

LakeExpo

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Pit bulls suffer from bad reps

By Isabelle Dills/McClatchy Newspapers (MCT)

BELLINGHAM, Wash. - Petula sat obediently, looking through the chain-link fence of her kennel. The German shepherd sharing her kennel barked wildly and awoke the other dogs.

A chorus of barks and yips reverberated through the walls of the Whatcom Humane Society's Williamson Way shelter. But Petula sat quietly, her fuzzy, black ears flopped inward.

As obedient as Petula is, her chances of being adopted are slim, because no one wants a 6-month-old pit bull, said Laura Clark, community outreach director for the Whatcom Humane Society.

High-profile pit bull attacks have made some people fearful of the breed.

This year, the Whatcom Humane Society has received 81 pit bulls or pit bull mixes. They are the third most common dog received by the shelter. Labs and shepherds are first and second respectively, Clark said.

Thirteen of the 81 pit bulls were adopted. Thirty-three were returned to their owners, and 32 had to be euthanized due to factors such as age, health and temperament, Clark said. Three remain at the shelter waiting for someone to adopt them.

Local animal experts say a pit bull's behavior is a matter of training, and it is not an inherently bad breed.

All dogs go through a developmental stage between 4 weeks and 18 weeks of age, and that is the time to teach behavioral skills, said Angi Lenz, owner of Tails-a-Wagging Doggie Daycare.

The training they receive during that time, such as learning not to bite and learning to sit, will become part of their personality, Lenz said.

Pit bulls have strong jaws, and when they bite they have a tendency to grasp and hold onto an object, said Washington State Patrol Trooper Jason Knott, who works in the Narcotics Detection K9 Field Operations Bureau. It's the effect of that grip that makes headlines when there's an attack.

But more dog bites come from cocker spaniels than pit bulls.

Pit bulls just want to please their master, and they will do what they're trained to do, Knott said.

Knott works with Moto, a 4-year-old pit bull who was rescued from Clackamas County, Ore., where his owners kept him and another pit bull locked in travel crates in a barn.

Moto's crate was filled with about two inches of feces and urine when he was found by a Clackamas County sheriff's deputy.

The other pit bull didn't survive, but Moto was donated to the State Patrol, which put him through a 240-hour narcotics detection class.

Moto is trained to sniff out marijuana, methamphetamine, cocaine and heroin. When he finds the drugs, he sits and barks, alerting Knott.

Not all pit bulls are bad dogs, but they are often mistreated, which can cause aggressive behavior, Knott said.

"Don't blame the breed," he said. "This dog has proven to me it's about how you treat the animal."

Spaying and neutering also makes a huge difference in a dog's behavior, Lenz said.

Dogs are best spayed or neutered between 4 and 6 months of age, Lenz said. This will lead to less aggressive behavior and an easier training period.

Petula has had five kennel mates since being dropped off anonymously at the Humane Society in April. None have been pit bulls, and all have been adopted, Clark said. It's likely that the German shepherd also will find a family before Petula does, Clark said.

On Wednesday, July 23, Clark took Petula for a walk around the shelter.

Clark stopped walking as she and Petula approached the shelter parking lot.

"Can you sit?" Clark asked.

The pit bull did what she was trained to do. She sat obediently.

"It's heartbreaking for our staff to see so many pits and pit mixes we can't help," Clark said. "We know how incredible they can be, and how poorly they're treated in society."

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