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Humans the cause of pit bulls' bad reputation

With the right care, dogs are quite sweet

By SANDY BRITT
The Leaf-Chronicle

What's dangerous about a book of matches, a gun and a car?

Absolutely nothing, unless they're in the wrong hands. If they are, they can be deadly.

A pit bull in the hands of a loving, responsible person is a loyal and loving family pet. In the hands of ignorant, immature or mean people, the breed can be dangerous. In fact, any dog can be dangerous if raised by someone who doesn't understand a breed's unique nature, needs and what constitutes humane care.

A story a few weeks ago about a pit bull that bit a man and killed a Dalmatian made me heartsick, especially when I saw the picture of its sweet face. The owner had a long history of negligent behavior with pit bulls, and because of her ignorance, the dogs were destroyed. And because of our weak laws and inadequate support of Animal Control, she got away with it for too long.

Most people don't understand the pit bull and look upon it as an innately vicious dog. But that's not true. Here's a brief history of the breed:

Today's pit bulls — the American Staffordshire terrier and the Staffordshire bull terrier — have their roots in England. They're crosses of old bulldog and terrier types, used for fighting, because in the early 1800s, working-class people were rabid fans of dogfighting and bull-baiting (bull dog breeds were trained to enrage and attack bulls by biting them on the nose and hanging on, all in the name of "entertainment").

Brought to America in the late 1800s, they began to dominate the fighting "pits" and became known here as the pit bull terrier, American bull terrier or Yankee terrier. When dog fighting was banned, fans went underground, but the breed also became a popular family pet.

Why? Because the dogs were bred to be docile toward people, as people had to be able to handle the dogs during fights. As a result, pit bulls — if treated and trained humanely — are sweet and good-natured with people, especially their family.

Remember the dog Petey from "The Little Rascals?" Petey was a pit bull. Helen Keller had a pit bull. The breed was so respected in the early 1900s the U.S. military put it on war posters to represent America. The pit was the only dog to be featured on the cover of Life Magazine three times.

While it's true pits are docile with people and good with children (in England the Stafford is known as the "nanny dog" for its eagerness and ability to take the role of a child's nursemaid), they can be aggressive toward other dogs and animals, especially if un-neutered, untrained or if they feel threatened.

The biggest pit bull problem: They're often the choice of those who measure their manliness by the viciousness of their dog, those who derive sick pleasure from brutal dogfighting, those who live the gangsta lifestyle and those who want to create an aggressive watch dog.

They're also the dog most often chained in backyards with heavy logging chains, abused to create vicious fighters and left alone because their heartless owners feel no compassion toward living creatures.

Any dog chained 24/7 can become unstable and aggressive, because they're pack animals that thrive on

companionship. They need exercise and stimulation. Chained dogs get none of that, become territorial and pose a danger if strangers approach. If they escape, tragedy can result.

This growing problem is a serious public safety issue, and it's time our County Commission wakes up, or we might be greeted one morning with the headline, "Pit bull kills child."

Commissioners should pass Animal Control's entire proposal for new laws, including licensing and banning the chaining of a dog 24/7. Commissioners should accept the findings of the Animal Control Committee (which includes commission members) because they've done extensive homework.

Commissioners shouldn't question every comma or ask inane questions like, "Will people be stopped from selling goldfish at the fair?" (a question asked by one commissioner during a meeting in reference to a proposed ban on certain pet sales).

The purpose of any committee is to research, present facts and make a determination for the larger body. Commissioners not on the committee should not grandstand, micromanage or second guess every word.

I do understand people's automatic fear of pit bulls. If one is running amok in their neighborhood, in all likelihood it belongs to someone who has no business having a pit — or any dog for that matter — and there's a chance the dog will hurt pets or children.

But remember, it's irresponsible humans, not pit bulls, who deserve our derision. You don't blame the car when a drunk driver kills someone, and no one should blame a good dog ruined by the hands of dim-witted people.
