

# Neighbors terrified of beloved pit bull

UNION-TRIBUNE

April 18, 2007



Once Americans find a consensus on guns, Iraq and gay marriage, it's high time we settle the issue of pit bulls.

In some parts of the country, owning a pit bull is a crime. In others, including California, it's illegal to pass such a law. That's how polarizing pit bulls are.

I observed it firsthand on a Rancho Peñasquitos cul-de-sac where children ride bikes together and play on front lawns. Tucked into green hills that give it the feel of a Hollywood set, Calle Juanito is home to about 40 children – and one pit bull.

Koda weighs about 60 pounds and stands about 2 feet tall. She has a tannish coat and green eyes rimmed in red. Folks don't see her that often, but it's more than they would like.

Koda is an American Staffordshire terrier. Her owner deplores the name “pit bull” and its negative connotations.

“To me, she's a dog,” Melinda Vasquez said. “To everyone else, she's this sensationalized animal everyone is afraid of.”

Fear of pit bulls, sensationalized or not, ratchets higher every time one kills.

Originally bred for fighting, pit bulls have powerful jaws, a reputation for aggression and a high tolerance for pain. They accounted for 31 percent of fatal dogs attacks in the United States over a 20-year period. In San Diego, 22 percent of court-declared “Dangerous Dogs” are pit bulls.

Yet they have staunch defenders who admire their intelligence and social skills, and who contend that they are lovable victims of discrimination.

Vasquez, a mortgage underwriter, moved to the neighborhood 14 months ago with Koda and Kenyi, an American pit bull terrier. This month the dogs got in a fight and Kenyi was euthanized for biting Vasquez when she broke up the fight.

Koda remains, and days later I heard from a neighbor.

“We don't feel safe with our children outside now,” said Christina Catalano, whose sons are 3 and 4. “It's like we're waiting for something terrible to happen.”

The ladies of Calle Juanito gather monthly to play Bunco and drink wine. Last week, I was there as 11 of them discussed their mounting fears.

One woman showed me the pepper spray she carries when her children play outside.

“We're hostages in our homes,” another said.

Later I called on Vasquez to meet Koda and hear her side.

One person I didn't get to talk to: the pool guy who met Koda in February when she dug under a backyard fence as he was working. He quickly jumped into the pool, where he remained for two hours.

You can look at that episode two ways. The Bunco ladies feel the pool man's terror. Vasquez understands it but says her dog has never attacked or bitten anyone. She contends that better fencing was needed, though it won't satisfy her neighbors, who no longer use their backyards.

Then there was the time last year when Koda got free ("she likes to wander") and ran to where Catalano and her sons were getting into their SUV. Catalano said she threw the boys in back, jumped in and put the vehicle in reverse. Before she could get the windows up, the dog's paws were inside.

Catalano said her boys screamed and she was terrified.

Vasquez said her dog's playfulness was misunderstood: "Normal people would be, 'How cute! What a friendly dog!' . . . Koda is so used to being around people who love her."

Their viewpoints diverged again one evening last month, when the place was crawling with children and Vasquez roller-bladed down the street, a leashed dog in each hand.

Vasquez said she was exercising her dogs in a safe and friendly manner, as she does most weekday mornings. The frantic mothers of Calle Juanito grabbed their young ones and pulled them inside.

Then came the April 1 dog fight in Vasquez's bedroom. Two nights earlier, Vasquez hosted a children's sleepover party at her home – where her niece, nephew, sister and father also live – without incident.

But that night, she said, a misunderstanding between her dogs led to "scuffling" in which Koda protected her from the misguided jealousy of lovable, dumb Kenyi. Vasquez and Koda were injured, and she decided to put down Kenyi.

"Koda saved my life," she said. "Had she been any other breed, it would've been on the news: Dog Saves Owner."

Kenyi's bite, according to Department of Animal Services records, opened Vasquez's right forearm to the bone and severed arteries and tendons. She still wears a cast.

To Vasquez, the dogfight and its aftermath feel like "a self-fulfilling prophecy" fueled by the "negative energy" of her neighbors. She suspects their fear has reached a point where Koda's life is in danger.

What next? A renter, she'll soon move.

"They're getting their way. I have to live my life. If they want to live their lives in fear, that's their business."

Before I left, Vasquez introduced me to Koda, who scampered around the house like an outboard motor on wheels, following her owner's commands and generally ignoring me.

I readily imagined the joys of having a muscle-bound canine pal. I also thought: Who can truly know the mind of a dog?

Looking into Koda's eyes, I knew which side of the pit bull divide I was on: I'm with pool guy.

**Find this article at:**

<http://www.signonsandiego.com/news/metro/braun/20070418-9999-7m18braun.html>

 [Click to Print](#)

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.