

To Whom It May Concern:

An Open Letter Regarding Breed Bans

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In eighteen years of working with dogs from showing to animal shelter volunteer, I think I have heard it all in regards to various dog issues. I think two of the most serious issues regarding dogs are attacks and what breeds are dangerous. When I was a child, the breeds to fear were German Shepherds, Dobermans and Akitas. Now as an adult, the "killer" breeds are Rottweilers and Pit Bulls. There is a new fear growing about some of the rare breeds many have never heard of or they are only hearing about through the media after a tragedy has occurred. I think I have heard everything about dangerous dogs from some breeds are just born killers and have a short circuit in the breed to some breeds have been genetically mutated into killing machines. In the past, I have tried to educate where I can about the real reasons there are problems with dogs. These problems can occur with any breed or cross. I have sent letters, responded to posts on the Internet and just talked with people in attempt to change views. In my experience, I found more often than not, it is not the four footed critter at the end of the lead but the two footed one holding that lead that is the true problem. With an ever-increasing call for breed bans and many misconceptions about various breeds, I decided to keep a general letter on hand to send out when needed. I have expanded upon the letter over the years I would like to share it now with you:

To Whom It May Concern:

I am outraged whenever I hear of a dog mauling a person. However, my 18 years of dog training experience also comes through and the first things I think of is NOT the breed but what type of owner and/or place did it come from?

First, the breeds often of most "concern" are not "mutant" in nature as some people erroneously think - all dogs are "mutant" if you want to get into semantics. Dogs were originally wild. Man developed all domestic dogs for a purpose: and yes, with some breeds that purpose was fighting. However, these breeds most people refer to when talking about banning breeds were not bred to be man aggressive - this is a relatively new phenomena in the history of the breeds. Pits were originally bred to be stable companions and trained to perform when in the pit. Rotties used to be all around farm dogs and even drove cattle to market! I can rattle off several breeds bred for various blood sports or man hunting that would shock the average person. But these dogs are not on banning lists. For example, many mastiff breeds are considered great family companions. However, their history is one of hunting poachers for nobles. Way back when, life had little meaning and poachers were often killed.

In my years, I have only met one aggressive pit bull - the dog was left chained in a garage without heat, air conditioning or training other than to be aggressive to anyone or anything. The other pits I have known were owned by responsible people who understood dogs and the breed. These dogs were not dog or human aggressive. I have known a couple aggressive Rotties - but the same thing - bad owner who bred for bad temperaments and encouraged the behavior. One of his dogs attacked my Sheltie - but I do not hate the breed, just the bad owner. I had the background to know that this is not the breed as a whole and the owner was the cause. Most Rottie owners I know have the best dogs and strive for that. What has happened is people have taken a tough looking dog and taken away the true temperament of the breed. People are breeding without care for stability - in fact these thugs want an unstable dog that would think nothing of being a weapon. This is NOT the majority of dog owners of these breeds in question. This is the minority who cause troubles with other things such as guns. Make the analogy here and I do not want to come off as being racist but I like to use extremes to make points:

I have a friend who the only Black and Hispanic people she knew were gang bangers. She was afraid of any person not White, Asian or Native American. When I asked her why, she said "They (Blacks and Hispanics) are all are gang bangers." Well, I never had this experience and knew that it was wrong to judge the whole based on the few. Now, after my former neighbors moved and the new crew came in, they started illegally subletting (they rent their house, we own ours) to some kids who were also known to the police for drug dealing. One of their cohorts threatened my son and me with a gun when I politely asked him to leave us alone. This is a nice, quiet community and the police were at their house quite a bit. This particular kid happened to be Black - does this mean I must fear that entire race? No.

Now, transfer this line of thinking to dogs: when people see only the bad of a breed, they judge the whole breed based on it - and not the truth. The truth is in 18 years of dog training and showing in various sports and now teaching, the only nasty dogs of ANY breed or cross I have had experience with were from: pet stores; back yard breeders; irresponsible owners; people who use dogs as status symbols; people who did not take the time to properly match the dog with the house and thugs.

Second, breed bans are designed to fail and/or punish the wrong people. You ban a breed; the thugs will take another macho looking breed and begin to make individuals of that breed the worst they can. Now, ban that breed and they will find another. Already I am seeing a trend towards these thugs taking American Bulldogs, Pit Bulls (a breed that needs an owner who truly knows the breed), Boxers, Bullmastiffs, Neos, etc., and crossing them to try and create the new "pit." Why? Well, there are always plenty of dogs to go around that they can make a status symbol out of through bad breeding (breeding for aggression) and bad training (teaching the dog to bite, using even inhumane tactics to get the desired results out of, etc). So, ban all these breeds and what will we have left? My husband and I fear the day when we can only own toy breeds because every other breed has been ruined by a very visible minority. The people who are causing the trouble do not socialize. They do not register dogs with the county (licensing) and often the dogs do not get vet care. They breed for aggression and killing. The dogs are kept underground and hidden. So far

a cry from people who show, breed for stability and their dogs get the best care and training possible and owned responsibly.

Again, I want to reiterate that if you look at the histories of many breeds thought now to be wonderful pets, you will see that many had a "dark" past. Does this mean we should ban all these breeds as well?

What I want to see are BROAD BASED dog laws that encompass every breed and cross from the tiny Chihuahua to the largest Irish Wolfhound, from the mutt of unknown origin to the dog who takes Best of Breed at Westminster. I want to see laws that will take into consideration factors such as:

- 1) Who owned the dog and under what conditions was it kept?
- 2) Was the dog being used potentially as a weapon?
- 3) Was the dog properly under control?

(It is amazing what things can bring out the worst in any dog - temperament is part hereditary and part what you do with it. I have seen wonderful dogs ruined by bad owners).

