

The Pit Bull Terrier Debate

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By SHELLEY DEMPSEY

PUT a bull terrier lover in the ring with a bull terrier hater, let them fight it out verbally and it's hard to believe they are talking about the same dog.

Is the dog the vicious, unpredictable monster that recently killed a two-month-old Sydney baby-or the smart, devoted, family dog which leapt from a cliff after his master at Lennox Head on the NSW North Coast last year?

Recent brutal attacks by these dogs and whispers of underground dogfighting rings forced the Federal Government last month to ban imports of pit bull terriers, said by many to be the most savage breed.

Community fear is now so great that people recoil in horror from any dog that looks like a pit bull and shout abuse at owners.

June-Marie Reid, 50, of Villawood, in Sydney's west, will never go near a pit bull terrier again, after her leg was savaged by a neighbour's dog last June.

She needed 62 stitches to repair the 20cm long by 10cm wide wound. On the night of her 50th birthday party she was walking home from Villawood train station when the dog, a pit bull-cattle dog cross in the middle of the street, attacked her, unprovoked.

The dog was put down and the owner, who never said sorry, was fined \$300.

"I still have nightmares about it," said Mrs Reid. "Quite often I wake up with sweat running off me and my husband has to pacify me from screaming. What won't leave me is the evil face of the dog.

"I have a big hole in my leg and I can hardly walk because of the pain. I don't think pit bulls should be allowed in the community."

Bull terrier owners blame confusion with look-alike dogs as the cause of public fear. Most people think a pit bull is a small white muscular dog with big jaws and pink slanted eyes.

But this is another sort, an english bull terrier-the family dog which savaged two-month-old Joshua Williams in his bassinette in his North Richmond backyard last September as his mother hung out washing.

Pit bulls are mostly red, brown or black, and can be twice as big as staffordshire bull terriers, said to be a different breed.

To people who love pit bull terriers, the import ban is unfair - a "witch hunt".

"I think they are the dogs which are closest to being human," said Tony Micos, of Clovelly, a devoted breeder of american pit bulls.

To the RSPCA, the dogs should ideally be banned.

"There is no place for pit bulls in society. Anyone who imports them, owns one or breeds them is suspect," said RSPCA executive director David Butcher, who owns a staffordshire bull terrier.

"These dogs have huge crushing jaws. When they bite people, large amounts of tissue are removed. They bite and crunch and tear until a piece of the person comes out."

To the NSW Gaming Squad the dogs are a menace. They are used in underground gambling rings which bet \$50,000 on one fight that can last up to five hours.

A South Australian Health Commission survey last year found that bull terriers were the most dangerous dogs around the home, responsible for 5.4 per cent of dog attacks on people Australia-wide.

Federal Resources Minister Alan Griffiths, whose cat was killed by a pit bull terrier, was behind the import ban, which may lead to the States imposing further restrictions on dangerous dogs, such as desexing and muzzling.

But the man who imported the first pit bulls into Australia 10 years ago, Rod Barker, in Geelong, has threatened to sue.

"Lawyers say we can't sue the Federal Government over the import ban but say we can sue the States if they bring in laws on breed discrimination," he said.

A spokeswoman for NSW Local Government Minister Gerry Peacocke said no breed-discrimination laws were being considered but said a new Dog Act would result in all dangerous dogs being restrained in public.

Mr Barker, president of the American Pit Bull Terrier Association in Australia, said: "If pit bulls or any dog are in the hands of an idiot then they are a dangerous dog. No dog is born bad.

"Ninety per cent of the time when someone is bitten, it is the owner at fault. The stupid thing is, when a dog bites someone, it is shot and the idiot goes out and buys another dog.

"We have got to be extra tough with our breed. I don't want to see anybody killed by a dog."

Mr Barker, who lets his 15 pit bulls play with his children, said newspaper sales of pit bulls should be stopped and the dogs sold only through clubs.

Australia had up to 5,000 pit bulls. The association, formed seven months ago, had 200 members nationally who ranged from piggers and 'roo shooters to university lecturers.

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- [June](#) [1]
- [January](#) [1]

2006

- [January](#) [1]

2005

- [June](#) [1]
- [May](#) [1]

2001

- [November](#) [1]
- [October](#) [3]
- [March](#) [1]

2000

- [November](#) [1]
- [October](#) [2]

1999

- [March](#) [1]

1996

- [May](#) [1]
- [February](#) [1]

1995

- [October](#) [1]
- [April](#) [1]

1993

- [October](#) [1]

1992

- [January](#) [1]

1990

- [February](#) [1]





1989

- [March](#) [1]

1987

- [September](#) [1]

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RECENT ATTACKS BY DOGS

* January 6: Wollongong. Police shot dead a rampaging pit bull after it attacked a kitten and charged at two officers.

* January 3: Heathcote, Sydney. Woman bitten on leg in attack by bull terrier/blue cattle dog as she walked along road.

* December 27: Melbourne. 60-year-old couple attacked in Yarraville by two dogs police said were pit bulls. Husband suffered deep wounds to wrists and thighs.

* September 28: Newcastle. Three-year-old girl bitten on face and arm by bull terrier/cattle dog cross while playing in neighbour's yard.

* September 16: Jervis Bay. 63-year-old heart patient fends off english bull terrier with walking stick after it charged at him on beach.

* September 15: North Richmond, Sydney. Two-month-old baby boy mauled in back yard by english bull terrier after being dragged from his bassinette , while his mother hung out washing. Baby died later in hospital from head and neck injuries.

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