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Breed profiling: It's the pits

Friday, March 2, 2012

By Gailynne M. Ferguson
For Journal Register News Service

For Journal Register News Service

Once known throughout the United States as the "Nanny Dog", the pit bull has now been labeled as one of America's most vicious dogs. They have even been banned in some states. In Tijeras, New Mexico (just outside of Albuquerque) animal control officers are permitted, by law, to seize and destroy pit bulls on site. Shelters see their share of pit bulls entering their facilities. Some are surrendered, some seized, a few are lost and there are even those left alone on shelter steps injured or dying.

Unfortunately, as is often the case, reports are sensationalized in order to make big headlines. Though there are cases of pit bull attacks on people, the truth is that these dogs have been around for centuries without the hysteria that is now present in today's headlines. Before they rose to being labeled as one of America's most vicious dogs, they were considered one of America's most coveted family pets and the protector of children. For years, people have been told not to judge a person by their ethnicity or color yet we are allowing a group of dogs, like those in the Bull and Terrier group, to be judged by their breed? Let's face it, racism, in any form, is the pits!

In the 1970's, the Doberman pincher was considered a vicious, dangerous dog. Children were not only told to not go near them but to walk on the other side of the street, even if there was a fence. Though the dog is highly intelligent, alert and loyal to its owner, the public hysteria of "this dangerous dog" made people fearful to be near one even though it was trained and trusted to be a guard, police and military dog.

In the 1980's, the vicious label shifted to the ever loyal German shepherd. Like the Doberman, the German shepherd is a highly intelligent, extremely obedient, loyal and protective animal. It is these traits that law enforcement and military have relied on to protect their officers and soldiers throughout the world.

By the 1990's, attention was drawn to the Rottweiler, a German and American bred dog that today is used in search and rescue operations, as a police, military and customs dog as well as a guide dogs for the blind. Again, the Rottweiler's high intelligence, loyalty and protective traits have made him exceptional as a family dog and as a working dog.

Today, the global target is on the Bull and Terrier group, which includes the American Staffordshire terrier, American Pit Bull terrier and at times the Bulldog. They are being banned because of their perceived aggressiveness which unfortunately has been the result of years of mistreatment. The blogger of Gotham Resistance, wrote recently of the pit bull hysteria stating that "ignorance spreads twice the speed of truth". This statement is so true. And to think, man is supposed to be the more intelligent species.

Too often, people's ignorant perceptions will group and label those they don't understand with the expectation that others accept their opinions without challenging the accuracy of the statements. Intelligent people look beyond a simple opinion and search for the truth. Over the next few segments, the Community Connection will look into the history of the Bull and Terrier group; shed light on how they went from being America's number one family dog to being one of the most feared dogs in the world and highlight famous dogs and owners from this group. The Community Connection's series on Pit bulls may very well change some people's perceptions of this exceptional breed. As famed Dog Whisperer, Cesar Millan, would say, "sit, stay and remain submissive".

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Breed profiling: It's the pits, Part 2

Wednesday, March 7, 2012

By Gaillyne M. Ferguson
For Journal Register News Service

As early as the 1800's, Europeans started breeding dogs from a fighting dog known as the Bull and Terrier. Used for biting and locking onto the nose of bulls for people to constrain the bull, animal rights activists fought for animal cruelty legislation and "bull baiting" was eventually outlawed. Today's American Staffordshire Terrier, American Pit Bull Terrier and the Staffordshire Bull Terrier as well as the English Bulldog and several others all evolved from the Bull and Terrier...some possessing more original traits than others. Damon March, operations director of the Humane Society of Berks County, points out that "it also refers to dogs that have or appear to have any of the mentioned breeds as a component of their mixed breed makeup and refers to the Pit Bull as more of a style of dog rather than one particular breed".

Eventually bred for human entertainment and protection, continuous selective breeding by humans to keep making the dog more muscular and aggressive looking brought about the beginning of the "Pit Bull" lineage. Today, they still family dogs, they are often used as guard dogs to protect drug dealers, their drugs and money and for the financially lucrative sport of dogfighting. The result of inhumane treatment, injuries left untreated, malnourishment, barbaric housing and training have all led to the present day pit bull hysteria which humans have created.

