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Bred to be killers

By EVIE GELASTOPOULOS

WHEN a **pit bull** terrier killed a woman this week it came as no surprise to those who know the breed. But, as EVIE GELASTOPOULOS reports, the dogs' strength is both a selling point and a sore point.

THOSE who breed and promote American **pit bull** terriers hail them as the strongest dog in the world for their size.

But this same quality is driving the call to have them outlawed in Australia - their sheer strength combined with an unpredictable streak is what makes them potential killers.

American **pit bulls** have been known to drag a 2m long cement and wooden bus-stop seat up to 100m.

That the same breed of dog jumped a fence, unprovoked, and mauled a woman to death on Wednesday night is evidence enough of their killer instinct.

A report in the 1990 Australian Veterinary Journal (AVJ) reported between 1979 and 1988, 157 fatal dog attacks were reported in the US - 70 per cent on children under 10.

In 101 of the deaths, the dog breed was identified and 42 per cent were **pit bull** terriers.

A study of 18,000 dogs by the South Australian injuries surveillance unit found **pit bull** terriers were 5.4 times more likely to attack than any other breed.

The last time a person died after a **pit bull** terrier attack in Australia, the federal government responded by banning the importation of the breed and introducing tougher penalties for dog owners who did not control their pets.

Two-month-old Joshua Williams was mauled to death by the family **pit bull** Chief, in the backyard of their North Richmond home in September 1991.

There are up to 5000 American **pit bulls** in Australia.

The RSPCA argues banning their importation only raised the value of the dogs here - puppies sell for between \$400 and \$600 each and strengthened the local breeding industry.

While the breed is not registered or recognised by the Canine Council of Australia, the national American **Pit Bull** Terriers Association is well organised and growing.

It holds shows at Londonderry, in Sydney's west, every three months.

RSPCA chief executive **Charles Wright** said they had been lobbying for 10 years to have American **pit bulls** banned altogether.

"How many times are we going to lose a life before we do something about it?"

"It is in this dog's nature to have a vicious streak. There is no place for them in our community."

Mr **Wright** said the **pit bull** terrier was not a pedigree dog but a animal bred to fight.

"They picked out the vicious strains of other dogs - the rottweiler, doberman, alsatian, and the (American) staffordshire terrier."

American **pit bull** terriers are a medium-sized dog with a short sleek coat. They are up to 30kg of pure muscle.

Their ancestry can be traced to the 19th Century when they were used for bullbaiting in England. The breeding of small dogs for combat grew with the introduction of organised dog fighting in the 1830s.

It is their history of being bred for violence which lends credence to the theory that American **pit bulls** are genetically inclined to attack.

Most dogs, wild or domestic, will fight only to drive a rival away and will stop attacking once its territory is safe, the AVJ report said.

However, in fighting breeds such as the **pit bull** terrier, the inhibition is removed by genetic selection.

There have been at least five known attacks by **pit bull** terriers this year.

A 13-year-old Griffith girl, Gabriella Torresan, was attacked as she walked home from school in July. The mauling left the teenager with injuries to both arms, both legs and her scalp.

Chester Hill pensioner Stephanie Kozlowski, 77, almost lost her leg to a **pit bull** terrier as she walked down her quiet street in February.

In both cases, the owners of the dogs said the attack was out of character for the animal and they could not explain what made them snap.

Mr **Wright** pointed to the British example where American **pit bulls** were outlawed about eight years ago and owners and breeders were given two years to eradicate the dogs.

Rottweilers, german shepherds, dobermans, blue heelers and even collies could be classed dangerous dogs, according to the RSPCA.

However, tougher penalties for irresponsible owners and breeders and a public education campaign can eliminate the risks in most breeds.

"But there is just no place for American **pit bull** terriers dogs in Australia," Mr **Wright** said.

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