Feature and photos by Michael Wood

Bullied to death



It's been 15 years since the Dangerous Dogs Act all but made the Pit Bull extinct in the UK. Those who know and love the breed are still mourning the loss

HUNDREDS OF FACES gazed longingly up at me, offering slobbery tongues eager to lick their new dad. Each excited puppy promised undying love in exchange for a caring home. But there was only room in my life for one of them. Walking the rows of kennels, I consulted my list of suitable breeds and adamantly stuck to it. That was, until I saw Bob. He was eight months old, weighed 30 pounds, grinned wider than the Cheshire Cat, and immediately melted my heart.

But Bob is half Pit Bull. Now, I use the word 'but' not because I fear Bob, but because everyone else seems to. I don't fear Bob because I know how docile he is. Unfortunately, to others, Bob is a born fighter, constantly probing for the chance to pounce at your jugular. It doesn't seem to matter to these people that they haven't actually met him. If they had, they would soon realise they were in no danger, save for a good, hard licking.

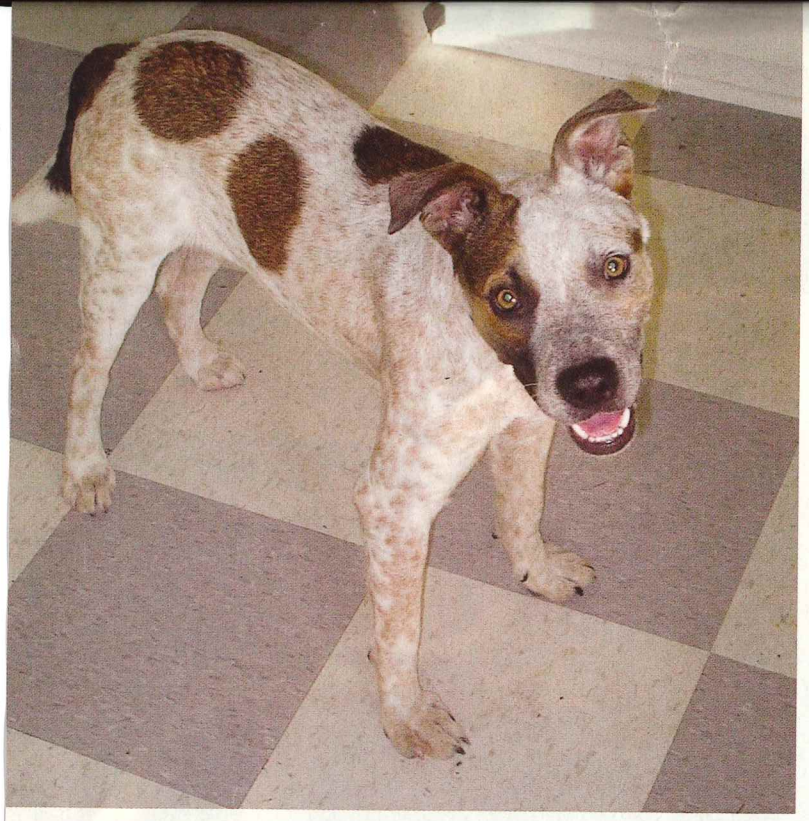
An archaic law passed 15 years ago banning all 'Pit Bull type' dogs has now resulted in their near complete extinction in the UK. Thankfully for Bob, he was not born in the UK. Bob was born in Texas, USA, where I moved last year and where no breed-specific dog ban exists. Consequently, with no such ban, the inherent fear of all things Pit Bull so common in the UK has not spread virally across these shores. American Pit Bull Terriers (APBTs) are as common here as Labradors. In fact, they are fast becoming America's top choice of pet.

Being British, my choice to live with Bob was not an easy one. I knew it would be a battle if I considered bringing Bob into the UK. As the APBT is not a recognised UK breed, British authorities decide whether a dog being imported is a 'Pit Bull type'. With no official paperwork, Bob could be classified as a Pit Bull by airport animal experts who would then call in police. "There is absolutely no chance of a Pit Bull type dog being allowed into this country," said Superintendent Simon Ovens, who is responsible for dangerous dogs in the London area. "It is illegal to import these dogs. Any owner trying to bring one in would be charged with importing and the dog would almost certainly be destroyed."

