



## Ken Okada: Pit bulls are judged, banned based on unfair misconceptions

By Ken Okada \ Guest columnist

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My wife found four dogs in the desert the other day. Three were pit bull puppies, about 10 weeks old. She called to them and they ran to her, giving her kisses when she picked them up.

The fourth dog was a Shih Tzu girl that was evidently welcomed into the puppy pack after she was lost. These pit bulls displayed unhesitating affection toward people and other dogs.

Question: So why do pit bulls have such a bad reputation?

Answer: From misconception and misinformation.

Pit bulls (American Pit Bull Terriers, Staffordshire Terriers) are some of the most affectionate, loving dogs you'll come across. My wife and I have interacted with hundreds of pit bulls at local shelters and have never been threatened by any of them.

The breed that gets labeled "most dangerous" changes over time. Some 150 years ago, it was bloodhounds. Early last century, it was German

shepherds. Then, later, Dobermans.

Pit bulls have been victimized by this label since the 1980s, a catalyst being a Sports Illustrated article with a cover picture of a pit bull and the caption, "Beware Of This Dog."

But pit bulls aren't inherently dangerous. In fact, all the "dangerous" breeds had one thing in common: They were made that way by people.

Bloodhounds, German shepherds and Dobermans got their reputations from being raised as guard and attack dogs. Pit bulls, of course, have received notorious attention from being forced into dog fighting.

But even pit bulls that are trained to be aggressive

to other dogs still remain gentle toward their owners; they do what they do just to please their people.

Pit bulls are feared even outside the dog-fighting ring, and this has been mainly due to the media sensationalizing pit-bull attacks.

The trend in recent decades has been that, even if a dog kills a person, if it's not a pit bull, it's often barely acknowledged by the local media. But if a pit bull so much as injures a person, it's reported not just nationally, but sometimes internationally.

The reality, though, is that pit bulls make

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wonderful companions if they are raised in a family atmosphere. Karen Delise, author of "The Pit Bull Placebo," states that 92 percent of pit-bull attacks were by those that were not fixed, nor treated as family dogs; they were left outside, neglected or abused -- often continuously chained.

Debates continue in various communities across the country about banning pit bulls. Even within this community there are areas where pit bulls are prohibited, and it's tragic to see people surrender their dogs to the shelter, speaking tearfully about having to give up their family members because of the bans where they live.

Are these bans justified?

Let's see. Every year, on average fewer than 30 people in this country are killed by dogs, and of those, three are from pit bulls, despite there being millions of pit bull-type dogs in this nation.

Contrast this to the number of people killed annually by other means: 34,000 by automobiles, 10,000 by guns and 400,000 by cigarettes.

Which should we really be banning?

Sports Illustrated printed a nice follow-up article in 2008, chronicling the fates of pit bulls seized from Michael Vick's dog-fighting ranch.

While certain groups wanted all these dogs destroyed, other organizations rescued and

rehabilitated them to the point where many were adopted to loving homes, and at least one pit bull became a therapy dog. The dog that previously experienced so much trauma is now helping to ease trauma in others.

Any dog has the potential to be aggressive if raised in a certain way.

But banning, or even fearing, an entire breed because of the sensationalized actions of a few -- especially when those actions are caused by humans -- is extremely unfair and is akin to racial profiling.

Any dog of any breed should be judged in the same way we would want to be judged -- as individuals.

Ken Okada is an anesthesiologist in El Paso.

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