

# Experts not surprised by attack

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To many in Nick Foley's neighborhood near Cary, the pit bull attack that put the 10-year-old boy and five others in the hospital was utterly baffling.

Why did the dogs turn on people they knew? Why did they act so viciously, and for so long?

Canine experts said the bloody scene that played out Nov. 5 made tragic sense, based on the general behavior of dogs and the specific tendencies of pit bulls.

All dogs are territorial, so a knock on the door might well have triggered aggression in the three pit bulls, animals that some think can be quickly roused to devastating violence.

"It's a dog that does not need provocation to go into a full, aggressive attack," said Alan Beck, director of Purdue University's Center for the Human-Animal Bond and a supporter of pit bull restrictions.

Others, though, say pit bulls are better behaved than many other dogs and that their wrath, when it appears, is rarely aimed at humans.

"[Owners of fighting dogs] didn't want them to nip handlers or a judge," said animal behaviorist Stephen Zawistowski of the New York-based American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals, which opposes breed-specific regulations. "When we've seized dogs from hardcore fighting lines, they're relatively easy for people to handle."

Petey's furious response--nearly biting off his owner's thumb when the man tried to restrain him--did not surprise the experts, given the dog's history of snapping at strangers. Dogs involved in serious assaults usually have a record of hostility.

Once Petey got started, the involvement of Good Girl and Stella, dogs that had never shown a temper, was equally unsurprising. Even meek dogs possess strong pack instincts.

One account in the British journal *Injury* describes how a Labrador-Jack Russell terrier mix bit its owner, a 67-year-old woman, when she called her four dogs in for the night. The other three animals, all Jack Russells, immediately joined in, gravely injuring the woman before a neighbor could drive the dogs away.

When Petey and the other pit bulls got outside, the children's natural reaction--running away and

screaming--probably incited the dogs further. Noise and motion can arouse an agitated dog to an even higher level.

Cheryl Carlson, a Michigan trainer who teaches dog bite prevention, said the best thing to do when confronted with an aggressive dog is to adopt a neutral position by turning sideways and remaining still.

"If you run from a dog, you're triggering that prey drive," she said. "They're biting what moves."

The animals' fury likely escalated when men tried to stop them with bites, fists and baseball bats. Long bred to fight, pit bulls have a high pain threshold and can respond to violence with even greater ferocity.

"[The dogs] have been bred for a long time to get into fights where each dog holds onto the other and it's a question of who holds out the longest," said Peter Borchelt, an animal behaviorist who has testified in support of restrictive pit bull laws.

Carlson advised trying to stop an attack by lifting and twisting the dog's collar, which usually compels it to release its target. Zawistowski recommended distracting the dog with a jacket, or whatever is at hand.

If a victim is knocked to the ground, he should put his chin to his chest, clasp his hands across the back of his neck and assume a fetal position, said Len Selkurt, head of the Milwaukee Area Domestic Animal Control Commission. That will protect the throat and abdomen.

Such guidance, though, is easier given than followed.

"There's no answer that makes any sense," said Borchelt. "Arnold Schwarzenegger would have run. You just can't not run. ... You would have to work on pure instinct, knowing full well that no matter what happens, it's going to be bad."

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