If Bob did somehow make it into the UK without police intervention, I would have to hide him away for fear he could be seized and hauled off to a secret location where he would spend months quarantined, scared and confused, locked inside a cage. Then, having been stripped of every ounce of love, his behaviour would be analysed with his fate decided in court. And all this without Bob even having barked in the general direction of a child.

I also had other things to consider before buying Bob. The next major hurdle was Deets, my American girlfriend's rather territorial Blue Heeler. Introducing a new dog into a household is always tricky, but with two males - one a Pit Bull - Heather and I had an uphill task. Or so we thought. Knowing the first sniff had to be done on neutral ground, we dragged Deets, tail between his legs, back to his former home at the same pound that housed Bob. Anxiously we watched Bob weave his way powerfully from his cage toward Deets into what surely would be a fierce clash. But, with just one light nip, Bob was on his back, paws wiggling in the air with Deets sniffing triumphantly at his privates. "A deadly Pit Bull," we thought.

Little did I realise that the tough interaction was yet to come. I knew my mum was a worrisome creature but her panic reached new heights when I told her about Bob. "But what about all the horror stories you hear?" was the inevitable adage that came back at me. I heard this phrase again and again



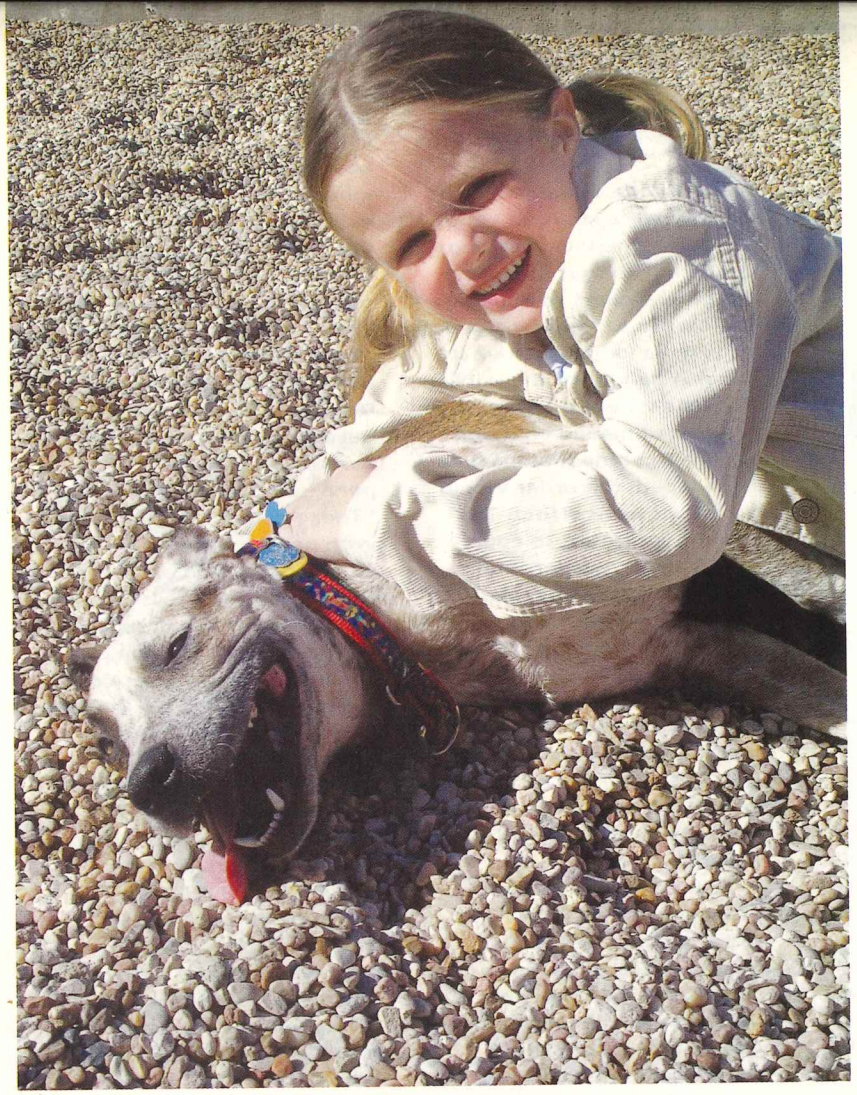
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over the following weeks with each new British friend I told.

