

Arguments Against Defending Pit Bulls

Several years ago I prepared a radio story on pit bull bans. At the time, communities were beginning to restrict pit bull ownership at an increasing rate and enacting, in animal-law parlance, discriminatory “breed-specific” legislation. Fighting such legislation is a cause célèbre among many animal-law types. For example, last year I attended arguably the most respected yearly animal-law conference in the world, at which a panel speaker exhorted the audience to go into their communities and proclaim pit bulls as “America’s Dog.” In fact, the only concession pit bull proponents typically are willing to make is to state that certain pit bull owners are negligent or unqualified to own a pit bull. In the latter case, simply by default because the owner has a criminal record. Of course, this reason, whether proponents recognize it, is a tacit admission that pit bulls are inherently dangerous, if just in the “wrong hands.” This argument also tracks quite closely some people’s feelings about “felons” and firearms, only substituting pit bulls for firearms.

However, my point is not to debate exactly what percentage of fault for pit bull incidents rests with respective pit bull owners. Nor is it my intention to debate pit bulls’ bite strength, to debate pit bulls’ predictability, or to try to define, on a continuum, exactly how dangerous pit bulls are compared to other dogs. I also do not wish to debate what percentage of pit bull blood a dog must possess to be considered a pit bull for purposes of “breed-specific” legislation.

Damages Your Credibility

My point is that it damages the credibility of animal advocates and attorneys to spend much time defending pit bulls. The public, overall, and thus judges and legislators, recognize the damage that pit bulls, and their variants, can cause versus any unique benefit pit bulls bring to the table. The public also understands that while many pit bull owners proclaim that their pit bull is “the sweetest dog on earth,” many of those same owners fail to acknowledge, perhaps even to themselves, that one of the reasons they have chosen that breed is because of the inherent fear pit bulls put into many others. This fear is present, at least in part, because of the breed’s very real history.

Wastes Your Resources

I learned two things about the pit bull debate while preparing my radio story. One is that both sides can be strident. However, it appeared that pit bull proponents, including attorneys, could, at times, exhibit more extreme behavior in defense of their position, which also further damages proponents’ credibility. The second thing I learned was that the majority of people seem to have settled into positions on the issue, with most holding some variation of the opinion that pit bulls are, at the least, to be treated with caution. An attorney expending measurable resources on behalf of pit bulls is not going to substantively change the equation.