

Dr. Oakley says....

Are Pit Bulls dangerous???

This is a loaded question! Half of the readers of this article want the answer to be yes and the other half want it to be no. The real answer, in my opinion is that it depends.

Let's start with what is a Pit Bull? According to www.understand-a-bull.com, the term Pit Bull is not a breed but a term used to describe three different breeds with similar characteristics: American Pit Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier, and Staffordshire Bull Terrier. Let me tell you what prompted this discussion. This past weekend, at the Lebanon Veterinary Hospital (LVH), there was an incident regarding a pit bull confrontation: A senior couple was walking their senior Golden Retriever on the Green when a pit bull attacked. The aggressor was stopped, but not before the Golden's owner had been bitten trying to save her dog. The pit was leashed but it took the owner precious seconds to gain control over her dog. The Golden was left unable to walk due to puncture wounds and soft tissue damage. The couple was obviously upset, but when they asked the pit's owner for her name.....she ran off. Amazing! The Golden's owner bandaged her hand quickly and rushed her poor pet in for medical attention. Dr. Z was certain that he could patch up the Golden, though she may not walk properly without surgery. Once she was stable, he encouraged the owner to get treatment for her own bite wound. The good news? Everyone is alive and will eventually be okay. The bad news? This pit's owner shirked reasonable responsibility thereby fueling the pit bull controversy.

The Zickmann family has had some lively discussions this weekend over breed types and owners. Here are some statistics that I heard flying around as I lay underneath the dinner table. "According to 2012 Dog Bite Fatalities by DogsBite.org in the eight year period from 2005-2012, pit bulls killed 151 Americans, about one citizen every 19 days." The American Humane Association says that from 1979-1998 at least 25 different breeds of dogs have been involved in the 238 dog-bite-related fatalities in the United States during that period. According to the American Veterinary Medical Association, about ½ of those injured in dog attacks are children. The rate of dog bite accidents is highest for those between the ages of 5-9. How would you feel if it was your dog or your child? Even a small dog can inflict damage to those little hands and faces.

Dr. Z says that many of the biters he has known have been small breed dogs that are intolerant of being restrained and examined. Funny how we seem to expect less of the little guys, right? The Z's were pretty clear at dinner that they don't believe in breed-specific legislation but that responsible ownership, consciousness breeding and public education are the most effective ways of reducing dog bites.

Could any dog have behaved as badly as in our incident this past weekend? Of course! Do pit bull owners have an even greater responsibility to be in control of their pets? Certainly!

“When two dogs fight, the conflict is usually ritualized. The objective is for one dog to win the disagreement with little or no bloodshed. The participants try to intimidate each other by engaging in plenty of dramatic-looking behavior, which may include posturing, circling, growling, showing teeth and snarling. Bites delivered during a fight are typically because the point is to cause pain but not necessarily to inflict serious injuries. Pit bulls have been bred to behave differently during a fight. They may not give warning before becoming aggressive, and they’re less likely to back down when clashing with an opponent. When provoked, they may become aggressive more readily than another breed might. Sometimes they don’t inhibit their bites, so they may cause injury more often than other dogs.” (The ASPCA “The Truth about Pit Bulls”)

An 8 lb. biting Chihuahua may be annoying but it simply cannot inflict the damage that a larger dog can. Pit bulls were bred to be fearless and tenacious; they are terriers after all! We have many wonderful pit bulls that come through our doors without incident. Dr. Z and staff are certainly respectful of any larger, powerful dog when they need to handle them.

I must comment on the myth, that pit bulls have “locking jaws”. They do not. There is no physiological mechanism that enables their jaws to “lock”; they simply have a very powerful bite force. They employ the same bite, shake and hold behavior as many other breeds. They were selectively bred to have a high threshold for pain. Considering that their original job upon arrival in the USA was to be a catch dog (a specially trained dog used to catch large animals in hunting, working livestock and baiting. Source: Wikipedia) for large animals like wild boars and semi-wild cattle, this seems a useful attribute. Contrast this with bay dogs, which corner their prey and howl or bay for their handler to arrive. So, they are not super canines but they are equipped and capable of inflicting major damage very quickly because of their strength and breed background.

This doesn’t make them bad dogs, but it does require owners to hold themselves to a high standard. We must lead/control all dogs or they will take charge. As annoying as that 8 lb. biting Chihuahua could be, a pit bull has the capability to be extremely dangerous and we must be able to lead/control our dogs. Don’t be shy about asking for help. Several good dog trainers are available locally at reasonable rates.

Dr. Z doesn’t know that I know this, but one of his favorite breeds is the German Shepherd. He grew up with one. He loves all animals but the Shepherds remind him of his young carefree days. Yet, he will not have one as a pet as long as he has the hospital. He believes that it is too much to ask of such a loyal, watch dog to allow “strangers” (people and pets) onto its property each and every day. He believes the living conditions would conflict with the breed character.

Me? I like anyone and everyone. Scratch my head and you are my friend for life but not all my relatives feel that way.

Dr. Z says that generally, owners don’t ask much of their pets. We do expect them to go outside to use the bathroom and not to bite us. In return we provide them with food, shelter, exercise,

love, attention, health care, fun and a place in our home and hearts. It seems like a good, simple trade.

We all have a responsibility to control and be responsible for our pets. Though Lebanon has no leash laws, please use leashes/leash systems and make sure you are in control. Most of us thought it was a good idea to wear seat belts before that became law.

We wish our friends that were injured this past weekend on the Green well. Please remember that controlling our dogs while in public places helps keep us all safe.

Peace,
Oakley