

Take a Look at BSL through the Eyes of a Trainer

Coming from a family of animal lovers, I was exposed to animals at an early age. Our first family dog was a stray that my father rescued. During the fifteen years she was with us, we rescued and adopted three other German Shepherds. When my parents bred two litters, my interest in dogs peaked. In retrospect, I realize that they were not the best trained dogs.

In 1992, I discovered the Japanese Mastiff and fell in love with this breed. I had met a young couple that was surrendering a four month old named Brutus. The owners could not control this energetic dog, so I adopted him. By the time he was eleven months-old, he weighed 110 pounds and started to become aggressive toward strangers and my guests. The little control I had on him was slowly slipping away. I realized he had potential, due to his good-natured personality with me and my family members, but I needed help. A friend of mine directed me to a trainer he was working with named Andy Hanlin of "Dogs by Andy." Andy taught me how to guide my dog to better behavior, by helping me be more confident and methodical in working with Brutus.

From obedience training, we progressed to off-leash obedience. Brutus was shaping up quickly. I worked the exercises every day with consistent dedication. After some basic agility work, we continued further with a personal protection program. Brutus excelled as my skills and understanding of dog behavior and guidance progressed. I was truly moved by my dog and other dogs on the training fields with owners committed to putting in time and effort into the program. In time, I continued to work with other talented trainers, studied dog training books, and began helping friends and their friends with their dogs' issues and obedience problems.

Several years ago, I decided to start a program that would enable me to help owners, rescue groups, foster organizations and veterinarians with dogs that needed guidance. My program, "For Pawz" consists of foundation, structure and guardianship in behavior and obedience for owners and their dogs. By us having a better understanding of a dog's behavior, it will assist us in guiding that dog, to become a well mannered citizen. I have had the pleasure of working, watching, and being involved with some talented behaviorists and trainers. I also was involved in seminars and workshops with Julio Rivera, whom I respect for his outstanding skills with helping dogs. It's a real pleasure for me to watch an owner and his/her dog be in harmony and peace as a result of their involvement in the program.

A black and white photograph of a man standing between two dogs. The man is wearing sunglasses and a light-colored sweatshirt with 'Queens College' printed on the chest. He has his hands on his hips. The dog on the left is a Weimaraner, and the dog on the right is a Mastiff. Both dogs are wearing collars. The background is a plain wall with a door handle visible on the left.

by Steve DiTullio

Stereotyping "bites"

BSL from a Trainer's Perspective

As a dog owner of a power breed, a trainer/behaviorist and a recruit for a rescue organization, I was very concerned when I was made aware of the Breed Specific Legislation (B.S.L.) that was being implemented in the town of Rockville center.

The reason a law like this is being put in place is not due to dogs' or dog breeds' behavior. It has to do with the dog owners and their lack of interest in gaining knowledge and understanding on how to pick, guide and manage their dogs to good behavior. Either it is ignorance or just not being prepared for the reality of the long-term commitment to make a dog a good family member and public citizen. It takes a lot of dedicated work for this to come to fruition, but the reward is a great feeling of communication between human and animal.

There are people that have dogs for all the wrong reasons, to fight them, to toughen their own image or to use the dog as a guard dog with no control. Pitbulls have long been the victims of this abuse and negligence. It is not a surprise then, that the name, Pitbull, has a negative connotation. Due to their heritage and loyalty, they will perform whether it's for the handlers' good intentions or bad.

The power breeds, Pitbulls and Rotweillers, are very attractive to all types of people, but they are breeds that can exhibit high drive, tenacity, strong will, enthusiasm and assertiveness. Owners need to be educated before they involve themselves in these types of dogs, because these qualities can become prevalent as the dog matures. Dogs that have these qualities, and I use the generic word "DOGS," because all dog breeds have the tendency to have these traits, even small dogs. Many small dogs can possess an attitude that leads to problems.

Many puppies and dogs are adopted or bought because of their "cute" appearance, and that animal's breed and personality are not looked at carefully. There are some

good dog and puppy testing techniques that can give a base line idea of that animal's drive and willingness to follow. Many young shelter dogs end up there at approximately six months to a year and a half of age because the behavior that was cute and encouraged at two to four months of age and fifteen to twenty pounds (jumping, mouthing or running away with a slipper) becomes a nuisance and undesirable, now that the dog is five to



seven months old or older and fifty to seventy pounds plus and much less controllable.

Any undesirable behaviors that were not addressed at the onset, have been practiced over and over, and the animal has, what I call, conditioned behaviors. This results in the owner becoming frustrated, angry and discontent for the dog as a result, the dog ends up in the garage, the yard or tied out where he/she cannot destroy things of value. Without stimulation and guidance, the dog is doomed. The dog is not learning any foundation or family pack structure and is further removed from the chance of learning social skills. He now builds up frustration from lack of human interaction and truly starts to act like a dog with no human guidance. He digs, chews, barks and acts out uncontrollably. The next stop is usually the shelter, and that's a shame.

I am happy to say there are people that do truly love their animals enough to recognize problems and seek out help from a behaviorist/trainer. They can learn how to redirect and guide their pet toward better manners in a family setting.

Most dogs are true followers. Thus, if the owner can learn to use the proper demeanor, skills and tools in structure and guidance, he or she can create an alliance with the dog where he or she will be happy to follow the confident and nurturing guide. I have worked with all types of dogs and people along with their different personalities. The majority of the time, the dog learns to change quicker than the owner. This is a quality we can learn from dogs, for most of them do not carry the personal baggage or judge as harshly as humans, and they are very willing to forgive and move forward with a guide who has the right demeanor and skills.

To be responsible for the welfare of a dog (medically, physically and behaviorally), is a big undertaking, and one that has to be met with a desire and a realistic approach. Understanding a dog's long term needs (nurturing, guidance and the owner's commitment) comes with preparation, not a spur-of-the-moment decision, which is usually based on how cute a puppy is or on an emotion of compassion for a shelter dog.

When working with dogs in a training and behavior setting, I always take the breed of the dog into consideration. Not all German Shepherds are police K-9 dogs. Not all Labs are soft-mouth bird dogs, and not all Pitbulls are fighters. I feel that the individual personality of that dog truly dictates what the dog is about, and as a trainer/behaviorist, I use and direct those traits into positive behaviors.



The media usually dwells on negative aspects of news and current events when it comes to dogs. This has helped confuse the general public by mostly reporting on negative situations that these powerful breeds have been involved in (again due to the lack of guidance from these handlers and owners).

Not enough attention is given to the positive contributions made and events these breeds perform in (ie: search and rescue, therapy with senior citizens and children or alerting a family to a home fire and saving them). Very few of these positive stories are printed.

B.S.L. is not an isolated problem. Breed-profiling could include your breed or involve your town next. There are many people with phobias and no interest or use for dogs, or think they are just a nuisance. These are usually advocates of issues that inspire laws like B.S.L. and the like. Therefore, it is very important that dogs are seen in a positive light, where they are obedient and display manners in any social setting.

It is more important than ever to get yourself and your dog involved in showing how great dogs are. There is a good chance you could be the one who helps change peoples' opinions from a negative one to a positive one.

Find more about Steve online at: <http://www.forpawzdogtraining.com/>