

# PIT BULLS

By Gary Wilkes

Old Photographs courtesy of Wilkes Family.

In December of 2008, Tina Angerson was sentenced to nine months in prison. Her jail time was the result of a simple misunderstanding – two Omaha, Nebraska mothers thought they could pull their infants down the street in a red wagon. *Duke*, Tina's American Pit Bull Terrier (APBT) didn't think so. He decided to do something about it. More specifically, *Duke* grabbed 15-month-old Charlotte Blevins by the head and jerked her out of the wagon. He then proceeded to rip off about 1/3 of her scalp.



It is commonly claimed that Pit Bulls only attack people if they aren't properly trained. They are often portrayed as sweet, loving dogs that can be trusted with children. This isn't just the opinion of Pit Bull owners, the United Kennel Club breed standard says so. "APBTs make excellent family companions and have always been noted for their love of children." Additionally, according to lovers of the breed, Pit Bulls have a very slow fuse and you really have to go out of your way to provoke one. It is also suggested that they are no more violent than other breeds such as Rottweilers – a breed that also has a reputation for doing great damage to people. Therefore, Pit Bulls should not be regulated based on their breed type. You'll have to excuse me for spitting up my milk, but all of those arguments are hogwash.

If you automatically think I am strongly opposed to Pit Bulls, you'd be wrong. I have trained many of them. They loved me. I loved them. My comments merely reflect that I'm adamantly opposed to hogwash and infants having their scalps ripped off.

To understand my opinion of the breed, it helps to know that I have a special attachment to them – it's in my blood. My grandfather was a railroad station-master in Mississippi in the 1920's. On the side, he bred and fought Pit Bulls all across the south. His job allowed him to travel extensively from Georgia to Louisiana and most points in between, fighting his dogs for side-money.

Wilkes family albums include fighting dogs in almost every picture. Six days a week, they played with kids, went on vacations and were an integral part of family life. They also put up with the typical abuse that children heap on dogs and were praised for their ability to be poked, prodded and fallen upon without any reaction. They were the model of bonded, loving, friendly, affectionate family dogs. On the seventh day, they fought like demons.

The prominence of dog fighting in that time and place isn't hard to understand. Many poor southern men, like my grandfather, made or lost extra money gambling on virtually anything -- horse races, cards, cock fights and dog fighting. It had been a part of their culture since English, Irish and Scottish immigrants migrated south in the 18th century. Other than horse races, genteel Southern society disapproved of these sports and anyone connected with them. My grandfather wasn't genteel. My grandmother was. Her high-class sensibilities caused her to initially oppose his dog fighting. As might be expected, the loveable, affectionate nature of the dogs led my grandmother to a reluctant acceptance and even a great love of their second source of income. That came to a halt in the late 1920's.

One night, an old drunk tried to cut across the Wilkes' backyard in Petal, Mississippi. The drunk tripped over a chain – a small thing – and lost a leg to Caesar, my grandfather's favorite pit dog. The old man was a loveable drunk who never harmed anyone. Losing a leg in 1928 Mississippi was no small thing. The community was outraged. A week later, the dogs were gone, for good.

No ordinance banned them from the community – public outrage and my grandmother's common sense were the active agents of change. What if one of her children tripped over the same chain, some dark night? Apparently, 90 years later, America is no better able to solve this problem than small-town Mississippi. We seem to have the same public outrage at incidents like Charlotte Bevins' attack, but may be lacking my grandmother's common sense.

### **A History of Violence:**

The reality is that from the beginning of the breed it was steeped in terrible violence. The ancient Roman bloodsports of bull baiting, bear baiting and dog fighting were

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still popular in 19th Century England. Growing cultural revulsion over the violence and brutality associated with animal fighting led to a concerted effort to stop them. In 1835 the English Parliament banned them all. Once these sports were banned, bear and bull baiting disappeared rapidly and dog fighting unexpectedly soared in popularity. That's because bull and bear baiting are big, outdoor events that can't be hidden. Dog fighting could be conducted in a barn, stable or back-alley, at the drop of a hat. Easily concealed, the only practical way to find a dog fight was by invitation. This made it virtually impossible to stop.

Once dog fighting was the sport du jour, several breeds were adapted to the pit. Bull Terriers and Staffordshire Bull Terriers were undoubtedly among the first commonly used breeds. Pit Bulls were either developed at the same time or already existed in the form of a dog called the "Pit and Bull Terrier". That dog was, as the name implies, a switch hitter – tough enough to fight a bull or another dog in a pit. The modern name of Pit Bull refers to the dogs' direct ancestors. Over time, Bull Terriers and Staffordshire Bull Terriers faded from the dog fighting pits. The most logical assumption is that they simply couldn't compete with their appropriately named cousin.

