls are less likely to attack humans than most other breeds. "Back when 'blood sports' were legal," Setter says, "dogfighting required the owners to be in the pit with the dogs. For this reason, human aggression was never tolerated, and any dog showing signs of it was culled." Culled equals killed.

Still, there's no denying that pit bulls have a

bad reputation. It must come from somewhere.

The most obvious source of pit-bull fear are the dogs themselves, or rather, the way they look. Some owners and breeders dock the dogs' ears and tails, which lend them a unique look that to some people is terrifying. Add jaws that look as though they are made for mauling and it's far easier to imagine a monster than a friendly pooch.

But a dog, even a pit bull, cares nothing for its looks. Petey, of *Little Rascals* fame, was a pit bull with all of his original body parts. Try finding anybody with a Petey phobia.

The dog's aggressive look and image work against it in other ways, too. Pit bulls have become popular with a certain crowd as a sign of toughness. Walk or drive through any rough neighborhood in Charlotte and you'll see pit bulls barking behind chain-link fences. This type of increased demand encourages negligent breeding to supply the dogs. Irresponsible owners fail to train their dogs adequately or, worse, train them to be human aggressive. Before you know it, every disreputable breeder that can find a male and female pit-bull-like dog is mixing and selling "pit bulls." According to PBRC and other dog advocates, it's this cycle that is inherently vicious, not the dogs.

Due in part to this irresponsible breeding, pit bulls tend to look like a lot of other dogs. In fact, there are over twenty-five breeds that are commonly mistaken for pit bulls. The boxer is one. The Olde English Bulldogge is another. The classification "pit bull" is actually a conglomeration of three breeds: the American pit bull terrier, the American Staffordshire terrier, and the Staffordshire bull terrier. With one dog taking the blame for the misdeeds of more than twenty-five breeds, is it any wonder we hear the words "pit bull" and "attack" so much in the same sentence? How many papers would "Golden Retriever Attack!" sell?

It's become cliché to blame the media for a variety of society's injustices, but it applies in this case. Take for example a February 6, 2004 article posted on www.nynewsdaily.com with the headline "Pit Bull Mauls 3-Year Old's Face." The section of the article that describes the attack reads thusly:

"Bellamy, who said he witnessed the incident, said the girls were playing on the floor with the puppy when the boxer 'just snapped' and first bit Isinay and then jumped on Makailah.

"My baby just got in the middle of it," sobbed the girls' mother, Shannon Smith, who came home after the incident. "My baby's face is so disfigured."



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Bellamy said two older sisters, Nesha Smith, 18, and Gina Smith, 17, tried to pull the boxer off of Makailah.

"They just made it worse," he said. "You're not supposed to antagonize the dogs."

Note that the breed of the dog that mauled the child is boxer, not pit bull. "If my pit bull could walk on water," says Setter, "the press would write, 'Pit Bull Can't Swim.'"

Because people tend to misidentify dogs as pit bulls, statistics on pit bull attacks are misleading. In stressful situations even the authorities cannot determine a dog's breed with any reliable degree of accuracy, according to Setter. To the police and bystanders, if it looks like a pit bull and it attacks somebody, it must be a pit bull.

Personnel at Charlotte-Mecklenburg's Animal Control Shelter feel that their policy of not offering pit bulls for adoption is warranted. "We just have no idea what the histories of these animals are," says one employee, who preferred not to be identified. "We don't know where they come from and we don't know what kind of life they had before. We can't risk letting a potentially dangerous dog loose in public."

Dr. Susan Coe, a veterinarian at Animal Medical Hospital on Monroe Road, says she understands that a pit bull can be a terrific family pet under the right circumstances, but reluctantly agrees with Animal Control's assessment. "Any dog is capable of biting or being unpredictable," she explains, "but I'd rather handle a ferocious Chihuahua, for example, than a ferocious Rottweiler or pit bull."

The American Temperament Test Society, a national organization that evaluates the temperament of individual dogs and ranks breeds by the percentage of each that passes, suggests that pit bulls could be less likely to attack than people think. During the standard ATTS exam, the dog is placed on a loose six-foot lead and exposed to all sorts of external stimuli, such as children and cats. If the dog reacts adversely to any part of the test, it fails. The ATTS has tested over 25,000 dogs and according to its statistics, 82.7 percent of all pit bulls passed. Compare this to the standard schnauzer — 64.7 percent, the cocker spaniel — 81.5 percent, and the dachshund (AKA, "wiener dog") — 76.85 percent. Even the golden retriever, that bastion of man's-best-friendliness, narrowly loses to the pit bull with an 82.5 percent passing rate.

Recently, there has been a shift in public opinion of these dogs. As witness to how far these dogs have come, *Newsweek* posted an online photo essay of pit bulls and their owners that placed the dogs in a very positive light. But as witness to how far they have yet to go, here is some of the feedback that *Newsweek* received:

"Just because some examples of 'nice' pit bulls exist does not make them a safe breed. They should be outlawed."

"This report states that these people are so happy when they have a pit bull. That argument is meaningless. There are thousands of people who are happy to molest children and that doesn't make it okay."

"I can't believe you people let this idiot with a tattoo of a dog on his chest write this article about the meanest dog on the face of the Earth. It's just a matter of time before this pit bull bites you. Good luck, pit bull lover."

I am convinced that the pit bull I found wandering my neighborhood would have passed the ATTS temperament exam with flying colors. By the way, after three grueling days

of worry over what I had done to her, and thanks in large part to a local pit bull rescue organization*, I managed to rescue and foster her until, by chance, I met her original owners. That's where she is today — fat, happy, tattooed, spayed... and very much alive. ❀

*Editor's note: That rescue organization, The Southeast Pit Bull Club, could not be reached for comment on this article; the same for another local pit bull advocacy group, Lucky Charm Pit Bull Rescue. It is not clear whether these groups still exist.

Jay Young is a freelance writer in Charlotte. He described the plight of the ticket scalper in the December 2003 issue of this magazine.

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