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PIT BULLS

Foes, fanciers agree dogs are a breed apart

By [Gary Magee Wilkes](#)

Special to the Tribune

Crystal and Lucy weighed about 35 pounds each, last September. Crystal was a typical 3-year-old enjoying the fall weather in Sultan, Washington. Lucy was a new neighbor, basking in the sun on the porch next door. Seconds after they met, Crystal lay bloody on the ground. There was a rip in her cheek from the corner of her mouth to her eye. Lucy was chased off by a man who heard the screams. Lucy was a pit bull terrier.

From Washington to Florida, newspaper accounts of pit bull violence punctuate the daily news. Proponents of the breed protest that pit bulls are being singled out for an unjustified smear campaign.

"We do not defend the attacks (of pit bulls) ...at the same time we feel the it is unjust to punish all pit bull owners because of a few incidents," said Margaret Amacker, president of the Duke City, N.M. Pit Bull Terrier Club.

Her club and the American Dog Owners Assoc. unsuccessfully fought a [Tijeras, N.M. ban on pit bull terriers](#). The ordinance followed a 1984 attack on 9-year-old [Angie Hands](#). Four dogs attacked Hands on her way to school, tearing away flesh and muscle from her upper arms as well as gnawing her right leg to the bone.

"She had lost so much blood, the doctors couldn't tell me if she was going to live, "Angie's Mother, Donna, said after the attack. Angie survived, but with massive scars.

The dogs belonged to Angie's uncle – she had been with them many times before with no trouble.

"A dog can be good for a long time because it doesn't have an opportunity for violence, said Seattle canine behaviorist Zoe Swanagon. "The dog alone might have been absolutely safe, but if there are two or more dogs together and they get into a pack mode, they can be extremely dangerous. "

Not all pit bulls are aggressive, Swanagon said, although aggressive ones are more dangerous than other dogs because of their tenacity and power.

"If a poodle is hell-bent on killing you, you stand a good chance of defending yourself," she said. "If a pit bull is in the same mode, you can forget about it."

Opinion is divided about almost every part of the controversy, even the name of the breed. While major dog clubs recognize the American Staffordshire Terrier, Staffordshire Bull Terrier and American Pit Bull Terrier, the breed can go by any number of other names. This has had a profound effect on legislation, causing courts to strike down laws for vagueness.

According to the World Encyclopedia of Dogs, the dogs have a common heritage. The English sport of bull baiting was popular for several centuries until it was banned in 1835. Special breeds of bulldogs were pitted against tethered bulls, or even bears.

With the ban on bull baiting, sportsmen turned to other diversions, chiefly dog fighting. The new requirements of dog against dog led to genetic changes in bull dogs.

"To be an effective fighter, certain traits have been selected and maximized by controlled breeding." Deena B. Case wrote in Community Animal Control Magazine. Fighting dogs were selected for speed, endurance, ferocity and insensitivity to pain, according to Case. A combination of enthusiasm for fighting and determination in attacks characterizes the breed. Case said selective breeding has developed unusual physical strength as well.

"If you own a pit bull you may be in possession of a time bomb. You may own the dog, but the dog owns the trigger."

–Arizona Humane Director
Dale Dunning

"Pit bulls can easily hang in mid-air, suspended by their teeth. The bite is so firmly held that pit bull fanciers routinely use special wedges called "breaking sticks" to release the dog's grip." Case also said that breeding accentuated some traits while eliminating others.

"They rarely bark or raise their back hair. The attack comes without preliminary displays. While this is desirable in the pit, it can be extremely dangerous if the dog decides to attack a human being."

Defenders of the breed deny their dogs are genetically programmed for destruction. They believe the dogs' characteristics have been misrepresented.

"He is a confident, stable, outgoing dog." Trainer Ralph Davis writes in *Bloodlines* magazine. "He basically trusts, likes and is relaxed around people." Davis said the breed's toughness is advantageous in training. "Tough dogs do not become shy as soft ones are liable to do. He must be able to stand corrections, fair discipline and be able to take a certain amount of roughing up."

Owners say the dogs are affectionate, loyal and gentle with children and that they are not naturally aggressive.

