



A breed gone bad?

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What has happened to the pit bull terrier? Imagine the confusion of a dog-loving time-traveller from the early 1900s arriving in Ontario today. What would he think when he learned that a dog that was considered to be a "fun" family dog is now perceived as a deadly menace that the Ontario government wants to ban. It was because of the pit bull's friendly, playful, yet stubborn personality that one was chosen to play the role of Petey, the comic dog with the circle drawn around his eye, in the *Our Gang* and *Little Rascals* movies. Nipper, the dog listening to his master's voice played on a gramophone in the RCA trademark, is another sociable pit bull. The courage of the breed was so admired that a pit bull became the symbol of America in the U.S. war bond drive during the First World War.

Has the breed simply gone bad over the last few decades?

The origin of the pit bull terrier was in Elizabethan England, when they were used as fighting dogs. They get their name from the fact that they were literally placed in a pit-shaped arena and required to fight a bull while bets were taken on the outcome. In 1835, when the British Parliament banned this sport, gamblers turned to betting on fights between dogs. Several different breeds were popular for this alternative blood sport, but all kept the old generic label of "pit bull terriers." This is generally understood to include the American bulldog, the American pit bull terrier, the Staffordshire terrier and the American Staffordshire Terrier, although the name is often used also to refer to crossbreeds (such as Rottweiler and Staffordshire mixes) and other breeds with similar characteristics.

The "perfect" pit bull had to have a bit of a dual personality. It had to be aggressive toward other dogs, but not toward human beings, since the dogs required extensive handling by their owners before and during their fights. Most of the dog handlers were working-class and kept the dogs in their family homes, so that aggression toward people was not tolerated. Any dogs that bit human beings were usually put down. As a result, pit bulls were fairly good family pets.

For many years the reputation of pit bulls remained good. The "vicious and dangerous breeds" of dog that the media focused on at various times were chows chows in the 1930s, German shepherds in the 1940s, Doberman pinschers in the late 1950s and early 1960s and Rottweilers in the 1970s. What often determined the public's view of which breeds were dangerous was the nature of the people who chose to own them. If highly respected members of society selected a breed, it was usually deemed safe, while if unsavory or criminal people owned the dogs, they took on their owners' reputation.

This was ultimately the downfall of the pit bull. The early 1980s saw an upsurge in the popularity of pit bulls as guard dogs for drug dealers and as an expression of machismo for street toughs who might have criminal links. The dogs were often deliberately bred to be aggressive and were often used as weapons for intimidation. Thus it is not surprising to find that the 1980s also saw several widely publicized cases in which human beings were badly mauled by pit bulls. Because of this the pit bull became the newest entry into the bestiary of "vicious, evil devil dogs."

Is this bad reputation justified? To assess the degree of danger that a dog presents, you must consider both ends of the leash. It is possible to control the degree of aggression that any dog shows by appropriate (or inappropriate) training and rearing practices. Let's consider what the scientific evidence says about dogs that bite.

Male dogs that have not been neutered account for close to 70% of all dog bites. Dogs that are kept tied outside on a chain are 2.8 times more likely to bite than others, and dogs that are simply kept outside in a yard all of the time are twice as likely to bite. Dogs that have been physically abused, or for which the major form of control has been punishment, are more than six times more likely to bite.

A lot can be done to reduce the incidence of dog bites, entirely apart from the dog's breed. A well-socialized dog is unlikely to bite. The simple action of taking a dog to a basic obedience class (at which a group of people stand around in a circle and teach Lassie to sit, come and lie down on command) reduces the likelihood that the dog will bite by 90%. A one-hour class for children on "bite-proofing" has been shown to reduce the risk that a child will be bitten by a dog by over 80%. Combining dog obedience and child education can thus produce a 98% reduction in dog-bite injuries without banning any specific breed of dog.

Breeding is also important, however. A flourishing underground dog-fighting circuit still demands aggressive dogs. There are many people who want a vicious dog to boost their ego, establish a tough image or protect premises that may house legal or illegal materials that could attract thieves or home invasions. And many breeders are willing to provide dogs (often dogs that fit the pit bull classification) that can be guaranteed to be threatening and dangerous.

Certain code words are used for those who want such deadly dogs. Type the words "game bred" into your Web browser, and you will see what I mean. It will bring you to one source of the problem. Perhaps legislation that can charge breeders when the dogs that they sell become aggressive threats to society is needed to force them to breed safe dogs and to sell them only to responsible dog owners. This is apt to be a much more successful course of action than banning specific breeds. Inside any well-bred and well-socialized Pit Bull, we can still find Petey and Nipper.

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