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Many pit bulls end up at shelters after being abused or abandoned

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Most of the pit bulls that Joan Bulger-Kay rescues come from a troubled past.

There is Lily, a dog that escaped from a known drug house only to be clobbered in the head with a shovel by a frightened neighbor. And there is Belle, the victim of broken hips after she apparently refused to fight another dog.

"Where you are going to find violence against pit bulls, you're going to find violence, period," said Bulger-Kay, who runs a dog rescue group in Orange County that takes dogs from around the Lower Hudson Valley.

Peggy Colonna, a dog rescuer and trainer based in Carmel, tells similar horrifying tales.

Her 8-year-old pit bull named Gift was stabbed hundreds of times after a domestic dispute in Peekskill six years ago. He needed 206 stitches and numerous surgeries to save his life, but now lives happily with Colonna. Even though deep gash scars along his shoulders and face are reminders of his traumatic past, his temperament is gentle, Colonna said.

Many pit bulls like Gift wind up at animal shelters after being rescued from abusive homes or abandoned by breeders who no longer want to take care of them.

At the Central Westchester Humane Society's shelter in Elmsford, 200 of the 1,000 animals being housed are pit bulls, President Mimi Stone said.

Donald Fives, assistant director of the Hi-Tor Animal Care Center in Ramapo, said that out of the 60 to 70 dogs a month that come into Hi-Tor, about 25 are pit bulls or pit bull mixes.

The recent high-profile case of Michael Vick, the Atlanta Falcons quarterback who pleaded guilty in August to being involved with a dogfighting ring, has not helped public perception of pit bulls, rescue groups and shelter directors said.

Last month, animal welfare workers rescued four dogs from filthy cages in a garage in Yonkers. The pit bulls appeared to be throwaways from a dogfighting operation.

When Bulger-Kay's rescue group started almost 20 years ago, 75 percent of the dogs she saved were pit bulls. But after struggling to find pit bulls suitable homes - pit bull adoptions usually take at least six months - she minimized her intake.

Lily, the pit bull whose skull was split open with a shovel, crawled on her belly for months after the incident, too afraid to stand on all fours. About half the dogs Bulger-Kay encounters must be euthanized because they cannot be rehabilitated, she said. Lily eventually recovered and was adopted, but even dogs who can bounce back face other obstacles.

Potential owners are often deterred from bringing such dogs into their homes because of insurance policies. Companies including Allstate and Nationwide will not offer policies to homeowners with pit bulls. Rescuers add that besides restrictions in home insurance policies, some apartment landlords also prohibit pit bulls.

While it's indisputable that pit bulls have generally been viewed with distrust and fear, it is unclear whether the bad reputation is deserved.

Dogs known as pit bulls are not recognized as a breed and the term actually refers to a cluster of breeds: Staffordshire bull terrier, American Staffordshire terrier, American pit bull terrier, and the American bulldog. The name "pit bull" emerged from the British tradition of placing a dog inside a pit to face a bull or bear, a sport called "baiting." It was later replaced with dog vs. dog matches, but the name "pit bull," used to describe a vicious dog, endured.

Stories of pit bulls' superior jaw strength and immunity to pain are myths, said Sharon Curtis-Granskog, a spokeswoman for the American Veterinary Medical Association.

"It's not the breed, it's the activity," she said, explaining that any breed can be trained for violence. "Any dog can bite. That's basically the bottom line."

The ambiguity of the pit bull threat is acknowledged by the national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. In a 20-year-study of dog bites, they note that because dog breeds in attacks are not accurately reported, there is "no measure to determine which breeds are more likely to bite or kill."

Pit-bull advocates are looking for their own ways to combat negative stereotypes. The Elmsford Animal Shelter holds an appreciation day in which pit bull owners gather outside the shelter and introduce their pets to families who may normally cringe at the idea of adopting a pit bull. Colonna called Gift a "great ambassador for his breed," and uses him to talk to children about how to treat animals.

She said Gift is proof that a pit bull can lead an enjoyable life after abuse.

"Here's a dog that had been through horrible abuse and neglect," she said. "He's perfect. He's a wonderful, wonderful, dog."
