

Hope's Story

A Veterinarian from Michigan Sets an Example



On July 14, 2011 Dr. Eric Keilen contacted MVMA and the MVMA office recommended Dr. Keilen contact me to assist him in finding a caring owner for Hope. Hope was Dr. Keilen's patient and an abuse victim. Hope is also a muscular, shorthair dog that is commonly identified as a "pit bull" mix or pit bull-type of dog.

When Dr. Keilen contacted me, he gave the following background information regarding the dog: "A few weeks ago we had a good Samaritan bring in a young pit bull mix that he had witnessed being abused. The dog had been tied to the back of a van and was being dragged down the street before eventually coming out of her collar and tumbling into the man's yard. The man who witnessed the event brought the dog straight to our clinic for treatment. He did not recognize the dog from the area and could not commit anything financially to the treatment, though he did mention that he would be willing to give her a home if needed. The event was reported to local animal control and the local news did a piece on the dog. As a consequence of this, many individuals have expressed interest in this dog. We have treated this dog's injuries and

she is healing beautifully. She has a great personality and looks to have qualities that would make her a good companion for the right owner. We will spay her and provide initial preventive care. So far all expenses have been covered by me and several donations that came in following the local news piece. When she is healed we would like to have her placed in a home. My preference would be to adopt her out through a third party rescue organization." After this communication, I connected Dr. Keilen with the Buster Foundation, an education and rescue organization focused on pit bull types of dogs (<http://thebusterfoundation.rescuegroups.org/>). The Buster Foundation was successful in helping Dr. Keilen find a wonderful home for Hope.

Sadly, Hope's abuse story is not uncommon. Cases of neglect and abuse are commonly reported to animal control facilities, shelters, rescue groups and veterinary clinics across the country on a daily basis. Many of the dogs that are victimized in these cases are indeed muscular and have shorthair, and are thus what could be identified as a "pit bull" mix. Public perceptions about the dogs identified as "pit bulls" range through

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a variety of extremes. These dogs have been portrayed by the media as “demonic animals —unpredictable and savage in their behavior toward humans.”¹ They may be seen as an abomination to the natural order, as a threat to the security and stability of humans.²

It has been argued that the way we deal with the social problem associated with pit bull type of dogs is not substantially different from the way we deal with societal issues we want to deny. From the perspective of the many problems from which we irrationally dissociate or actively ignore, the problem of our relationship to dogs of pit bull type is perhaps one of the most pernicious. These dogs may be even considered responsible for their own abuse, because of the public zeitgeist surrounding them. Pit bull-type dogs are frequently starved, chained to concrete blocks in backyards, forced to fight, tortured, and murdered at will. The pit bull-type of dog is considered the ultimate contemporary problem animal.

Several issues are associated with pit bull-type of dogs. The first supposition people hold is that the fact that a dog is genetically of pit bull lineage makes that dog automatically hardwired to be a “killer.” This supposition is of course untrue. However, it raises the second problem of identification and misidentification of the dogs that have similar phenotype, but are of unknown ancestry. This was confirmed by Dr. Voith’s³ study: “Comparison of adoption agency breed identification and DNA breed identification of dogs” where there was little correlation between adoption agencies’ identification of probable breed composition with the identification of breeds by DNA analysis. The dogs that are used for fighting are shorthair and muscular, and some of them are indeed American Pit Bull Terriers. However, not every shorthair muscular dog is an American Pit Bull Terrier. Obviously, not all American Pit Bull Terriers are used in dog fighting. In fact, there are more than 20 breeds that have a phenotype similar to American Pit Bull Terrier and American Staffordshire Terrier breeds. In the end, the

main question is what is a “pit bull”? This term has an abstract meaning that leads to confusion. In combination with the many urban myths associated with “pit bulls,” the result can be an irrational fear, panic, and eventually exclusion of appropriate societal ethics regarding treatment of innocent animals.

The current negative image of pit bulls is fueled by the fact that these dogs have

“Never, never be afraid to do what’s right, especially if the well-being of a person or animal is at stake. Society’s punishments are small compared to the wounds we inflict on our soul when we look the other way.”

—Martin Luther King Jr.

become urban legends. There are three identified factors that combine to create an urban legend, and all of them appear to apply to stories about pit bulls. First, pit bull stories have great media appeal. Second, pit bull “issues” are legitimized by being addressed by certain authority figures; in this case the negative attention applied to the pit bull dog makes them more attractive to certain societal elements that see them as “outlaw” symbols to which people attach as a projection of their own self-image. Finally, the instigation of fear and public outcry against pit bull dogs serves to promote certain vested interests, such as politicians and members of law enforcement and the media.⁴ Demonizing pit bull dogs by these individuals can serve to emphasize the role of the politician or law enforcement officer as a “protector of society’s interest,” and pit bull stories sell newspapers and attract viewers to media sites. Thus, the Pit Bull “. . . has become a reflection of ourselves that no one cares very much to see.”⁵ Two especially fear-inducing elements that have developed in our society are criminal gangs and drug dealers. Ownership of pit bulls has been associated with both of these groups.⁶ Instead of addressing these negative elements of society, “. . . conflicting groups can direct their attacks safely against the

proxy target, without having to engage each other directly. Normally, a society dares not choose genuinely powerful internal enemies.”⁷