The knee-jerk reaction back in 1991 from UK politicians banning specific dog breeds stemmed from a glut of negative media attention and the resulting public outrage. Now, Pit Bulls are hounded from British society and at such a cost. Loyalty, companionship and a devoted kindness to children are well-documented traits of these supposed monsters. A recent study by the American Temperament Testing Society found APBTs to have a more dependable character than many other breeds, including Border Collies and Beagles. Pit Bulls are only involved in attacks because some owners do not take responsibility for their pets.

These owners never realise how doting and goofy Pit Bulls can be. Wherever I go, Bob is there with me. Not even toilet trips are sacred anymore. Watching Bob climb down from the sofa should be a paid spectator sport. The event never fails to result in Bob splayed out on the floor, tail





wagging furiously, with smile lines decorating his rubbery face.

On a recent visit to the park, my friend's eight-year-old daughter, Nora, began wrestling with Bob, plunging his face into gravel and physically abusing him the way kids like to. The entire time there was not one reaction nor hint of anger in Bob's squashed face. He just lay there and played along.

Unfortunately, it is impossible to ignore the horrific attacks we have read about in the papers. But outlawing entire breeds is not the answer. Instead, further crackdowns on illegal dog fighting are needed, with close monitoring on irresponsible breeding and ownership.

The Pit Bull does not deserve the stigma we have labelled it with today. These dogs toiled tooth and nail for farmers, kept families safe from harm, and are now used in homes to help rehabilitate the sick. These dependable dogs deserve our respect and should not all be held responsible for human failings. If they really are man's best friends, why do we not treat them as such?



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Pit Bull history



As the Pit Bull is not a recognised breed in the UK, it is hard to pinpoint its true beginnings. However, many experts believe them to be descendants of Asian Mastiffs, and to have reached modern development over several centuries in England.

Today's Pit Bull has endured many decades of breeding to become the dog we know now. They are thought to have been developed in the 18th century by crossing the bulky Bulldog and agile terrier, creating a working dog ideal for tough farming tasks.

English farmers used the early Bulldogs to help haul in bulls for castration or breeding. These dogs were well suited to the task - with strong jaws and a hard, sinewy body to take the inevitable thrashing given out by the bull.

Sadly, to relieve the depression of poverty, working men began pitting their dogs against bulls, and sometimes bears, for enjoyment. This soon evolved into the infamous and hugely popular sport of dog fighting. With a high pain threshold, Pit Bulls often fought to the death for their owner's pleasure and the winners were highly prized. Thankfully, this foul sport was outlawed in England in 1835.

As the years passed, dog fighting declined and it seemed these dogs were doomed to die with it. Fortunately, fanciers stepped in and began breeding them for exhibition. But, in 1991, they suffered a potentially fatal blow when the British government banned Pit Bull types following reports of attacks on humans. Pit Bulls are now all but extinct in the UK.

In the US, the American Pit Bull Terrier (APBT) is a descendant of the British Bulldogs brought over by early colonists. Dog fighting was again popular among the working class before being banned. In 1898, the United Kennel Club formed solely for the purpose of registering APBTs. To distance them from their fighting roots, the new title of American Staffordshire Terrier was given to those APBTs selectively bred for show. Physically these two breeds are virtually identical. They both now thrive in America and are much loved for their gushing affection and loyalty.



TURN OVER... ...to read about the Dangerous Dogs Act - its history, its impact and the efforts being made to get the legislation changed to protect innocent dogs both in the UK and overseas

Dreaded DDA



IN 1990, British newspapers began filling with the gruesome details of dog attacks, even though no actual rise in the number of attacks was reported. Initially, Rottweilers were the main culprits. However, during 1991, the emphasis shifted to the Pit Bull. That year, reacting to public outrage, the government introduced the Dangerous Dogs Act (DDA) 1991.

Because the British government does not recognise the Pit Bull as a pure breed, it was decided that any dog of 'Pit Bull type' be banned under this legislation. This extremely vague definition means that any dog, regardless of parentage, can be considered a Pit Bull. The law now leaves it to authorities to decide a dog's fate by analysing its behaviour and physical characteristics.

Hundreds of crossbred dogs have suffered needlessly under this law. From 1992 to 1997, at least 770 destruction orders were made against dogs under this Act. Many other dogs were kept in isolation awaiting court proceedings at a cost of £23,000 per year. In 1997, the average length of incarceration for a dog in these cases was two years and four months. The longest period any dog was held was over seven years. It was very hard for owners of seized dogs to fight these cases, as the owner had to prove that the dog was not a 'Pit Bull type' rather than the police having to prove that it was.

