

Barbara Kay on Ontario's Pit Bull ban: Pit Bulls are bred to maul — UPDATED

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A July 29 article in the Toronto Star, entitled “Ontario’s pit bull ban: The pit bull underground railroad,” compels my brisk re- entry into the debate over dangerous- dog legislation. The offensive Star title alone cries out for condemnation, implying as it does that rescuing dogs is morally comparable to rescuing human slaves.

The article reports on a litter of seven illegally- bred “pirate puppies” by a mixed- breed bitch in Ontario. A pit bull (PB) activist “spirited” them to Halifax (home to several recent PB attacks). The activist’s greater purpose was to promote Bill 16 — a private members bill in its third incarnation — that would end Ontario’s PB ban.

The article was dense with sentimentality (the innocent puppies “hadn’t done anything wrong”). It relied uncritically on PB scofflaws and apologists without balance from disinterested researchers. And it failed to challenge the puppy rescuer’s fallacious credo: “It’s the deed, not the breed.”

Fact: When it comes to dog bites, it very often is the breed. Each year, about one PB in 100,000 kills someone, compared with one non- PB in about 10 million. About one adopted PB in 30,000 kills or disfigures someone after passing behavioral screening. (Other dangerous breeds, like Rottweilers and Huskies do plenty of damage too; more on them another time).

For a preview of Ontario if it lifts the PB ban, harken to the experience of internationally acclaimed animal behaviourist Alexandra Semyonova, author of *The 100 Silliest Things People Say About Dogs* (published in 2009).

Semyonova worked for years at a humane shelter in the Netherlands. During their ban years, they took in four or five PBs annually (mostly collateral catch from drug raids). In 2008, the year of the ban lift, there were 180 PBs awaiting execution; all had hurt someone. Today, various dog shelters there are going bankrupt, because they can’t handle the tsunami of dumped PBs.

PB advocates are passionate and verbally aggressive. When Semyonova spoke publicly about the inherent dangers of PBs, she was smeared through a methodical intimidation campaign so virulent that the Dutch Ministry of Justice acknowledged it as a pattern clearly constituting organized crime. “If you speak out about pit bulls, you are on your own,” Semyonova writes. She notes that confiscated PBs were never sent to their home- town shelters “in order to prevent the violent, histrionic break- in rescues that the pit bull lobby sometimes organized.”

Her findings are borne out in the U.S. and Canada. According to Merritt Clifton, for decades a statistics- driven investigative reporter in this field, PBs accounted for 930,000 shelter killings in 2011, 60% of the U.S. total, even though they represent 3.3% of the dog population. PBs also account for 51% of dogs impounded for attacking other animals. Each year, from 33% to 45% of the total U.S. PB population enters an animal shelter, “a phenomenon never seen with any other dog breed.” Clifton says there are few accidental PB births, “because nothing resembling a pit bull occurs in nature.”

In their unconditional love for PBs — there are apparently more PB advocacy organizations than for all other specific breeds combined — denialists all quote each other’s baseless statements in an endless loop, and parrot the same Manchurian- candidates mantras: “My PB may lick you to death”; “all dogs bite”; “It’s the owner, not the breed”; “the pit bull was the most popular family pet in America.”

These are all myths. Dog- sales statistics show that PBs were never that popular in America; and they were never bred for anything but fighting. All dogs bite, but few do serious damage on a statistically consistent basis. Some PBs may lick you; others may maul you. Nobody can predict their behaviour — not even celebrated dog whisperer César Milan, as a recent YouTube episode rather horrifyingly demonstrated.

The fact is, even responsible owners cannot prevent PB attacks. Most killer PBs were raised in loving homes and seemed sweet — until they attacked. Semyonova says, “There is no temperament test or behaviour test that can predict or assure that a pit bull won’t suddenly do what it was bred to do.” PB “impulsive aggression” is a genetically carried trait and strongly heritable. By seven months, those cuddly pups usually start attacking other animals without provocation. Small children are at particular risk for harm because they are easy prey.

Yes, abused, starved, endlessly- chained or desperately cornered dogs of other breeds will fight, but not to the death like PBs. Once PBs attack (without warning, unlike other breeds), with their characteristic grab- and- shake death lock, they are so pain- insensitive they are almost impossible to dislodge.

But the off- the- charts actuarial stats on PB harm are no match for the PB propaganda machine — of which the Toronto Star now has declared itself a part.

So naïve people keep buying them. Then they find they can’t manage them. Typically, according to Clifton, they arrive in shelters at about 18 months, and unlike other dogs, have been through three homes: their birth home, the home they were sold to, and a third rehabilitation- attempt home that gave up on them.

Since 1982, PBs and close mixes account for: 45% of all U.S. and Canadian human dog- attack fatalities, a total of 207; 51% of all dog- attack disfigurements of children, 850; and 66% of all dog- attack disfigurements of adults, more than 700. According to Clifton, media databases show that there has never been a time when PBs did not account for more than half of all fatal dog attacks over any given 10- year interval, even though PBs (by all their alias names) never amounted to even 1% of dogs in the U.S. and Canada until 30 years ago.

Bans work. In 1989, Denver passed the strongest and oldest PB ban still in effect. The result is that Denver is one of few major U.S. cities that hasn’t had a dog- attack fatality in 20 years. Ontario adopted its law prohibiting PB possession in 2005 (with a provision grandfathering responsibly owned dogs). Ontario shelters now kill fewer PBs serving a population of 13 million people than does Detroit, with no ban, and a human population of 1.2 million. Lift the ban and Ontario will enable tragic, preventable human and animal carnage, while condemning thousands of dumped dogs to death every year.

What is particularly disheartening about the “canine correctness” one constantly encounters in this debate is that so many influential people and organizations — including some veterinarians, kennel clubs and the SPCA — lend their credibility to the claim that no breed may be said to be more dangerous than any other.

One e- mail denialist triumphantly held up a petition attesting to PBs’ good character signed by 4,000 veterinarians as proof of their worthiness. I replied that veterinarians cannot always be counted on to be disinterested observers; they have to be on good terms with all their clients and cannot afford to offend the PB lobby.

Send me a petition from 4,000 emergency- room doctors insisting PBs are no more dangerous than any other breed, I wrote her, and I will reconsider my opinion.

Still waiting.

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