- 4) Was the dog "justified" in the bite? (I will address this after.)
- 5) Stiffer penalties for animal cruelty - most now are a slap on the wrist.
- 6) If a dog is suspected of being used as a weapon or is being used to guard illegal trade, the owner will be charged as though he had a loaded gun.
- 7) Mandatory leash laws with stiff fines for breaking them - many communities - even suburbs - do not have them. (There will be exceptions for working farm dogs and livestock protectors).
- 8) Public education of breeds, safety around ALL dogs and what signs to look for if you suspect someone is using a dog for illegal things.

Now, the justified bite: by justified I mean was there a reason the dog may have bitten like it was being tormented. For example:

When my husband and I first moved to Virginia, we were replacing the old fence that came with the house we bought and installing six-foot stockade. We had about sixteen feet left to go of the old fence. Our dogs (a Sheltie and an Aussie Sheperd/Newfoundland Cross) were never out unless one of us was outside watching them, as we did not trust the old fence. I was talking to my other neighbor when another (now former) neighbor's kids asked if they could call the dogs over and say "Hi". Never having issues before with the kids, I said fine (we had not even been in the house for a year and these kids seemed to be

quite nice). Suddenly, they shoved down the old fence (they had worked on loosening a post that day unknown to me) and took a metal pipe to both my dogs. Now, if my dogs had bitten, would that have been justified? You have never seen a woman in her third trimester of pregnancy move so fast across 1/4 acre.

I informed their father if there were another incident of damage to my property and cruelty to my pets, the police would be called. I immediately hauled out some temporary fence stakes and ran a four-foot chain fence two feet inside the perimeter of the old fence. I affixed poles to the old post that was pushed in to shore it all up until my husband could finish the last two sections. The next day I caught the same kids using long sticks to try and push down the temporary fence within the old fence so they could get at my dogs again. Once again, I told the father the police were going to be called and charges of animal cruelty brought up. This time he took it seriously and the children did not attempt it again. The fence was completed very shortly after.

There was another celebrated case years ago involving a Saint Bernard that killed a four year old. What was never published was the child was unattended with the dog and rammed a pencil down the dog's ear canal! The pencil stub was found upon necropsy. Big dogs have big bites and when a big bite is on a small child, the results can be disastrous at best. But we need to take dog bite cases individually and not as a lump.

When I work with clients who are having nipping issues, I find it is often the failure of the family to properly address this. I have watched children and adults do things to ENCOURAGE a puppy to bite because it is cute. Now, the puppy has been taught biting is acceptable and is well on the way to becoming a biting problem as an adult. Or, people mistakenly think that watchdog is analogous to vicious and intentionally train the dog that way. This is wrong thinking and often dangerous.

Now, let us address breed identification. Who is to say what a pit bull is? I have seen many crosses of breeds not even terrier or Rottie in background that can be mistaken as a Pit, Pit cross or Rottie cross. I have seen Lab/Shepherd crosses that looked Pit. Boxer crossed (Boxers are lovely dogs with great temperaments) with Lab that looked pit. Pit is often a catchall phrase used indiscriminately.

When I was starting out in dog training, I went to a seminar that addressed breed bans. The one thing that really stuck was when they asked an animal control officer to identify several dogs; he claimed they were all Pit or Pit crosses, Rottie or Rottie crosses. Not one was. The dogs were all champions of record and the breeds included a Boxer, a Lab, a Bullmastiff and a couple others. How reliable is this guy when deciding what dog is a Pit or not? Note: this was in a city and not some rural town. Supposedly the city employee knew his breeds! The other point was than bans will only affect the responsible owners and drive those who have no business owning ANY living creature further underground. And if they run out of one breed, they will go for another. Remember the Doberman, German Shepherd and Akita scares of the late 70's and in the 80's? Well, then these jerks found new breeds to destroy (Pit Bulls and Rottweilers) and are always looking for something no one else has to be that status symbol. This is why I think we are seeing

some rare breeds involved in maulings. Again, the integrity of these breeds is being abused and misdirected and the dogs are being turned into weapons.

In my eighteen years working actively with dogs, the most vicious dogs I knew personally were:

Chihuahua - from a back yard breeder who let her go at 5 weeks, owners did nothing to socialize her and thought her antics were cute. Dog is an adult menace that I think should be put down. Even the vet will not do a physical unless the dog is well sedated.

Border Collie - dog had owners who were not quite prepared for the working drive. The dog got out of hand and took over. She began to see all other dogs as a threat to her human flock and defended them. They did not address the issue from puppyhood and by the time the dog was a teen, she was out of control.

Shih Tzu – another back yard breeder, the dog had an organic problem causing unpredictable rage and had to be put down. The issue was thought to be hereditary.

Jack Russell Terrier - owner thought the dog's antics (going after bigger dogs) were cute and the owner's response to puppy testing was to pick up and cuddle the dog as opposed to teaching the dog this was not good behavior. As the dog grew, he became aggressive since this is what the owner was reinforcing by the way he corrected the dog as a pup (words said "No" but body language and tone said "I like what you are doing.")

Beagle - kids taught the dog as a pup that biting was cute and a good thing.

Shar Pei - kids were allowed to beat the dog and torment it. Finally, the dog retaliated and nailed their three year old. I had warned the family and children many times that the dog was going to bite (these was the same kids who beat my dogs - the puppy came along after that incident).

Pit Bull - the one mentioned above who was mistreated.

Two Rotties - the ones mentioned above.

I hope I have made my point. I am a freelance writer, mother and run a small dog training business in Virginia. If you wish to see my credentials, you may check out my web site. I am a serious dog person and feel as an educator of owners and their dogs it is my duty to try and educate the general public about dogs in any way I can.

Sincerely

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