## Born to Fight:

To develop a fighting dog required selective breeding for specific physical and behavioral traits. The dogs had to be physically strong, insensitive to pain, able to instantly attack without threats or preparation and to be indiscriminate about the target.

Since the handlers were normally in the pit with the dogs, Pit Bulls had to allow a human to grab them from behind and pull them back from the fight at any time. This behavior is regularly taught to modern fighting dogs, from infancy. The dogs also needed to be friendly and affectionate with the handlers and not challenge their authority. This spawned their generally friendly disposition with family and friends. This cordial nature makes it easy to believe that they are not naturally aggressive and that some special effort is needed to get them to explode.

### "It's all about how you train them."

The knee-jerk response to serious Pit Bull attacks invariably focuses, not on their roots, but on their training. Either the dog was improperly trained, trained to be aggressive or not trained at all. This is meant to persuade the listener that the devil is in each dog's private history and not their blood. This leads to the assertion that you can't blame their genes for their violent behavior. If you can't blame their genes, you can't fairly ban the breed.

By this reasoning, the way to end the attacks is to manage how they are trained, not by banning the breed. You might be convinced that this is perfectly logical, as stated. The problem is that it completely contradicts the views of the people who know these dogs best. The elephant in the living room is ironi-

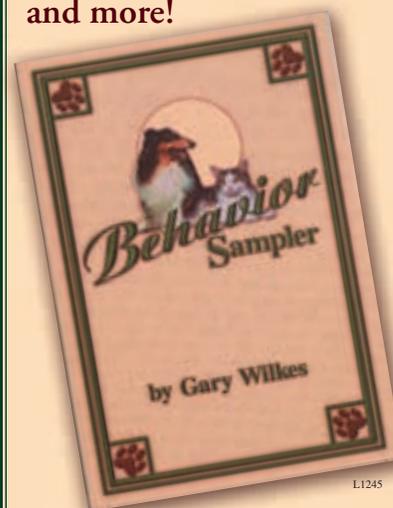
cally the two main experts on the topic of Pit Bull nature vs. nurture -- the United Kennel Club and the dog fighters, themselves.

The United Kennel Club (UKC) is the largest purebred dog registry for American Pit Bull Terriers. They not only register purebred dogs, they also organize dog shows, and a variety of other dog competitions. The primary purpose of registering dogs is to track their breeding with the intent of improving the health and temperament of the various breeds.

The UKC firmly stands on the belief that purebred dogs are the result of physical and behavioral traits created through careful, selective breeding. The name of their magazine, *Bloodlines*, reflects this belief. They also promote the concept that a dog's temperament is predictable based on its breed type. They provide breed profiles that include specific statements about a breed's typical behavior. Along with the above quote about Pit Bulls and children, their standard for the breed

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includes the following sentence:  
*The America Pit Bull Terrier is not the best choice for a guard dog since they are extremely friendly, even with strangers. Aggressive behavior toward humans is uncharacteristic of the breed and highly undesirable.*

If you read this temperament standard you would assume that American Pit Bull Terriers can't possibly be the devil dogs everyone claims. You would also be confused by the word "pit" included in their name. The UKC does not mention the word "pit" in their history of the breed or make any reference to dog fighting. This would be like describing Australian Shepherds without mentioning that the word "shepherd" refers to their job of herding sheep. Failing to connect Pit Bulls with hundreds of years of dog fighting seems disingenuous.

The UKC breed histories of Bull Terriers and Staffordshire Bull Terriers include historical references to dog fighting. Neither breed has been connected with dog fighting for more than 100 years. Why try to hide the Pit Bull's "bloodlines?" Critics of the UKC allege if you cross-reference their breed registries with dog fighting stud books, many of the names are the same. By distancing the history of Pit Bulls from the pits, it allows one to believe that fighting dogs are the result of training, not genes. It also absolves the UKC of any responsibility for dog fighting. In this case, the failure of the UKC to link Pit Bulls and their true "bloodlines" appears to be the clearest link of all.

The other group with great expertise about Pit Bulls is the breeders of fighting dogs, themselves. Their "breed of obsession" is not the biggest, strongest or fastest dog on the planet. Mere physical prowess is not sufficient to make a good pit dog.

Dog fighting requires an additional trait that is more than the sum of their physical attributes – they also need to be "game" – a pit fighting adjective meaning tenacious, ferocious and deadly. A game dog is



one who can kill other things at the drop of a hat with no thought to its own survival.

