

## Pit bull attack breeds fear



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It wasn't a fair fight:

Pit bull vs. poodle.

**Phil Luciano**

NEWS COLUMNIST And the poodle was on a chain.

Guess which one won?

Monday afternoon, a loose pit bull ripped into the throat of Ruby, a 12-year-old poodle mix. Owner Patsy Downs, 61, had to put Ruby down the next day.

Still shaken, Downs grimaces and spits out, "They don't never have that dog on a leash."

That's not uncommon in Peoria, especially with pit bulls and especially on the South End. Moreover, Downs and her family say the neighborhood is so lousy with pit bulls that some residents stay inside.

"The neighbors say they can't put their kids out because of the dogs," Downs says.

Ruby, a spunky ball of fluff, served as something of a watchdog for Downs. The dog would bark like crazy whenever anyone would come near Downs' small rental home at 3035 W. Meidroth St.

From the cement stoop stretches a chain leash. Downs typically would put Ruby on the leash and watch as the pooch would do her business. That's what they did Monday afternoon.

But a pit bull appeared out of nowhere, dashed into the yard and snapped its jaws around Ruby's throat. The poodle fell prone and still, as if playing dead. The pit bull didn't attack again, but stayed next to Ruby, barking.

Downs called for help, and an animal-control officer arrived from the Peoria Animal Welfare Shelter. The officer captured the pit bull and took it to the pound.

Meanwhile, Downs and her family took Ruby to a veterinary hospital. Its neck had been crushed badly, making breathing difficult. The vet jabbed a tracheostomy tube into the dog's throat to allow breathing, then sent Ruby home with Downs to monitor the pooch's condition.

But the next day, Ruby's breathing grew worse, prompting another trip to the hospital. The vet said the prognosis looked bad.

Downs cradled Ruby in her arms one last time.

"I told her, 'It'll be all right,'" Downs says. "And I petted her."

Then she turned over the dog to be put out of its misery.

Says Downs' daughter Mary Jordan, "This was a family dog. It shouldn't have happened."

Meantime, PAWS contacted the owner of the pit bull, Angela Sierra, 3032 W. Seibold St., who recently had moved into the house behind Downs. Sierra's backyard is ringed by a chain-link fence, but Downs and her family say the pit bull - like many others - roamed the neighborhood off-leash.

Ruby's medical treatment and euthanization cost \$636. Downs could ask Sierra to pay, but Downs isn't too hopeful - as Sierra has not so much as offered an apology for the dog attack.

I couldn't reach Sierra for comment. This matter apparently marks her first run-in with PAWS.

Sierra must decide what she wants done with her pet. To get it back, she would have to pay a \$105 reclamation fee and a \$125 fine, plus agree to get the animal spayed.

Until two years ago, Peoria city ordinances allowed PAWS to declare an attacking dog "vicious" and order it put down. But a 2005 state law now takes precedence. A dog can be deemed vicious and then euthanized only if a person is seriously hurt, or killed.

But in the case of a dog-on-dog attack, the offending animal - such as pit bull who bit Ruby - can be declared only "dangerous," bringing only penalties like fines. Only after three canine attacks can a dog be deemed vicious.

Downs isn't alone in her apprehension over roaming pit bulls. A block away on Seibold Street, an elderly woman recalls talking to a neighbor outside two weeks ago. She had been cradling her year-old miniature schnauzer when she saw two pit bulls run toward her. She panicked and ran, in the process dropping the dog.

"The pit bulls, they grabbed each end and pulled her apart," the woman says.

She didn't bother calling PAWS. Instead, she just buried her dog in her backyard.

PAWS director Lauren Malmberg has heard endless pit-bull horror stories. She doesn't doubt that an entire neighborhood could be gripped with fear.

"They *should* be," she says.

Though any type of dog can attack, pit bulls are bred to be aggressive, she says. They are a popular breed, especially on the South End, where many young men buy and breed the dogs as a statement of power.

Each year, PAWS handles about 450 dog-bite calls and 3,500 dogs. About 40 percent of those dogs are pit pulls. In fact, of the shelter's 26 stray cages, about half typically are filled with pit bulls on any given day.

Some get picked up. But most don't because the owners never show up. Because of their criminal past, many owners shy away from showing identification to any law enforcement, even dog catchers. So they instead leave the dog at PAWS and buy a new pit bull elsewhere - and often lose the replacement, as well.

"It's amazing how quickly these people go through these dogs," Malmberg says.

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