

# Puppy Love

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Are Pit Bulls being sent to the doghouse without getting a fair shake?

They are feared. They are hated. They are misunderstood.

Contrary to how the media portrays them, not all pit bulls are bad dogs.

Recent news coverage has only shown this breed of dog to be vicious attackers that are dangerously unpredictable, but a closer look at the pit bull, going beyond the hype and dismissing the myths, shows that pit bulls are not the monsters people think they are.

There is another side to these dogs that the public doesn't get to hear about.

Misleading or incomplete information is thrown to a hungry public, creating fear in the uneducated.

For example, in a January 2004 article in the L.A. Times, the writer associated pit bulls with loaded guns and questions their owner's reasoning, adding dog-bite statistics that include other breeds.

On the positive side, the Orange County Register ran a story in the same month about a missing hiker, which briefly mentions a 6-year-old pit bull named Dakota that assisted in the search.

Some say the media thrives on the negative images of a few individual dogs.

"It sells papers. People love to read 'Pit Bull Attack' the same way they do a train wreck," Marcy Setter, chair of marketing and public relations for the Pit Bull Rescue Center, said. "What the pit bull is experiencing now, is not much different than what the German Shepherd faced in the 70s, the Doberman in the 80s and the Rottweiler in the 90s."

Setter also knows about Dakota and Kris Crawford, the mine search and rescue team mentioned in the missing hiker article. Crawford and her three

Thirty-nine-year-old Stanton resident Curtis Windham has had pit bulls in his family since his first at age 11. His dad bought a puppy from a champion pit fighter in Kern County. Though the dog descended directly from fighting dogs, it even got along with the family cat. Of the four pit bulls he's had, Windham said his favorite dog was a pit bull named Stein.

He also said the meanest dog they owned just happened to be a miniature poodle, but that "Stein loved everyone, even the mailman."

Stein even rescued a baby bird from a fallen tree in the backyard by taking it in his mouth and dropping it unharmed into Windham's awaiting hand.

Windham said quality time with your dog is important regardless of the breed. They need to be played with and given lots of love.

"If you can't raise an animal with love and affection then you shouldn't have it," he said.

Some owners are more responsible than others.

"Then there are the dogs that ignorant people train to be mean," Setter said.

Dog fighting, an activity illegal in 50 states and a felony in 47, is a major cause of abuse for these dogs.

An illegal dog-fighting ring was recently busted in Georgia in January, according to news reports.

The adult dogs had been abused and trained to fight, altering their temperament and encouraging aggressiveness.

"The problem is the extent of training these guys go through.

These dogs don't know anything else," Drabek said.

For fighting purposes, pit bulls are the desired breed, he said. Abused pit bulls are often forced to walk treadmills for long periods of time to build up stamina and sometimes they are given smaller animals as "treats."

Drabek said pit bull fighting goes back hundreds of years and that people now look at the breed's history and assume that's the way the dog will be.

"Not all pit bulls are bad. Pretty much any breed with responsible ownership can make a good companion," Drabek said.

Many Web sites are devoted to pit bull rescue and facts.

Dog authorities characterize the various pit bull breeds as being different from the media's aggressive portrayal of them.

The American Staffordshire Terrier and the Staffordshire Bull Terrier are recognized as separate breeds by the American Kennel Club.

Though they have different bloodlines, similarities in appearance cause them to be given the

label of "pit bull."

Another breed included under the "pit bull" label, but not by AKC, is the American Pit Bull Terrier. The AKC lists them as AmStaffs while the United Kennel Club acknowledges them as a separate breed.

The AKC describes AmStaffs as "affectionate, reliable, and an especially good dog for children." According to the description of the Staffordshire Bull Terriers, they are "gentle, affectionate, trustworthy and loyal."

According to the American Temperament Test Society, Inc., pit bull breeds score about the same as the popular Golden Retriever at about 82 percent.

Setter, who also owns a pit bull, said a responsible owner knows their dog and is aware of the extra responsibility their breed requires.

"With pit bulls, they have been bred for years to fight dogs. So there is a tendency for pit bulls to be dog aggressive and owners need to be aware of that fact. Not all pit bulls are dog aggressive, but it's a possibility that owners need to be aware of and take precautions," Setter said.

"Biting is the dog's only form of defense against people. Just



LISA HART/Daily Titan Staff

This one-year-old pit bull mix is just one of many strays at the Orange County Animal Shelter because potential owners are afraid to adopt the dog due to its supposedly aggressive behavior.



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Another stray pit bull shows he is anything but mean on Monday at the shelter.

pit bulls are involved with community educational programs and animal-assisted therapy.

The unfortunate fact is that dog attacks do occur, but they aren't necessarily breed specific. Setter pointed out that the press is eager to run a story about a pit bull attacking someone, but it is uninterested in stories about a pit bull saving someone's life.

Common factors in most dog attacks are irresponsible owners and a lack of training.

"Different factors can trigger human aggression in a canine, prolonged abuse, accidents, environment, etc. Another key in fatal dog attacks is chained dogs," Setter said. "They have also typically not been made part of the family or trained or socialized with people."

Public Education Officer Ryan Drabek of the Orange County Animal Care Services, who graduated from Cal State Fullerton, said he rarely sees a dog that has some type of training or socialization to show aggression.

"We have several dangerous dogs in Orange County. Some are pit bulls, and some are German Shepherds or Rottweilers. Instead of looking at the breeds, you need to look at the people adopting these dogs," Drabek said.

because a dog bites, doesn't necessarily mean it's a 'mean' dog," she said.

They also do not have "locking jaws" Setter said. She added that young children should not be left alone with any breed of dog.

In his experience as a field officer for the OCACS, Drabek said he's found that in general, any dog that has not been trained or socialized with other dogs and people can develop an aggressive nature over time.

"Definitely get your dog to a training school. Get it around other dogs and other people," Drabek said. Setter and Drabek both said that people should use caution when approaching any unknown dog.