Anyone who has ever owned a dog knows that, like people, they are unique animals with their own personalities. How that personality develops directly reflects upon how they have been raised, treated and trained...just like children. To classify all dogs with "like" components is, in the long run, very unfair to the individual dog.

Loyal, obedient and protective to their owner, both the American Staffordshire Terrier and the American Pit Bull Terrier are medium-sized dogs with short coats and muscular builds, weighing anywhere from 30-78 pounds. Like the Doberman Pincher, German shepherd and Rottweiler before them, their traits are sought after by those that understand them and feared by those that do not. Those that fear them believe they should be destroyed.

Often confused with the American Pit Bull Terrier, the American Staffordshire Terrier is its own separate breed. It had several uses in England as a farm and guard dog, to companion animal and dog fighter. By the late 1800's, it was brought to America and the breed eventually gained popularity as "Pete the Pup" in the acclaimed television show, Our Gang (The Little Rascals). During World War I, the American Staffordshire terrier's image of strength and dignity represented the United States' tough stance against its enemies. These dogs went to war during WWI. Sgt. Stubby, the most decorated dog in military history, fought in 17 battles, spent 18 months in the trenches for France, warned his fellow soldiers of incoming gas attacks, rescued wounded soldiers from No Man's Land, listened for incoming artillery, and captured a German spy. Not what one typically thinks of when they hear the term "pit bull".

A native dog of Scotland, Ireland and England, another similar dog possessed the traits of strength and dignity. Though Europe eventually banned the use of dogs to bait bulls, it didn't stop man from dreaming up yet another sport called rattling. This eventually led to dog fighting in Europe and when these dogs came to the United States, they became known as the American Pit Bull Terrier. Once again, they were used on the farm to catch semi-wild cattle and hogs, to hunt and to drive livestock. During World War I and World War II, these fearless dogs were used to deliver messages on the battlefield, under fire.

From Helen Keller and President Teddy Roosevelt to numerous families across America, the pit bull type breeds have proven to be loyal, dependable and protective family dogs. These dogs are not born with an innate hatred toward man and other dogs...they are trained to be that way. Starve a person, strip them of their dignity, injure them without treatment and see if they act any differently than these dogs. Unlike man, these dogs are not being given the second chance they so desperately deserve.

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Breed profiling: It's the pits, Part III

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By Gaillyne M. Ferguson
For Journal Register News Service

Several of the fighting dogs rounded up in the Mike Vick dog fighting incident have since gone on to successfully complete a Canine Good Citizen course, find new homes, become active in canine agility contests as well as becoming therapy dogs. But success stories don't just lie within the Bad Newz Kennel dogs, they are all over the United States even locally.

Dakota, Cheyenne and Tahoe are all American Pit Bull Terriers. With over 200 search and rescue (S.A.R.) missions to their name, these three dogs have searched the debris for survivors at the World Trade Center after 9/11, the grounds of the Columbia Space Shuttle disaster and for Laci Peterson. Though, they are world famous search and rescue dogs, they are also trained therapy dogs helping children with special needs, children who have been abused and battered and are now involved in safety programs at schools. Are these three unique to the breed? Absolutely NOT!

Abandoned and left to die with her nine littermates, Weela, an American Staffordshire Terrier, would go on to become Ken-L Rations 40th dog hero of the year after saving 30 people, 29 dogs, 13 horses and one cat during one of southern California's worst floods. The courage she displayed is far more than most humans would have undertaken.

RCA was a victim of the housing collapse and the ever-growing pit bull hysteria. Unable to find a pit bull-friendly home to, she was surrendered to the Anchorage SPCA. Her fantastic temperament soon landed her a job as Alaska's first certified hearing dog.

Suffering from wounds to the head and neck, stuffed in a garbage bag and left to die in a refrigerator, 5-month old Popsicle was rescued by police in Buffalo, NY during a raid. After recovering from his wounds, at the Erie County Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, he was selected by the U.S. Customs Service to join the ranks of 612 dogs nationwide for drug interdiction. He underwent 15 weeks of training at the Canine Enforcement Training Center in Front Royal, VA and by the time he retired, he had made 24 seizures of marijuana: 12,080 pounds with a street value of \$640,000, one cocaine seizure of 148 pounds worth \$6,719,200 and two currency seizures with a total value of \$65,144.

