

Put owners of large dogs on short leash

John Kass

August 23, 2006

Every day, there's another story about large dogs attacking children at play, or attacking police working narcotics and other cases.

The police kill the dogs. But children are savaged.

Politicians get mixed up in it and dog enthusiasts, and we become like molecules in a predictable formula, reacting to each other, pointing fingers and attempting unworkable breed bans, until the controversies fade, until the next child is savaged, like Nick Foley, the little boy who was the subject of a recent and compelling three-part series in the Chicago Tribune.

Last year, when Nick was attacked by three pit bulls belonging to a neighbor in McHenry County, I came up with an idea that made dog owners quite mad. But today I'm going to reintroduce it, as a father, as a fellow soon to be on the lookout for a bird dog pup to train to hunt with my 11-year-old sons. So here goes:

Any owner of any large dog over, say, 15 pounds, would be required to pay a \$1,000 one-time licensing fee. This fee would be reduced if the dog was spayed or neutered, temperament-tested by licensed trainers, and socialized with young children, and only if the dog passed yearly obedience tests and received a yearly canine good-citizen award.

If the dogs don't pass the requirements, if their owners refuse to neuter and train them properly, then they won't receive a license, allowing authorities to seize and kill the dog.

You think that's rough? Read the Tribune series again about Nick Foley.

I figure it's time to bring my plan up again, not to engage in unworkable breed bans, but to actually force owners of powerful dogs to be responsible for the children in their neighborhoods.

The idea was to keep large dogs away from those too lazy or stupid to own such a dog, including the brutalized and brutal urban youths who equate the size of a pit-bull's testicles with the scope of their own manhood. Pit-bull bans, like gun control, are not merely about dogs and guns, but also about urban and suburban liberal elites who use their money to insulate themselves from the urban poor who live nearby. Invariably, pit-bull bans get bollixed up in race and class issues that are often avoided by breed ban proponents.

One recently passed state law, sponsored by state Rep. Jerry Mitchell (R-Sterling), touches on these sensitive

class issues by prohibiting felons convicted of violent and drug crimes from owning vicious dogs that have not been spayed or neutered.

"Criminals with a record have a tendency to get large dogs, they train them to be meaner than the dickens and protect their enterprises," Mitchell said.

He originally proposed a pit-bull ban after a 14-year-old girl in his district died after a pit-bull attack, but withdrew the ban as unworkable. "I got accused from an attorney from Chicago of racially profiling dogs," Mitchell said. "It got kind of crazy."

But my plan isn't breed-specific or race- or class-specific. It is weight-specific. All dogs bite, but big dogs bite big. So if you want a big dog, then train it and socialize it and pay for the privilege. Or don't have one. Or move out to a 5-acre spread in the country behind a large fence.

When I first came up with this idea, dog owners started shrieking. Others who wouldn't know sit from stay accused me of being too right-wing on the issue, although the use of government regulations to shape human behavior is actually the domain of the political left, as evidenced in Chicago where politicians are determined to save us from foie gras.

Still, if it pleases you, call me a liberal. Alan Keyes did, and I've been called worse. But let's do something real, before the next Nick Foley.

"I like where you're going, putting the onus on irresponsible owners rather than on a breed, but I think your plan goes too far," said Ledy VanKavage, senior director of legal training and legislation for the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. "Still, the idea of license discounts for canine good-citizen awards is wonderful. And only dogs of sound temperament should be allowed to breed.

"But \$1,000 is too much for poor people to pay. And they love their dogs too."

If they love their dogs, then they can train and socialize their dogs. Or they can get goldfish.

Not all the dangerous dogs in the U.S. are pit bulls. They can be Labs in packs in some back yard, tethered and aggressive, never having been socialized with children, one chain link away from running down the street. Or hounds, terriers, you name them, innocent dogs picking up, over time, the pathologies of their owners.

There are many things that should be done. Eliminating back-yard breeding is one. Prohibiting the adoption of aggressive dogs from animal shelters is another.

Breed bans won't work, because morons who invest their manhood in dogs will find another breed to ruin.

But unless owners are held accountable--with obedience training and temperament testing as requirements, not merely recommendations--you will see the Nick Foley story repeated.

jskass@tribune.com

Copyright © 2006, Chicago Tribune