



## The Pit Bull Dilemma

### Connie's Weekly Newsletter

As animal welfare professionals, we have heard time and again from experts in the field that although breed influences behavior, it does not determine behavior. The real culprits in most instances are environmental influences, including abuse, a lack of socialization and training, and failure to neuter.

In the book “The Pit Bull Placebo: The Media, Myths, and Politics of Canine Aggression”, author Karen Delise states the following:

*A century ago, there was a more balanced view of both the dangers and contributions dogs made to the welfare of humans. The media portrayed what many people at the time seemed to understand: that good dogs occasionally behave “badly” and that even “bad” dogs could do good deeds.*

In 2007, Dr. Randall Lockwood submitted an affidavit to the Federal court in opposition of Denver, Colorado’s Pit Bull ban based on his research of dog bites and attacks. He described the attempt to correlate dog bites and attacks with the single vector of breed as evidence of a 19<sup>th</sup> century mindset. Dog bite injuries, he said, are a complex, societal problem that must deal with a wide range of human behaviors that put people and animals at risk.

Yet despite repeated counsel from canine behavior experts and animal welfare organizations backed by science and research, discrimination against Pit Bulls and Pit Bull-type dogs continues. A national pet retail brand is moving forward with a policy banning all bully breeds from its pet hotels and dog day care centers. Likewise, the Department of the Navy has instituted a policy taking effect this fall to ban all bully breeds from Navy bases including housing units. One ban punishes the responsible pet owner who wants to send their dog to day care for necessary exercise and socialization or provide a comfortable boarding experience while traveling. The other discriminates against military families and pet owners of “bully breed” dogs by effectively forcing them to choose between affordable housing and their pet.

After 30 years of working in animal welfare, I can’t recall a more lasting breed prejudice than the culture of prejudice against bully breeds we are now experiencing. The first official breed ban targeted German Shepherds in the 1920s and lasted until 1974 when it was appealed. In the 70s, the Doberman was feared and in the 80s and 90s the Rottweiler and Pit Bull took the Doberman’s place. Today, the term “Pit Bull” describes any square-jawed dog with a muscular build and remains firmly entrenched in the minds of the public and media as the “breed” to be feared.

There are few tools available to us to help protect the people and animals affected by this prejudice; however some you can use are:

1. Obtain ‘Canine Good Citizen’ certificates for pit bulls placed on your adoption floor.
2. Focus targeted and measurement-based spay/neuter programs on the pit bulls in your community. Remember San Francisco SPCA’s “Bucks for Balls” program?
3. Make sure the dog you label “Pit Bull” is in fact a Pit Bull. Use DNA testing on these dogs.
4. Offer DNA testing to the public; pet owners forced to relinquish a Pit Bull mix may discover that mixed breed dog is not a Pit Bull after all.
5. Change perceptions through positive messaging. Use Pit Bulls and other bully breed dogs in your photos, on the web, and other public material.
6. Offer free puppy socialization classes to every adopter of a pit bull puppy.

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**\*Choose any size pack from cat to XL dog – each pack of PetArmor contains three measured doses.**

Sincerely,

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