Neville nearly became a victim of Canadian Breed Specific Legislation. Through the hard work of volunteers and dedicated people, this American Pit Bull Terrier, was transferred to the United States where he was quickly accepted into a Law Dogs program to learn bomb detection. As a member of the Washington State Patrol, he screened over 200 cars per day for bombs on the Washington State Ferry System. After five years and 21 actual finds of weapons or explosives, he retired but his success led to the placement of four more pit bulls working with the Washington State Patrol in narcotics and bomb detection. K-9 Motto, a pup rescued from the Clackamas County Animal Shelter, was one of those four. Another Law Dogs success story, K-9 Motto was trained in narcotics detection and had a combined 2005 & 2006 record of 70 searches with 120 narcotics finds for the Washington State Patrol.

The media, to include television, newspapers and magazines have all presented reports of "vicious" attacks by pit bull type dogs which have helped to further deteriorate the breed's reputation but the dogs just mentioned are far from vicious. Philadelphia Eagles' quarterback, Mike Vick's Bad Newz Kennels incident truly brought to light the inhumane treatment that pit bull types receive when they either lose a fight or merely aren't good enough. Vick's excuse for the horrific torture these dogs endured was "it's his culture". This callous disregard for another living being is inexcusable. Torture and murder are not an accepted American culture yet despite the suffering that Vick's dogs and numerous others throughout the US have endured; they remained loyal and forgiving to their owner regardless of their pain. Next week, the Community Connection will wrap up its series on Breed Profiling, address responsible ownership rules and highlight success stories from shelters in this area.

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Breed profiling: What's next?

Wednesday, March 28, 2012

By Gaillyne M. Ferguson
For Journal Register News Service

Meet Dino, one of three dogs who were rescued as pups from a home in Berks County along with their mother and father. Taken to the Animal Rescue League, Dino was eventually placed with Debbie Greusel, of Mohrsville, as a foster dog. Unable to give her up, Debbie adopted Dino and set off on a journey to the Intermountain Therapy Dogs in Wilkes-Barre to have Dino become a certified Reading Education Assistance Dog (R.E.A.D.). Dino has helped inspire reading among numerous autistic children in the Reading School District.

Exeter Township resident, Vicky Hoffman, rescued a six year old black and white pit bull named Sophie who had been hit by a car. Sophie was left blind in one eye and needed to have her rear leg amputated. Despite her permanent injuries, Sophie's determined nature helped her rebound and today she attends pit bull awareness presentations at both the Reading School District and the Reading Rec Center.

Ava, another pit bull owned by Hoffman was seven months when she was found along with her brother in a dilapidated garage in Reading. Both had their ears cropped in a crude manner, not by a veterinarian, but most likely by an individual intent on using her and her brother in dogfights. Today, Ava is not only a family dog but is undergoing therapy training and soon will join the ranks of Sophie and Dino.

A well behaved dog of any breed starts with early training and socialization. This is especially true with the pit bull types. What a better way to end the prejudice than to have the most well behaved dog in the neighborhood!

Basics commands of sit, stay, come, and down are essential for a dog. Teaching the dog how to walk and act while on a leash will allow the owner to keep the dog under control in public. Though dog parks, in theory are a great idea for exercising a dog, remember that dogs are like children: when they become tired, they are easily agitated. Sadly, owners become complacent and believe that their well-behaved dog will not engage in unwanted behavior, even when agitated. They are wrong. More incidents occur at dog parks because of unwanted play or a not-so-well socialized and behaved dog joining the group causing tension. These dogs are high energy. Walking them for thirty minutes, playing fetch, enrolling them in a dog agility or flyball course will all tire the dog and a tired, relaxed dog is a well behaved dog.

Dogs want security and look to their owners for this. If allowed to run free in the yard, make sure it is securely fenced to provide safety for the dog and others walking by. Many dogs find safety & security in a crate when home alone and this is a great alternative if there is no other secure place.

