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Neither Nature nor Nurture

No Simple Answers in the Debate about Pit Bulls

BY GARY WEITZMAN, DVM, MPH



With September's tragic dog shooting at Adams Morgan Day, the seizure of 200 fighting dogs in Ohio that same month, and the recent release of a book about the rehabilitation of Michael Vick's dogs, pit bulls have been much in the news of late. There's nothing new about that, I know, but it does give us cause to consider just what is going on with these dogs.

As a resident of Capitol Hill, I'm sure you have had some exposure to pit bulls, and your opinion of them may be positive or negative. There are those who think pits are wonderful dogs, and the entire onus for their occasional misbehavior lies with their owners. And then there are those who do not trust the breed under any circumstances.

And so it is that, on one hand, a police officer at a public festival shoots a pit bull he believes is aggressive, while on the other hand, police chief Cathy Lanier comes by the Washington Animal Rescue League regularly to spend time with our dogs and embraces all the pit bulls literally and enthusiastically.

How is it that different intelligent and well-meaning people look at the same dog and see totally different animals? I'd suggest it's because they have had either a good experience with pits, or a bad one. The experience need not even be direct. Maybe they saw a news report that made pit bulls look like 40-pound Godzillas. Or perhaps they were impressed by the movie "The Incredible Journey," which shows a pit bull in a positive light. It really is that simple.

The lesson I gather from all this is that those of us with pit bulls and those of us who rescue pit bulls are taking on a grave responsibility. We had better do things right because the eyes of the world are upon us and the stakes are high.

The Adams Morgan Day dog, Parrot, was in foster care when he was shot. Whoever you think is the guilty party—pit bull or police—we can all agree that the incident was a tragedy. That's what I mean when I say the stakes are high: with any dog, but especially with pit bulls, things can go very bad very quickly, and then prejudices can be established. It pays to be careful.

And what does "careful" mean? First of all, I think we have to be honest and admit that there are dogs who are simply too dangerous to be out in public. I'm not just talking about pits, of course. Any type of dog can fall into this category, but that category definitely includes pit bulls.

Those organizations that are a source of companion dogs owe it to the adopters, the public, and the dogs themselves, to make sure that our dogs do not fall into the dangerous category and that they are trained and, above all else, that they are cared for properly. A dog must have proven itself to be temperamentally sound before we place it with an adopter, whether permanent or a foster. At the League, every dog whose den carries an "Available for Adoption" sign has been through two comprehensive and rigorous behavior evaluations conducted by a professionally certified trainer. And knowing that large sectors of the adopting public tend to be leery of them, we generally put a bit more work into the pit bulls we have. We'll give them basic obedience training and extra socializing with other dogs. Several of our pits have even earned their AKC Canine Good Citizen certificate while in the shelter.

Because they are de facto ambassadors for their breed, the pit bulls we adopt out have to be absolute gems. And most of them can

easily become that with consistent positive reinforcement training.

But it doesn't end there. We always counsel adopters of all dogs, pit bulls included, to use common sense with their dog. There are dogs who should not attend large public gatherings. Taking my own two dogs through Eastern Market on a weekend morning proves that clearly enough. It's like a Cirque du Soleil performance minus the grace and fluidity.

And we all know that Parrot should have probably have been left at home on Adams Morgan Day. In fact, the Web site for Pit Bull Rescue Central, a very well-respected group, says point blank that it "does not recommend dog parks or dog daycares" for pit bulls. They're not saying that pits are terrible dogs—they think they're the best breed there is—but they are sensible and acknowledge the responsibility that pit bull guardians and rescuers have taken on.

One thing is irrefutably true, pit bulls really can be the very best of dogs, and pit bull rescue and adoption can certainly be done right. We played a pivotal role in the successful medical and social rehabilitation of eleven of Michael Vick's pit bulls a few years ago. And as I write this, we have just taken in ten more pit bulls from a suspected dog fighting operation in Ohio. Over the summer, we held a special pit bull adoption promotion that found great homes for 20 great pit bulls.

These dogs deserve the best chance we can give them, just as all dogs do. But that demands a clear-headed, sensible approach to their rescue, rehabilitation, and re-homing, as well as education and common sense in how they are cared for after adoption.

Dr. Gary Weitzman is a veterinarian, CEO of the Washington Animal Rescue League, and Chair of the DC Board of Veterinary Medicine. He is also the co-host of "The Animal House," National Public Radio's only program devoted exclusively to animals. Dr. Weitzman can be reached at gary.weitzman@warl.org. ★

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