For hundreds of years, men like my grandfather strived to create "gameness." If you asked them, they'd tell you their particular bloodline was "dead game" and they charged a pretty penny for every pup they sold, based on that promise. They weren't breeding for intelligent dogs that could learn to be game – they didn't believe it could be taught. They believed it was all in the blood.

### **Breed Type and Behavior: What are the odds?**

If we ignore the expert opinions of kennel clubs and breeders, we can still test the theory that Pit Bulls have to be trained to be aggressive. All we have to do is look at other behaviorally selected breeds. Consider the English Pointer. An adult Pointer is supposed to run, lickety-split, back and forth across a field until it smells the scent of a bird. Once it senses the bird, it is supposed to stop, instantly, and hold the "point" until the hunter gives a signal. Some of the sequence is trained – the pointing is not. (Related dogs display specific variations of pointing that run through their bloodlines.)

To test this, take a Pointer whose parents are good hunting dogs. Raise him for a year without ever letting him see a bird. Now put him in a field full of pheasants and

see what he does. He'll point. He doesn't need training, encouragement or coercion to cause him to point. His genes have passed along a specific behavior - if you smell a bird, freeze. Pointers who possess this innate reaction sell for very high prices. Try telling a hunter that he paid \$10,000 for a finished field Pointer that had to be taught to point. He'll laugh at you. He paid a premium for a pedigree that assured his dog's potential for excellence.

If you need another example, consider the Australian Cattle Dog – AKA Blue Heeler or Queensland Heeler. The name "heeler" describes the instinctive tendency of this breed to bite the heels of the animals they herd. This trait was created when Scotch Collies were mixed with Dingos in the late 1850's. By 1900, the genetic behavior pattern was firmly established.

Now, virtually every Heeler heels, instinctively. If you tell an Aussie drover that his dog had to be taught to heel. He'll laugh at you, too, mate. Like his Pointer counterpart, the Heeler displays a trait that is transmitted genetically. It requires no training or encouragement. To assert that Pit Bulls are only aggressive if you train them to attack, contradicts the existence of every other behavior-specific breed on the planet. According to them, my Heeler would be just as good in a

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dog fight as their Pit Bull and their Pit Bull would be able to bite the planted heel of a cow, just like my Heeler. My Heeler, *Tuggy*, laughs at that. Pit fighters would belly laugh.

## Who Trains These Dogs?

The next problem with the “training” defense is that 99% of pet owners can’t or don’t teach their dogs to “come” reliably or virtually any other behavior. Conversely, the same number can’t or don’t teach their dogs inhibitions of any kind. The common Pit Bull owner can’t stop his dog from jumping on guests or chewing shoes, let alone “don’t rip the scalp off the baby.” Even if foolish owners wanted to teach their dogs to attack, the odds that only pit bull owners succeed with consistency defies the broader numbers.

Nationally, the odds that a Pit Bull will bite you are slim – there aren’t that many of them compared to other breeds. However, if you are killed by a dog, the likelihood that it was a Pit Bull is high. Over the last three years, of the 88 fatal dog attacks in the US, 59% were committed by Pit Bulls or dogs described as Pit Bull types, even though they comprise less than 5% of the total dog population.

One has to wonder where all these dogs were trained, if training is required to create a killer Pit Bull. According to their owners, they weren’t trained at all.

After a Pit Bull seriously attacks someone, the owners invariably claim they never encouraged their dog to be aggressive. They state that the attack was unexpected, unanticipated and took them by surprise. Their famous last words are, “He’s never done that before.” That is often true and tragically irrelevant.

## Blame the Victim:

Another common defense of the breed is that somehow the victims provoked a perfectly friendly animal to attack. The claim sounds plausible. Any dog is capable of biting if the circumstances are right. Many dogs are capable of aggression if threatened or attacked. A cursory search on the internet shows the following provocations for recent **Pit Bull attacks...**

The *Chicago Tribune* reported on June 30, 2009, “Aurora police were forced to shoot a pit bull terrier six times after it attacked a 13-year-old girl, who was walking to summer school, and then tried to lunge at police officers, officials said today.” Then fast forward, six months...

“The 49-year-old man was walking in the 6000 block of South Vernon Avenue when a dog – possibly a pit bull or pit bull mix – jumped on him, according to a Grand Crossing District police lieutenant. Two police officers on patrol saw the

dog knock the man to the ground and attack him in the left eye and forehead area, the lieutenant said. ‘He was attacking his head,’ the lieutenant said of the dog.” **On**

## the next day...

“The officer gunned down the pooch in the South Side Grand Crossing neighborhood at about 1:40 p.m. when he saw the dog latch on to the leg of a girl it was

chasing, the Sun-Times reports. After the shot, the dog let go of the girl’s leg, but went after another child immediately afterward. The officer then fired several shots killing the dog.

