

Dog Bites Dog, So Man Bites Dog and Is Bitten

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It was the classic news story: man bites dog.

A Long Island man said he defended his dog against a pit bull here last weekend by sinking his teeth into its head -- a reaction that turned a routine dogfight into a high-profile case of canine justice.

A television reporter referred darkly to the animal shelter isolation room where the pit bull is being held as "death row." A radio announcer made jokes about the dog-biter's license plate, which reads NOLEASH, but which the man says refers to his bachelorhood, not his recovering pet.

Now the pit bull, Dutch, is scheduled to be put to death, and a lawyer for its owners says that the publicity surrounding the case has stacked the deck against the dog.

"Any time that the public is made aware of an incident, it's going to put pressure on the Police Department to act in some form," said Michael J. Brown, a lawyer for Dutch's owners, Mary Graham and her son, Michael Marano. "The public has this perception that pit bulls are just mean, nasty animals. There are standard poodles who are nasty. There are Labrador retrievers who are nasty."

The trouble started on Saturday, when Richard Robbins, 44, of Melville, took his three dogs for a walk in a field near the Birchwood Elementary School, at the same time Ms. Graham took her three pit bulls there. The police said that Ms. Graham's dogs were unleashed, and that one, Dutch, lunged at Mr. Robbins's Siberian husky, Gina Marie.

Mr. Robbins said that to save his dog, he bit Dutch, which then let go of Gina Marie and attacked Mr. Robbins. At that point, the police say, another of Ms. Graham's pit bulls, Eve, also attacked Mr. Robbins.

Mr. Robbins said that he was bitten on his face, head and arms, and that his dog needed more than 100 stitches.

Ms. Graham's lawyer counters that her dogs were on leashes and that Mr. Robbins should have known better than to stick his face into a dogfight. "This gentleman injured himself by putting his head between two fighting dogs," Mr. Brown said, adding that Dutch "has lived an otherwise passive and loving life."

The authorities say that Dutch's fate is his owners' fault and that Mr. Marano signed a form after the fight authorizing Huntington's town animal shelter to put the dog to death. Mr. Brown is seeking a hearing on the matter, saying Mr. Marano did not realize what he was signing.

Mr. Brown also objected to the charges of third-degree assault and second-degree reckless endangerment filed against Ms. Graham, suggesting the police had unfairly linked the incident to another notorious case that Long Islanders have followed closely: the fatal mauling of Diane Whipple, a young woman from Manhasset, by two Presa Canario dogs in San Francisco.

The police said their response to the pit bull attack had nothing to do with television reports, and everything to do with evidence from neighbors familiar with Ms. Graham's pit bulls and witnesses who saw the attack on Mr. Robbins and his dog.

As for the "man bites dog" angle, there is little physical evidence of what took place between Mr. Robbins's teeth and Dutch's head, said Inspector Dominick Varrone, commander of the Suffolk County Police Department's Second Precinct. In the end, he said, "We didn't establish any bite marks on Dutch."