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## **Pit-bull owner believes stigma misplaced**

*Advocates say dogs' loyalty can be twisted to companionship or aggression.*

**Matt Wagner**

**News-Leader**

Rick Wilson doesn't expect everyone to feel the way he does about pit bulls.

But when a local veterinarian refused to treat a pit bull pup Wilson "liberated" from abusive owners, he knew the breed was in trouble.

"That bothered me," said Wilson, who is a veterinary technician.

To make matters worse, dog attacks involving pit bull terriers and mutts resembling them continue to grab headlines in Springfield, with two high-profile incidents last month, and across the country.

Wilson said he sees signs of pit-bull paranoia when he walks through the neighborhood with Tara, a 3-year-old brindle whose owners duct taped her into a defenseless bundle and kicked her around the yard.

"I get looked at sometimes like I'm some sort of drug-dealing thug," added Wilson, who said people routinely cross the street as soon as they realize Tara is a pit bull.

The stigma attached to pit bulls prompted Wilson and wife Amanda to start the Springfield Pit Bull Association, a breed club that has evolved into more of an advocacy group with close to 100 members.

Wilson's goal for the group is to raise enough money for a kennel outside city limits where he can retrain rescued pit bulls abused and neglected by their ill-suited owners.

If all efforts to rehabilitate the rescued dogs for adoption fail, Wilson said, he would turn them over to the Humane Society.

When he's not working, Wilson follows up on tips about irresponsible pit bull owners he blames for the breed's ailing reputation.

"Most of the time I'm met with hung-head embarrassment," he said.

Wilson's bottom-line assessment: too many pit bulls and not enough people who understand the breed's special needs.

"It does take a special owner to own them," he said. "They are a headstrong breed. ... They're only content when they're doing a job."

### **BREED TEMPERMANT**

Wilson's opinion is shared by Melissa Zarda of Missouri Pit Bull Rescue in Kansas City.

The rescue group was formed about five years ago in response to the city's growing number of abused pit bulls linked in part to illegal dog fighting, Zarda said.

Pit bulls were originally bred for bull-baiting and then pit-fighting. They're instinctively aggressive toward dogs and other animals, but not humans, Zarda said.

"We have absolutely no tolerance for human aggression in this breed," she said.

Pit bulls intent on hurting people have either been trained to do so or neglected so much that they lash out for lack of attention and socialization, Zarda said.

Pit bulls are staunchly loyal to their owners, which doubles as the breed's best and worst trait, depending on the owner.

Experts said bad owners feed a pit bull's aggression while loving but stern ones reap the dog's steadfast companionship.

"They are so eager to please," Zarda explained. "They're very much a what-you-see-is-what-you-get breed of dog."

According to the American Canine Temperament Testing Association, 83 percent of the American pit bull terriers tested for temperament passed compared with the average passing rate of 80 percent for all other breeds.

Yet pit bulls continually attack and kill people every year in the United States. In 2002 and 2003 combined, pit bulls were involved in 11 fatal attacks, according to the National Canine Research Foundation in Seattle.

Owners who aren't equipped to properly care for pit bulls are the root of the problem, Zarda said.

"They're taking a great family pet, and they're ruining good dogs," she added.

## **BREED-SPECIFIC LAWS**

Pit bull experts agree that breed-specific legislation enacted by cities, counties and states around the country isn't curbing the number of dog attacks.

The laws have only fueled what they consider a form of dog racism.

"It serves no useful purpose except to cause havoc to our government," said Glen Bui of the National Canine Research Foundation.

Effective dog laws — like the Ryan Armstrong Law in Illinois — carry heavy-handed penalties for irresponsible owners, said Bui, a canine genetics expert who has worked extensively with pit bulls.

Wilson called for stringent animal-cruelty laws that would severely punish convicted violators and bar them from ever owning another dog. Missouri also needs a dangerous-dog law, he said.

A Springfield City Council member's remark last week about pursuing a pit-bull ban is disheartening, Wilson said.

In addition to penalizing responsible owners, a ban would be extremely difficult to enforce, experts said.

Bui said mixed-breed dogs are often mistaken for pit bulls, which encompass American pit bull terriers, American Staffordshire terriers and Staffordshire terriers.

A dog with a boxy head or wide chest may have some pit bull heritage but shouldn't automatically be lumped in with the breed, Bui added.

Zarda called pit bulls "the flavor of the month," reminding that dog fads come and go. Not that long ago, Doberman pinschers were en vogue. Then came the hip-hop glorification of mean pit bulls on chains.

"Pretty soon, it's going to be something else," Zarda said.

### **DEMAND FOR DOGS**

As long as the demand is there, Lisa Garrison of Buffalo said she plans to keep breeding pit bulls.

Garrison, who previously lived on Division Street and advertised pit bull puppies with a sign in her yard, said people love the breed for its courage.

But that courage can morph into misdirected ferocity if a pit bull ends up in the wrong hands.

Garrison compared a pit bull to a loaded gun: They have the ability to harm people if not handled responsibly, and both give owners a sense of security.

"We want the right to protect ourselves," said Garrison, who faced a burglar many years ago while living in Springfield.

After selling three litters for \$250 per puppy, breeding pit bulls has served as a steady income for the single mother.

Wilson said communities like Springfield need to take care of the existing pit-bull population instead of exacerbating the problem with "backyard breeding" operations.

He hopes the pit bull association will succeed where government and nonprofits have failed.

"We need to police this as a community," he said.

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