The pit bull had been chasing three girls, aged 7, 11 and 15, a boy, aged 9, and a 27-year-old woman. All were treated at Jackson Park Hospital and released.”

These stories are all too easy to find. Google the phrase “cop shoots Pit Bull” and you find them, all over the country. (You can also Google “Pit Bull kills \_\_\_\_\_” and fill in the blank with child, woman, girl, burglar or any number of descriptions and get plenty of hits.) If you read them closely, you come to some interesting conclusions about the dogs.

Apparently, provocation means walking to summer school, pulling your infant in a wagon or walking on the street. As I write this story, an AP news report from San Bernardino, California, reports the death of a three-year-old at the jaws of his family’s Pit Bull. The family called 911. When firefighters and paramedics arrived, the dog attacked them. A police officer shot the dog. If you’d asked the family a week ago, they’d probably have told you how good the dog was with the child he killed.

## What to do about it:

If you think I’ve laid out a biased case against Pit Bulls, you’re right. Besides being the descendent of a pit fighter, I spent eight years working in shelters and animal control agencies. For three years of that time I routinely caught, impounded and attempted to control Pit Bulls as a field officer. I once investigated an attack on a three-year-old by a family’s pit bull. The child’s face was ripped from the corner of her mouth to her eye. The provocation was that the child walked too close to the dog’s chew bone.

For the last 25 years I have trained and rehabilitated Pit Bulls as a regular part of my business. I have found them to be bright, affectionate

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and loving. I've also seen what they can do to other dogs, livestock and people. It's not pretty. It isn't supposed to be. They were bred to do one thing – attack with no reservations. Like a hand grenade, they are inert until you pull the pin. Once the pin is pulled, there is nothing you can do to stop the explosion.

To quote Dale Dunning, former executive director of the Arizona Humane Society, they differ from grenades in one very important aspect – the dog controls the pin. That fact neutralizes all the acknowledged true accounts of their sweet, loving, affectionate nature. It means that your child will probably be immune to your Pit Bull's aggression, just like my father, his brothers and sisters and their cousin Roscoe. The problem starts when a neighbor kid socks Roscoe in the nose. What will your Pit Bull do if he thinks he's protecting "his" child? What happens when someone trips over your dog's metaphoric chain?

### **A Touch of Balance:**

To be fair, many other dogs seriously attack people. An Akita can

kill you on a good day. The same is true for German Shepherds, Rottweilers, Cane Corsos, Presa Canarios and a few other breeds. If the goal of a community is to protect people from dog attacks, merely outlawing Pit Bulls isn't going to fix the problem.

When the English attempted to outlaw animal fighting in general, they inadvertently increased the popularity of dog fighting, in specific. Similarly, in Arizona, a law banning cock fighting caused some cock fighters to switch to dog fighting.

Modern dog fighters in the Southwest are often heavily armed and also involved in the highly violent drug trade. They hold their "conventions" in distant parts of the desert. Just as in England, 175 years ago, the only way to find a modern dog fight is to get invited – and they aren't inviting people they don't know. They are heavily armed and Sheriff's deputies are not welcome, neither are undercover humane investigators.

Not coincidentally, at the county pound in Phoenix, Arizona, the Pit Bull population rarely dip below 25%. They even have special "free spay or neuter" enticements to get people to adopt them. The conclusion is simple and unfortunate – an attempt to ban animal cruelty didn't solve the bigger problem, much as the ban on bull and bear baiting increased dog fighting.

The truth is that haphazard efforts to ban animal cruelty are unlikely to have a beneficial effect. The public outrage that ended my grandfather's dog fighting career didn't end dog fighting in the deep South. The Law of Unexpected Consequences is alive and well in the anti-Pit Bull movement. Unless you write the laws correctly and know what you are trying to achieve, you may simply drive the sport deeper underground or you may make matters worse.

### **When it works:**

As a result of Charlotte Bevins attack, a number of cities have created breed-specific legislation. Many

follow the lead of Council Bluffs, Iowa, the neighboring city to Omaha.

In 2005, Council Bluffs, enacted a ban on Pit Bulls. In the year prior to the ban, 2004, there were 29 attacks by Pit Bulls. In 2005, the number dropped to 12, in 2006, six attacks, in 2007, two attacks and in 2008, zero attacks.