While opinions differ about the cause of pit bull attacks, the dogs' physical attributes are undisputed. Their bodies are very compact, with deep chests and heavy jaws.

"Pit bulls can bite with greater force than other dogs..." veterinarian [Donald Clifford](#) wrote in an article for the Journal of the American Veterinary Association. "...once in a hold they do not simply maintain the bite but continue to grind their molars and premolars into the flesh while the canine teeth stabilize the hold."

Commenting on the death of a Kansas woman, a forensic pathologist remarked, "In 30 years of doing this work, it's the worst case I've ever had. Her scalp was torn completely away from her head. There was a large chunk of muscle torn away from her arm."

A 14-year-old Bremerton, Washington had a similar experience. Brian Varney was carrying two water jugs from a neighbor's house, last July, when he was attacked by two pit bulls.

"Before I knew it, one of them jumped for my face." He said in a Seattle Post-Intelligencer interview. "He was pulling skin and meat from my arm and I was just watching him."

Ironically, the dogs themselves are seldom easy prey. They have the reputation of withstanding massive damage while continuing to attack. An [Everett, Washington](#), policeman was driving his patrol car down a residential street when a pit bull streaked in front of his car. Unable to stop the car, the policeman struck the dog, throwing it onto the hood. The dog stood dazed for a moment, then attempted to attack the officer by lunging repeatedly at the windshield. The dog was found the next day resting at home, unharmed.

A policeman in Cincinnati, Ohio, shot a pit bull nine times in one hour after it attacked a young boy. Five of the .357 magnum slugs hit the animal in the head. The dog died, later.

Reports like these have caused many police and animal control agencies to examine the problem. According to animal control professional, pit bulls often attack without warning. Once an attack has started, traditional methods of control may not be effective.

When two or more pit bulls are at large, the situation rapidly can become volatile. Police in Portland, Oregon, stopped two pit bulls by ramming them with their patrol cars. The dogs had attacked a citizen, a police officer and mauled another dog on their rampage. The dogs were not seriously hurt in the encounter.

In Snohomish County, Washington, two pit bulls attacked a 9-year-old girl and two adults who tried to rescue her. Matt Johnson, one of the adults, said that the dogs initially tried to attack his 3-year-old son. Johnson's brother was bitten while protecting the boy, but drove the dogs off, he said. The dogs then attacked the young girl. Johnson was bitten when he grabbed the girl from the dogs and threw her over a fence to safety. Johnson's response was automatic, he said.

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“By the time I’d gotten a gun, there would have been untold damage to that little girl. Why should I be held in siege by dogs in my own neighborhood?”

Incidents like these have caused a growing number of anti-pit bull laws, designed to prevent violence before it starts. The success of such legislation is doubtful. Dog fighting, the source of the breed, is already illegal in every state. In more than half of the states it is a felony. Despite the ban, dog fighting is growing in popularity and lurks on the fringe of the controversy.

The United Kennel Club, publisher of *Bloodlines* magazine, is foremost in trying to separate legitimate breed fanciers from the fighters. Before an American Pit Bull Club can hold licensed United Kennel Club events, its bylaws must have a strong denunciation of dog fighting and must bar members from any contact with the sport.

Critics of the dogs say the disclaimer is the best evidence of the breed’s continuing ties with the fighting pits. Although the United Kennel Club recognizes many breeds, the American Pit Bull Terrier is the only one that requires a denial of any involvement with fighting.

According to Dale Dunning, director of the Arizona Humane Society, singling out one breed may not be practical.

“I think it would force the people who see dog fighting as a sport to refine their breeding a bit until it turned into something that doesn’t look like a pit bull but still fights,” he said in an interview. “I think we would see a resurgence of the same type of dog in a few years.”

An often proposed solution is the adoption of aggressive laws to control vicious dog in general. Many areas have tried to avoid the pit bull issue by writing generic laws that do not mention specific breeds.

“Many of these ordinances were passed amidst the public frenzy surrounding tragic incidents,” according to Dr. Randall Lockwood, a spokesman for the Humane Society of the United States.

Lockwood, an expert on vicious dogs feels that laws should place the blame on the owners.

“Irresponsible ownership must be made costly...such owners should be held accountable for the actions of their animals.