There are a surprising number of urban legends associated with the pit bull type of dog. These include the following:

- MYTH: Pit bulls have massive biting power measuring in 1,000s of pounds of pressure per square inch.
- FACT: On average, dogs bite with 320 pounds of pressure per square inch. The bite pressure of a German Shepherd, an American Pit Bull Terrier, and a Rottweiler were tested. The American Pit Bull Terrier had the least amount of bite pressure of the three dogs tested. (Dr. Brady Barr, National Geographic)
- MYTH: Family pet pit bulls turn on their owners.
- FACT: No single neutered household pet pit bull has ever killed anyone.* (Karen Delise, founder of the National Canine Research Council. *Source*: The Institute of Animal Welfare and Behavior of the University of Veterinary Medicine, Hannover, Germany, which temperament tested over 1,000 dogs.)
- MYTH: Pit bulls attack without warning.
- FACT: “Pit bulls signal like other dogs.”
- MYTH: Pit bulls are more dangerous than other dogs.
- FACT: “A dog is only as dangerous as its owner allows it to be.” (Diane Jessup, founder of LawDogsUSA. *Source*: Animal Farm Foundation)

It has been argued that pit bulls are victims of a society that categorizes them as inherently vicious animals. Thus, the abuse of dogs that are forced to labor in the fighting pit is rationalized by arguing that the dog fighting arena is the place where pit bulls are “allowed to act out their normal behaviors.”⁸ It has been noted that breed bans appear in circumstances marked by emotionalism and limited inquiry into the sources and probability of a risk and limited

consideration of alternative policies.⁹ Delise¹⁰ identified a change in media description of dog attacks that began in the 1970s. At this point in time, according to Delise, “media sensationalism replaced common sense.” In depicting dog attacks, the emphasis shifted and “children stopped teasing dogs and dogs started attacking children without provocation.” Delise also argues that the media stopped describing such events as existing in a framework of typical “cause-effect,” because this diminished the impact of the stories, rendering them less newsworthy or interesting. Without describing the circumstances under which this event occurred, the impression is fostered that the dog is inherently unpredictable and untrustworthy, while the truth may be that this dog was abused, inadequately socialized, and certainly was not treated as a family companion. Rather than being identified as a tragic case involving child neglect and animal abuse, the dog’s genetics bear the entire responsibility for the event. In order to prevent dog attacks, we have to identify the real reason and address them properly. This might not be an easy or quick process, but it is the only way forward to provide adequate protection to the public and the animal alike.

By stating that “pit bulls” are often victims of animal cruelty, I do not suggest that there are not “pit bulls” that attack. Dogs from any breed or mix of breeds could attack under specific circumstances. A critical resource that addresses the issue of dog attacks, attack prevention, and the breeds more commonly associated with human attacks is the paper from the AVMA Task Force on Canine Aggression and Human-Canine Interaction.¹¹ From this source comes the following information: “Statistics on fatalities and injuries caused by dogs cannot be responsibly used to document the ‘dangerousness’ of a particular breed, relative to other breeds, for several reasons. First, a dog’s tendency to bite depends on at least five interacting factors: heredity, early experience, later socialization and

training, health (medical and behavioral), and victim behavior. Secondly, there is no reliable way to identify the number of dogs of a particular breed in the canine population at any given time (e.g., ten attacks by Doberman Pinschers relative to a total population of ten dogs implies a different risk than ten attacks by Labrador Retrievers relative to a population of 1,000 dogs). Third, statistics may be skewed,

“Our task must be to free ourselves . . . by widening our circle of compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of nature and its beauty.”

—Albert Einstein

because often they do not consider multiple incidents caused by a single animal. Fourth, breed is often identified by individuals who are not familiar with breed characteristics and who commonly identify dogs of mixed ancestry as if they were purebreds. Fifth, the popularity of breeds changes over time, making comparison of breed-specific bite rates unreliable.”¹²

The truth is that dogs are not “little humans with fur.” All modern dog breeds, whether Maltese or Mastiff, are wolf descendants. Dog bites are contextual and of multifactorial etiology. Adults, parents, owners, and guardians are the responsible parties in the human-animal interaction. We should not expect common sense from children and dogs, nor should we blame the dogs’ genetics for an adult’s reckless behavior that puts at risk other human lives. People should be educated regarding the proper methods to raise, socialize, and train a dog, as well as to the basic factors of dog care before adopting a canine companion. Responsible dog ownership, which places the responsibility for the dog’s misbehavior squarely on the owner, is optimal. Legislators should act to address negative social issues in a global sense, rather than superficially acting to gain positive media spin. The media should respect their role and inform, not misinform. Veterinarians are best positioned to educate regarding animal welfare and responsible

dog ownership, as they are trusted medical professionals. Veterinarians are the experts in animal welfare.

I wonder what would have happened to Hope if Dr. Keilen had not viewed her as an individual dog, but as a monster. I also wonder what would have happened to Hope if the Good Samaritan that brought her to the clinic had assumed that Hope deserved to be abused because she is a “pit bull.” I am very happy that both of them saw an individual dog, an abuse victim, a creature in need, and ultimately a patient after all . . .

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