The Dangerous Dog Act 1991 contains two main sections:

Section 1 of the Act stipulated that owners of 'any dog known as the Pit Bull Terrier' along with three other breed types (Japanese Tosa, Dogo Argentino and Fila Braziliero) had to comply with strict guidelines. These included keeping the dog muzzled and on a leash at all times in public places, having adequate insurance for the dog, and making sure the dog was neutered with the aim of making the breed extinct in the UK. Owners of these dogs were not permitted to sell or give them away. All of these requirements had to be fulfilled by November 1991 or the dog would become illegal. The government also offered compensation to any owner willing to have their dogs voluntarily destroyed.

Section 3 of the Act went even further by applying the law to any dog, regardless of breed. The Act made it a criminal offence to allow a dog to be dangerously out of control in a public place. This includes not only any occasion where an injury occurs but also where there is fear it might occur.

Under this Act, owners convicted of having either an illegal or dangerously out of control dog could have received a criminal record, up to £5,000 fine, and up to six months in prison. The dog could also have been destroyed.

However, in 1997, after constant pressure from the organisation DDA Reform Group, among many others, the government amended the Act.

Under the amendment, if any owner is charged under section 1, meaning the dog is one of the four banned types, the court may allow the owner to register the dog as long as judges believe it is not a danger to the public. In cases where a destruction order was placed on a dog before the amendment was introduced, the order would no longer have effect. The case must return to court for further consideration. However, the emphasis remains on destruction.

If a dog owner is charged under section 3, pertaining to any dog, regardless of breed, the same procedure as in section 1 should be followed. However, there is no need to consider registering the dog, as it is not one of the banned breeds.

After the amendment was passed, the DDA Reform Group disbanded. But, with Germany's strict breed specific laws, and other countries considering similar legislation, the Dog Legislation Advisory Group (DLAG) formed. This organisation keeps a close eye on dog prejudice worldwide and intervenes whenever necessary. It also offers advice and assistance to owners prosecuted under the DDA 1991.

Many UK organisations firmly denounce regulations included in the Dangerous Dogs Act and are currently looking to change the law.

Leading dog welfare charity Dogs Trust stands firmly against breed-specific laws of any kind. A spokesperson said, "It's the deed not the breed that should be looked at. We believe that any dog, regardless of breed, could show behavioural problems. Judgements should be made in each individual case." She added that the law has led many Brits to believe this breed to be inherently dangerous without exception.

Katy Geary, spokesperson for the RSPCA, said the organisation has recently spoken in court hearings as far away as Ontario, Canada, hoping to stop the spread of dog prejudice. "Back in 1991, we strongly urged the UK government not to bring in breed specific legislation, however that advice was ignored." She went on to say that dog fighting is not yet dead in the UK, as both the RSPCA and police have dealt with a number of cases involving injured Pit Bulls.

Ali Taylor, Head Behaviourist at Battersea Dogs and Cats Home, believes it is irresponsible owners who should be penalised and not their dogs. "These can be excellent dogs with good temperaments," she said. "We do all we can to ensure that, whilst abiding by the law, these dogs are not prejudiced. Our major concern is with owners and breeders who breed 'Pit Bull types' for purposes other than pets."

Superintendent Simon Ovens, who oversees all incidents involving dangerous dogs in London, said there are around 30 Pit Bulls currently quarantined in secret locations. But he believes there are many more still being bred in the UK. "They are a status symbol for many people, especially in south London." He said he is now working alongside other organisations in a bid to change the law. "Current legislation was brought in when it was needed and it has been successful. But times have changed and we are currently lobbying parliament to change the law to 'deed not breed'."

Current legislation in the US varies greatly from city to city. The American Pit Bull Terrier (APBT) is a recognised breed in the US and has been banned outright in some areas including the cities of Denver and Miami. Just recently, officials in San Francisco approved an ordinance requiring all APBT owners to spay or neuter their dogs unless they obtain a breeding permit. So far, breed-specific legislation is not widespread in the US. However, without close scrutiny and protest, this trend could easily sweep the country.

Contact details for the Dog Legislation Advisory Group (DLAG): Juliet Glass, 3 Cranmore Avenue, Osterley, Middlesex TW1 4QW. Tel 01395 512384