The city of Mesa does not have a pit bull problem, primarily because of strict animal control laws aimed at owner responsibility, according to Jerry Buzza, lead animal control officer for the Mesa Police Department.

“We have numerous pit bulls in the city but have had very few incidents with them,” he said.

Buzza said the department is highly visible in the city and issues criminal citations for violations. Owners of vicious dogs are cited regardless of breed.

Large fines and jail sentences are not the only ways that owners could be liable. A Florida senate bill was proposed that placed financial responsibility on the owners of pit bulls. The provisions included a required \$1 million liability insurance policy for pit bull owners.

“There is no known insurance company that would write a policy for \$1 million in liability coverage to cover attacks by dogs,” Said John Miller, editor of *Bloodlines* magazine “...personal damage suits have been so large that some of the country’s largest insurers have told their sales people to accept no further policies of this sort.

Lack of insurance can pose an insurmountable problem for victims. After Crystal Bernard was attacked in Sultan, Washington, dog owner Glenn Matkins was convicted of reckless endangerment. He also was ordered to pay \$10,000 toward the cost of Crystal’s reconstructive surgery. Matkins launched an appeal that the city of Sultan could not afford to fight. It dismissed the charges and vacated his conviction. Matkins also was relieved of responsibility for damages.

While this local victory for pit bull advocates seems significant, the national view is somewhat different. The ability of pit bull owners to finance a continued defense is questionable. In Florida, the legal fees for the defense have totaled more than \$45,000, leaving defenders desperate for funds. Frequent articles in *Bloodlines* ask for contributions by breed supporters. It is doubtful local dog clubs or the dog owners association can sustain a nationwide legal battle to defend all pit bulls.

Newsweek estimated that the pit bull population may be as high as 200,000 and growing. Only 25,000 of the dogs are registered with the UKC, representing about 13% of the total population. The efforts of registered breeders and owners to protect the breed also will affect the

other 87 percent. Due to the clandestine nature of the sport, fighting dogs rarely are licensed or registered with dog clubs.

While registered breed owners promote responsible ownership and the breeding of quality pets, the fighters are proceeding along other lines. Richard Stratton, author of several books about pit bulls distinguishes between show dogs and pit bulls. Show dogs, according to Stratton, are bred to a standard of appearance while pit bulls are bred to a standard of performance – the ability to beat other dogs.

Stratton makes it clear in his books that gameness of a dog can only be determined when two dogs are allowed to fight each other. Stratton feels gameness is the single most important trait of the pit bull.

Humane Society Director Dunning echoed Stratton's belief that pit bulls are the result of selective breeding as are other breeds. Dunning used German Shorthaired Pointers as an example. He said that they were bred as hunters but few are still used for that purpose.

"Most German shorthaired pointers are family pets," Dunning said. "You take a dog that is four or five generations removed from hunting and raise it here in the city. Take it out in the country with you. What is the first thing it's going to do when it flushes a quail? It's going to point."

Dunning said that the genetic behaviors have been developed over hundreds of years and cannot be removed in a few generations. He added that the fighting behaviors of pit bulls are the same.

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If pit bulls are bred to be dangerous or merely capable of violence if improperly trained is the most hotly debated topic. If *Newsweek* statistics are correct, it may be irrelevant to the issue. If registered breed fanciers are such a small minority of owners, they cannot be viewed as typical. The fact that their dogs are well-trained and controlled does not speak for the majority.

The ratio between owners who like the dog's looks and owners who like the breed's fighting ability is unknown. Appeals for responsible ownership may not affect owners who buy a pit bull for its reputation as a fighter. With the apparently increase in the population of pit bulls, both sides will have something that they want – statistics.

The high-profile nature of pit bull attacks will insure that any violence by the breed will be reported. According to proponents of the breed, more pit bulls mean more maulings. According to the victims, once is enough.

Notes:

- 1.) Two days after the publication of this piece, [Yakima, Washington passed a pit bull ban](#).
- 2.) During the mid 1980s, the [constitutionality of breed-specific pit bull laws](#) was being tested. The courts determine [as early as 1986](#), that well-written breed-specific laws are indeed constitutional.