

Pitbull Pride

"Dog mauls child," the newscaster announced. "Details at 6." I turned to my partner: "Well, we know it wasn't a pitbull. If it were, they'd be screaming it."

There was a time—as an R.E.I.-style dyke with two Labrador retrievers—that pitbulls struck fear into my heart. One day my partner came across an emaciated female pitbull with five very small mixed-breed puppies; someone had abandoned them in the freezing rain in a North Portland park. Impressed with the mama's calm demeanor under duress, we ended up keeping one of the pups and I became an accidental but devoted owner, friend, and protector of the bully breeds.

Many municipalities have outlawed pitbull and pitbull-type dogs, the current rogues of the canine world. Our neighbors to the north in the city of Vancouver just considered—and, fortunately, rejected—just such a ban. Here in Oregon, the 6 o'clock news reported the toddler was killed by the dog attack about which I heard the headline. As I guessed, it was not a pitbull. Though the breed involved is often used as a guard dog, no one decried its vicious nature or suggested it be banned.

As a society we seem to need a villain, someone or something to distract us from critical issues we could sink our teeth into and make real headway solving if we could just get over our hysterical finger-pointing. More children die each year from abuse by caregivers than die from attacks by all kinds of dogs



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BY MARY MANDEVILLE, DC

combined. More children drown in swimming pools or die in car accidents. The chances of being killed by a lightning strike are higher than the chances of being killed by a dog. But we love drama, and the specter of the monster pitbull and its sometimes real and sometimes imagined "gangsta" owner satisfies our need for sensation.

I have met, worked with and fostered numerous pitbull dogs. These pooches long to gain the approval—and the laps and pillows—of their human companions. The qualities old-time breeders valued for a dog in the pit—tenacity, fortitude, loyalty, determination—serve well in search and rescue, drug and bomb sniffing, therapy and making wonderful family pets. In a recent study of 122 dog breeds conducted by the American Temperament Testing Society, pitbulls achieved a passing rate equal to standard poodles and better than golden retrievers, beagles, Chihuahuas and a host of others. Even dogs rescued from fighting operations (e.g., the infamous Vick dogs) have earned Canine Good Citizen status.

As with any breed of dog, pitbulls who are abused, neglected, starved and otherwise mistreated can, but don't always, become aggres-

sive to humans. Many folks nod their heads at this. "It's all in how you raise 'em," they say. "It's not the dogs, it's the owners." But banning the dogs does nothing to change the behavior of *people*. In the '70s, German shepherds were the bad dogs of the day, in the '80s, Doberman pinschers.

A couple of years ago, a legislator introduced a bill to ban bully breed dogs in Montana. My sister is active in local politics. She had never seen more attendees at a committee hearing on any issue at any time. Passion was high, with sentiment running about 10 to 1 against the ban. Among the comments:

"Our son was mauled by a black Lab. But we're not here to suggest Labs—or pitbulls—be banned. We're just looking for owner responsibility."

"My former boyfriend beat me up, broke my arm and three ribs, punctured my lung. Nobody's suggesting a ban on him, though I wish they would."

"We had two dogs when our child was born, a cocker spaniel and a pitbull. One of them started snapping at the baby and threatening to bite her. We had to get rid of it. We still have the pitbull."

Consider these statistics. Of the dogs involved in fatal attacks:

- 90-97 percent (depending on the source) are not spayed or neutered.
- 84 percent have been abused, neglected, and are not properly contained.
- 80 percent are chained dogs.
- 78 percent are not kept as pets, but as guards or implements of protection.
- 3 out of 4 attacks on children involve the family dog.

Judging a dog by its build, ears, shape of head and slant of eyes is nonsense. Due simply to the skin they were born into, good dogs and responsible owners are punished along with the ill-temperamented and poorly bred, the negligent and criminal. Judge the deed, not the breed.

We'd improve safety by addressing social issues underpinning cycles of abuse and neglect across all classes. Unless we address the reasons people want menacing dogs along with the reasons they cruelly mistreat them, there will be dangerous dogs of one breed or another. Histrionic attitudes about pitbulls may sell newspapers and grab viewers for poorly conceived evening news clips. But they do little to help us to a saner, safer future. ☐

MARY MANDEVILLE wakes to a snoring pitbull pup, head on the pillow, most mornings. Her pitbull dogs are part of the family. Find her at animotionchiro.com.

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