Pit bull type breeds can be great family pets but responsible pet owners need to learn as much about their breed as possible before adopting. Over the past several weeks, the Community Connection has addressed the pit bull type breeds so that others can understand the true nature of these dogs. Though this just touches upon the majestic nature of these animals, their history and the problems now facing the breeds; it was intended to prove that with the right training and responsible leadership by their owners that even dogs that have had a rough start in life can overcome the

odds and contribute greatly to society. It is the irresponsible owners that have destroyed this dog's reputation over the years by breeding them to close, subjecting them to pain and hunger and depending on them to be a defense for the owner's illegal activities.

These dogs are eager to learn and anyone who has every owned a pit bull type dog knows first-hand just how wonderful, loyal and obedient they can be if they are trained correctly. Pete the Pup, Nipper, Tige, Sgt. Stubby, Neville, Popsicle, Dakota, Cheyenne, Tahoe, RCA, Weela, Dino, Sophie and Ava are all proof that these dogs are not inherently vicious. They can be trained to perform a task for society and excel. With advocates throughout the United States fighting for the pit bulls survival, one has to ask, what's next for this heroic, family oriented dog?

Editor's note: Gaillyne Ferguson wrote the following as a personal epilogue to her series:

Over the past two months, I set out on a journey to help educate the public about animal shelters. In the process, I saw the overwhelming number of pit bull type dogs that are turned in. The numbers shocked me and I knew I had to do something to help educate the public. I hope I reached some people. I know I educated myself if nobody else.

I can't help but think that those with the power to condemn the dog want to take away a person's right of dog ownership just like they want to take away a person's right to own firearms. These dogs are security for their owners. We condemn them for acting like "untrained, wild dogs" but allow those that trained or didn't train them to go either unpunished or with a minimal sentence. There are even those that have been rewarded with lucrative financial gains if they say how sorry they were torturing and killing the dogs. In all honesty, if they treat animals this way, why is stopping them from treating another human being this way?

An old English proverb reads, "Give a dog a bad name and hang him. The virtues of the dog are his own, his vices, those of his master." It is time this country stops pampering and making excuses for those that cannot live in society as responsible citizens. It really isn't that hard.

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The Community

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Letter to the editor: Breed profiling

Editor's note: This letter was written in response to the "Breed profiling" series that has been published in the Community Connection.

About a year and one-half ago, I took the very best friends I had to the local vet to be put down. They had both reached between thirteen, and at thirteen and one half years, it was about time. One was blind and the other began having urinary problems. They were both pit bulls.

As a police officer and a survivor of a close quarter shootout, (of which I was also shot), I believe pit bulls are punished as a whole for deeds committed by a few in comparison. I remember, one time responding to a 911 call for a 'vicious pit bull', and racing there to possibly prevent some 'heroic' police officer from discharging his firearm. Once I arrived on scene, I located the animal. It was a large, beautiful white pit bull, that had

gotten off of its leash and ran in excitement. I think we can all admit, we have all done that ourselves at one time or another in our lives.

Well, luckily, I beat my commanding officer to the scene and took the dog into my grasp by hand by its collar. I then released custody of the dog to its owner within a few minutes. The owner was sincerely grateful. My commander then stated something to the effect of 'Why did you

do that?', I flew here so I could shoot that dog?, and chuckled. I then explained how I owned two myself at that time and departed the scene.

In closing I would like to share a thought; As human beings, (and more specifically police officers), we are not allowed to judge others, or 'profile' a given race. When a dog wakes up in the morning, it does not think about who it is going to bite that day. If a dog bites a person, that

dog is usually put down either by law enforcement or via euthanasia.

When a human being wakes up in the morning, he/she considers the consequences before loading that firearm, or pulling out that knife from the kitchen drawer. They then locate the person they intend to murder and commit the act, with as you can see, malice aforethought.

The human being is possibly arrested and then granted a jury trial. If the prosecution can prove beyond a reasonable doubt that THAT specific human committed the act, then he/she would have to serve a given amount of years in prison depending on the state in which the crime was committed.

Now please consider, which one is actually the animal?

Shawn Marando