

A knock on the door ...

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On a drizzly day last November, 10-year-old Nick Foley was accompanying his friend Jourdan Lamarre on the most innocent of childhood rituals--selling Girl Scout candy door to door. As they approached the home of Scott Sword, they heard growling. "It's OK," Nick said. "I know these dogs."

All it took was a knock on the door to demolish that illusion. All it took was a knock on the door to change Nick Foley's life forever.

With that knock, the dogs detonated. There's no other way to describe it. They exploded out the door and savaged the children. In the next hour and a half, the dogs ran wild, menacing the neighborhood as if possessed, Tribune reporters Carolyn Starks and John Keilman reported in their chilling series "Open Wounds: The Enduring Agony of a Pit Bull Rampage."

In all, four others were injured, including the owner, Scott Sword, who nearly lost his thumb.

Seven surgeons worked on Nick for five hours. They tied veins and sewed shut roughly 100 bites on his legs, arms, torso and head. They laced 35 stitches into his face. Both of Nick's forearms were broken and stripped of flesh, so the limbs could not hold a cast. In months of recovery, the boy would have to learn to climb stairs again. He'd learn to use his left hand to write and has been told he may never regain full use of his right hand. He and his parents continue to grapple with the emotional scars from that day.

The attack galvanized talk in Illinois of banning pit bulls. And it left a deep, disturbing question: Why did these dogs attack?

Those who defend the breed often point to bad owners as the culprits behind most attacks. That's often true. But as far as the authorities can tell, these dogs weren't mistreated. They weren't trained to attack people. They had not caused trouble in the neighborhood. In other words, these were relatively normal dogs ... until they attacked.

It's not clear that a ban on a certain breed could be enforced. But the threat of severe consequences for owners, if a breed known to be dangerous attacked, could be a deterrent. That is, toughen laws against owners, including the possibility of felony charges if a dog attacks, even a dog that does not have a history of aggression. That proposal failed in the Illinois legislature this year. It's still a good idea.

There's too much evidence of even seemingly docile pit bulls suddenly going on a vicious attack. They have been bred over the decades to fight--hence the "pit"--and to be lethal.

You want a pit bull for a pet? You've got to be kidding. Stories like Nick Foley's cannot be dismissed as aberrations. These dogs are unpredictable. They were long bred for ferocity, to withstand pain and keep coming. They are dangerous, if placed in the wrong situation. Trouble is, even an owner can't predict what that might be.

People have to think much harder about that. And people have to know they will suffer consequences if their dog attacks.

The debate over banning this breed will continue, as will the attacks. The defenders of the breed will be out in full force. They'll argue these dogs are worth the risk. Tell that to Nick Foley.