Contrary to the popular concept that breed specific legislation doesn't work, there are many examples across the US and Canada where serious dog bites and fatalities have dramatically decreased because of laws focusing on just a few breeds of dogs. Websites such as dogbites.org catalog and cite both research studies and analysis of efforts to solve the problem of serious dog bites against people.

The most effective laws include restrictions on a few selective breeds, requirements for owners to carry liability insurance coverage and harsh penalties for the slightest infractions of existing dog laws. Another wrinkle includes preventing the adoption of fertile Pit Bulls from local animal shelters. Outright bans of Pit Bull adoptions rarely work because people simply stop taking them to shelters for fear they will be automatically destroyed.

The outcome of enforcing these strategies leads to a simple conclusion. If a community wishes to dramatically decrease vicious dog attacks, it can be done. The real issue is whether a city council is more concerned about the safety of the community or wishes to yield to a supposed right to own breeds known to be more dangerous than others.

In the minds of many administrators and politicians, facing an angry dog advocate is less terrifying than looking into the face of a grieving mother – as it should be.

As municipalities have moved to restrict dangerous breeds, the going hasn't been smooth. The backlash caused by breed specific legislation is understandable. It is easy for dog lovers to think that banning a specific breed is a bad thing. They hate to imagine that anyone should

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be prevented from owning the dog of their choice – and are often unwitting allies of the people who breed dogs to kill for sport.

Ironically, the majority of people who feel intense disgust over dog fighting feel sympathy for those who wish to protect Pit Bulls – the only breed used for dog fighting. They are often deluded by reports that Pit Bulls are affectionate, gentle family dogs who especially love children. Who would want to limit ownership of sweet, loving dogs? This perspective fails to recognize the big picture. The issue is not whether Pit Bulls can be friendly, family pets or even how many of them live their lives without ever biting a soul. My grandparents owned many dogs that were perfect pets, six days a week, for many years. It's that seventh day that bothers me and should cause dog lovers to look to their brains and not their hearts.

### What will be, will be:

No other breed in America is currently bred for fighting, in such great numbers as the American Pit Bull Terrier. No other breed has instinctive behaviors that are so consistently catastrophic when they occur, regardless of how rarely they happen. The reality is that every English Pointer has the ability to point a bird. Every Cattle Dog has the ability to bite the heel of a cow and every Beagle has the ability to make an obnoxious bugling noise when it scents a rabbit or sees a cat walking on the back fence. Realistically, if your English Pointer suddenly and unpredictably points at a bird in the park, nobody cares. If my Heeler nips your ankle, I'm going to take care of your injuries and probably be fined for the incident. If your Beagle bugles too much, you'll get a ticket for a noise violation. If your Pit Bull does what it's bred to do...well, you fill in the blank.

*Gary is an internationally acclaimed behaviorist, trainer, author, columnist and lecturer. He has more than 30 years experience*

*working with dogs, including eight years of shelter work. Gary Wilkes is responsible for the innovation and development of clicker training as a practical methodology for dogs and with his former colleague, Karen Pryor, introduced this method to the world in 1992. His knowledge is founded on his experience clicker training thousands of dogs by veterinary referral and includes teaching the first clicker training classes, correcting serious aggression, training animals with physical and neurological disabilities, creating training protocols for search and rescue, assistance and therapy dogs and consulting with MIT on artificial intelligence projects. He currently has a full-time, veterinary referral-based behavior practice in Phoenix, Arizona, and is a columnist and feature writer for Off-Lead & Animal Behavior, and behavior columnist for Groomer to Groomer magazines.*

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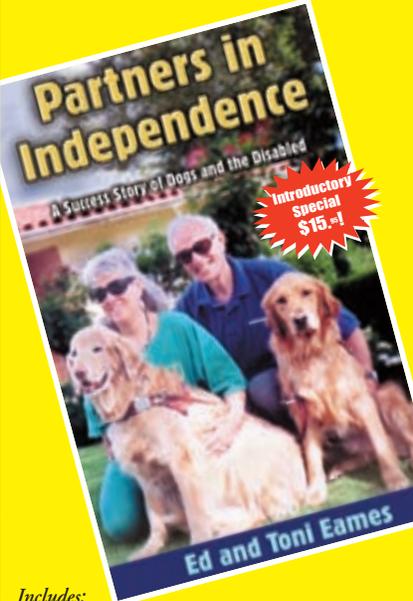
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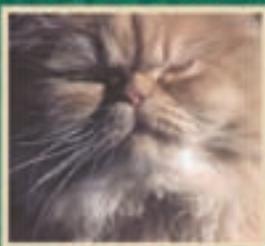
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