

## Bark vs. Bite

Written by Janet Goodman, BT Contributor; Photos by Silvia Ros  
September 2017

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### Pit bulls have been banned here for 28 years. Is it history or hysteria?



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On April 4, 1989, Dade County commissioners passed a controversial ordinance forbidding pit bull dogs to be sold, purchased, or brought into the county. The law went into effect ten days after approval and gave current owners 90 days to register their pit bulls with the county's Animal Services.

Owners of the pit bulls already here had to confine their dogs indoors or within a six-foot-high outdoor pen. Outside the home, they had to use leashes and muzzles. They also were required to buy \$300,000 of liability insurance coverage for dog-inflicted injury or death, and remained subject to \$500 civil penalties and court action for failure to insure, failure to confine, failure to register, or for obtaining new pit bulls.

The ban has remained on the books for 28 years, despite efforts to overturn it in the courts, in Tallahassee, and at the ballot box. It is the law that just won't die.

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To pit bull advocates, breed-specific legislation (BSL) discriminates on the basis of breed alone, not on individual temperament. "Breed-specific laws fail to address dangerous animals of other breeds and species, are difficult to enforce -- especially when a dog's breed can't be easily determined -- and unfairly target dogs that are responsibly owned and not dangerous," says Michael San Filippo, senior media relations specialist for the American Veterinary Medical Association.

Leading up to the 1989 ban was a decade of dog bites and media focus on pit bull types. From 1986 to 1987, 19 of the 32 people who died from dog attacks nationwide were killed by pit bulls. Throughout the 1980s, various South Florida municipalities proposed breed-specific legislation -- bans or restrictions.

In 1985, Lauderdale Lakes enacted an ordinance forcing pit bull owners to muzzle dogs and carry million-dollar liability insurance policies. Biscayne Park considered a similar ordinance. The Coral Gables city attorney was asked to write a law requiring people to register pit bulls.



In the Florida legislature, Rep. Irma Rochlin, D-Hallandale, sponsored a bill in 1986 requiring pit bull owners to register the dogs with their county, to leash and muzzle them outside the home, and hold a \$100,000 liability insurance policy.

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During this same time, South Miami, Hollywood, and Hialeah, and Broward and Monroe Counties had a set of anti-pit bull legislation setbacks, mainly over the definition of “pit bull” and that many of the targeted dogs were not purebreds. Broward statistics from 1984 show that other breeds not targeted by restrictions were also culprits: Dobermans had 145 reported bites or 1 per 26.4 registered Dobermans; German shepherds and shepherd mixes had 400 reported bites or 1 per 16.8 registered shepherds; pit bulls had 192 reported bites or 1 per 5.1 registered pit bulls.

In 1988, the Third District Court of Appeal overturned a 1986 circuit court ruling that found a North Miami law was unconstitutional, and upheld the requirement that owners of American Staffordshire terriers, Staffordshire bull terriers, and American pit bull terriers must meet \$300,000 liability insurance, six-foot-high fencing, and leash requirements.

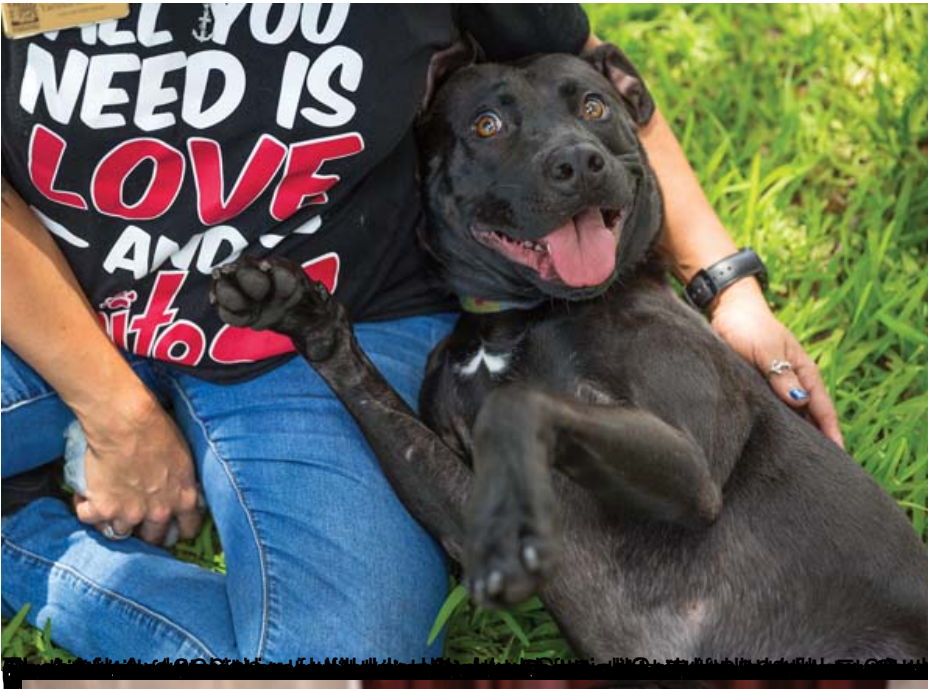
By 1989, Florida City passed pit bull restrictions, as did the city of Sunrise. State Rep. Susan Guber, D-Coconut Grove, proposed a bill outlawing the breeding, sale, and possession of pits, telling the *Miami Herald*: “It’s like owning an alligator or any kind of animal that can destroy people.”

In Dade County, everything came to a boiling point in February 1989, when an eight-year-old girl, her mother, and grandmother were savagely attacked by a neighbor’s pit bull that had escaped from the owner’s yard. The young girl, Melissa Moreira, bearing noticeable scars on her lip, cheek, and forehead, appeared with her mother at a county commission meeting in March 1989, when the pit bull ordinance was first placed on the agenda by Commissioner Joe Gersten and was co-sponsored by Commissioners Valdes, Schrieber, and Dusseau. The *Herald* reported Gersten’s comments: “Pit bulls are as lethal as a knife or gun and have to be regulated. How many innocent victims have to be mutilated before we act? This is the last one.”

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