

Pit bull owners are as loyal as their dogs, reports VANESSA McCAUSLAND

Jayden, 5, slumps lazily over the neck of his eight-year-old **pit bull** terrier cross Khan.

Kiana, 3, is trying in vain to avoid a tongue bath from her bull terrier Hope.

It's a sight that would make many mothers squirm, but for Toni Johnson her three bull-breed dogs are part of the family.

"They are wonderful with people," she says while carefully keeping an eye on the dogs and kids running amok in her Sans Souci back yard. "They run with the kids in the yard. They would protect them to the end. I don't think I could smack my kids without one of the dogs growling. They are very loyal," she says.

The loyalty that so many owners prize in their dogs was horribly absent when, last Saturday, 34-year-old Daniella Donaldson's **pit bull** terriers turned on her in her Kemps Creek back yard.

Donaldson was badly mauled on the arms and chest and was only able to escape the pack when a stranger came to her rescue.

For most of us, the thought of owning a dog which necessitates by law a sign saying "Warning Dangerous Dog" and a cage the size of a small car is deterrent enough.

But there are thousands of owners across the state who trust their families with the **pit bull**.

Toni Johnson's reasoning is that **pit bulls**, if reared properly, are not dangerous, they are simply bearing the fruit of their bad owners.

"There are a lot of back yard breeders that operate without the regulation of the canine council. They don't care who they sell the dogs to," she says.

Part of responsible ownership, says Johnson, a vet nurse by trade, is understanding the dog's nature.

"Keep in mind terriers are naturally bred for hunting purposes. They have a natural aggression towards one another. If there are four or more they automatically form a pack and can be triggered into attack mode," she says.

Grandmothers, pig hunters and financial advisers are among the individuals who choose to keep the king of the fighting dogs. The **pit bull** owner is hard to pin down and as difficult to find as the two dogs still on the loose in western Sydney.

Their breeding network seems to be a tenuous chain of word-of-mouth and classified ads.

Because **pit bulls** are listed as one of five restricted dog breeds under the Companion Animals Act, breeding and to some extent, ownership, has gone underground.

Breeders are hesitant to advertise their **pit bull** puppies in the classifieds, some papers even banning **pit bull** notices. And owners don't always register their dogs with council because of the strict guidelines that must be followed.

These include muzzling their dog when it's off the home property, keeping the dog in a child-proof wire cage, and erecting a warning sign on the property.

Animal control officer Wayne Asplet says **pit bull** numbers are difficult to estimate because the **pit bulls** are often wrongly registered as staffordshires. "Most owners don't want people to know they own a **pit bull**. They won't register them or they will register them as another breed," he says.

Financial adviser Daniel Blogg from Parramatta says he and his family do not bother with all the guidelines for restricted dogs for their **pit bull** Priscilla.

"We adhere to most of them but we don't think she's that big a threat. She's very good -- we've never had any big problems.

"They are supposed to be muzzled each time we're outside the property but I think it's stupid. It's about how she's brought up ... and she's a purebred," he says.

But Asplet captures and rescues **pit bulls** and sees the state in which many are kept.

"Some **pit bull** owners are boofheads. They pinch **pit bulls** and cross breed them and they make fighting dogs. They think it's tough," he said.

"You'll have so many people out there who will get a dog, not because they like dogs, but more for the appearance of the **pit bull**. They will have a big fat metal chain and the guy will be on steroids himself."

Asplet sees the appalling cruelty of some of these owners when they pit their dogs against each other in organised fights.

“They are notorious in the Canterbury area. They move the fights around. There are a group that meets in some desolate park and they fight their **pit bulls**. It's usually into winter -- from April through to June,” he says.

Every year Asplet is contacted to pick up the dozens of injured **pit bulls** and staffy-crosses that have lost in barbaric fights.

“These dogs are bred to fight but its terrible for the dogs,” he says.

Asplet, who catches these dogs for a living, cannot see the point of perpetuating an animal that is bred for fighting. “I cannot see why we need those particular animals. They should put blanket-ban breeding of restricted dogs.

“We need to make fines of \$15,000 and they'll stop breeding them and we won't have these problems.” Chief inspector at the RSPCA Don Robinson sees **pit bulls** that have attacked other animals on a weekly basis.

“I think it's telling that the Federal Government has banned them from imports as a particularly savage animal or an animal that has the ability to become savage,” he says. “Our staff come across them on regular occasions and they are always wary of them. I think the animals are very protective of their own habitat. We get complaints about animal welfare of **pit bulls** attacking other animals, other dogs and cats. I believe they are animal-aggressive,” he says.

Aggression is not the only hallmark of the **pit bull**. As Jim, a member of the Endangered Dog Breeders of Australia Association explains, they are also top dog for tenacity. “When September 11 happened and there were search and rescue missions to dig out trapped people, they left out telling the public about a number of dog breeds that were used. **Pit bulls** are a very common dog used in search and rescue missions. They have an amazing tenacity. They won't give up and they will continue to dig after all the other breeds have given up,” he says.

Phil Ciantar felt this tenacity turned bad last Saturday when Daniella Donaldson's four **pit bulls** turned their attention from their owner to her rescuer.

“**Pit bulls** are not a dog, they are just a monster. They will turn on you in a second ... that's what they're waiting for ... they eventually will ... look what they have done to her,” he says.

“They had no fear -- I stood my ground because I thought maybe if I don't show fear they will calm down but it didn't make any difference. They wanted blood. They weren't going to give up until they got me. The only reason I got away was that I jumped a pool fence too high for them. They wanted to go for somebody.”

Two-year-old Hayden Alexander had 150 micro stitches to re-attach his ear after a woman's **pit bull** took off part of his ear while he was playing in his street in Waterloo two years ago.

Matthew Phillips, 21, looked as though a shark had bitten him after a **pit bull** terrier and two rottweillers savaged him near his home at Koonawarra, in Wollongong's southern suburbs.

In Queanbeyan, pig hunter Dave Johnston, 21, and his friends use **pit bulls** for pig hunting.

Johnston says all his friends own the dogs. “There are dogs I've seen that I wouldn't come within 50m of. Even I'm pretty scared,” he says.

“It's not a big dog but if they do latch on they are capable of causing a fair bit of damage. I like the size and the fact that they're short-haired and have strong skin. They are unreal -- they bail the pig up and we shoot it. Everyone I know hunts pigs with **pit bulls** or **pit bull** crosses -- it's just to give it that extra drive,” he says.

Bonnie Norton is a grandmother of 55 who is so confident of her dog she lets it eat from her mouth.

The president of the only **pit bull** association in the country calls for better understanding of a breed she says is the most human-friendly she's ever known.

Caption: (clockwise from top left) pit bull catcher Wayne Asplet with Snoopy; Toni Johnson and children Kiana and Jayden with dogs Khan and Hope; and Daniel Blogg with Priscilla
NATHAN EDWARDS; SAM RUTTYN

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