



Two days after an appalling attack by a pit bull terrier on a six-year-old girl, CAROLINE PHILLIPS delves into the minds of such animals' owners

# Just who would want a pit bull as a pet?

NEXT TO the door bell is a sticker bearing the legend: "Make his day. Break in." On it is a picture of a pit bull terrier, stocky and muscular with a steel-trap jaw.

So why would anyone want an American pit bull terrier—or APBT, as the new Sporting Dog periodical would have it?

There are an estimated 10,000 APBTs in England, of whom 1000 reside in Dave and Maria Britons' borough of Waltham Forest, an area where youths walk in the park: one with an APBT, another with a rottweiler. With its killer instinct, the APBT is a loaded weapon.

Dave and Maria, 36 and 35, live in a terrace house in Walthamstow on a short stretch of road that houses no less than one dobermann, a Yorkshire terrier and 13 APBTs. Of these, 11, including nine puppies, are in the Britons' 20-ish ft paved garden. They have a one-bedroom flat on a heavy traffic road.

They have lived in it for two years—with exposed plaster work and unfinished floor in the microwave-only kitchen. There's a picture in the hall of a hand carrying a spearhead, blood trickling down—and in the sitting room, ones of fierce-looking tigers' heads. In the bathroom, the Sunday article is open at *The Hiss of Death*. There is an uncomfortable atmosphere of violence restrained.

The dogs, Nash and Misty, don't even bark when we arrive. They wag their tails. They show no sign of aggression. In fact, they are rather placid. And in the garden the five-week-old puppies frolic, squealing and squeaking. One chews my foot, another my handbag.

"The vet's always saying how gentle they are," says Maria, in black leggings, wine T-shirt and long brown hair. She has a face that looks as if it has experienced the rougher side of life and a character that fluctuates between being meek and showing a very hard edge. "It's sad people are so nasty about them. They're such lovable things," she says, passing them a tray of rice, egg and biscuit.

Maria is a housewife who says she doesn't do a lot. Like her husband, she left school at 15. "I generally take the dogs out for a couple of hours a day." She says she only bred so her bitch would put on weight. But she hopes to sell them for upwards of £300 each.

"They're good with everyone, particularly children, very good guards, obedient, very affectionate," says Dave, showing me book-plates of one with a parrot and one pulling a baby in a cart. He's rough-



The Britons hope to sell their puppies for at least £300 each

spoken, bullish and thickset, wearing a tracksuit that he has worn to mend a friend's car, and long hair. He's clearly very strong. "Currently unemployed, and looking for business premises," he says, adding that he's a motor mechanic when working. They live on the dole, claiming (between them) £124 every two weeks.

They don't have any children. "I have no intention of having any, either," says Maria. "The dogs are my kids." He, too, is mad on the creatures. Ask him to describe his lifestyle, and he says: "My dogs... when I get home I'll walk them or play with them in the yard."

He goes to the club for APBTs and other sporting dogs which started in Basildon six weeks ago. Operating alternate Thursdays, it

offers events like "flirt pole variations" and "weight pulling"—in which a 70 lb dog pulled 5151 lb harnessed to it. They sell T-shirts which read PITBULL, where P is for protective, I for intelligent, then tasteful, boisterous, unspoilt, loving and lively.

When Dave's not with the dogs, he'll "shoot off to see some mates or go down the betting shop". He'll bet on anything, he laughs—except dog fighting. Nor would he fight his dogs. "If they get hurt, I get hurt." He says they're part of the family.

"My dogs have never bitten anyone and they're never likely to. Only about .001 per cent of the 9000 registered dogs have ever attacked people. And a dog will only attack if it feels threatened, annoyed, protecting its own territory or jealous." But what about the case of the



Dave and Maria Briton with their pit bulls, Nash and Misty: "The dogs are my kids," says Maria

mutilated six-year-old, Rucksana Khan? "Sad," says Maria.

"But we don't know the full circumstances," says Dave. "You never hear both sides of the story as to why the dog attacked."

Maria thinks it's untenable that the RSPCA should suggest treating the animals in law as wild. "It's disgusting because they are our pets!"

And what do they think of the MP's suggestion that the dogs should be neutered and imports banned? "Well," says Dave, "I think MPs should be neutered."

Originally the Britons had a German shepherd—which didn't stop them being burgled. So two years ago they decided on an APBT. "We're living in a high risk area with lots of muggings. When my wife goes out in the evening with her friends, I don't want her walking around the streets with nothing on her arm."

When he goes walking, he carries a breaking stick—a long piece of wood "with which I can open their jaws in a flash". So there must be just a hint of a thought in his head that the dogs could attack? "Oh no, no, no. It's just a precaution we take." And one that he's been taking for the last two years. As he says, these dogs do have five times more power in their jaws than rottweilers.

Dave decided to let his dog breed. "So it doesn't get possessive about its owners. A nasty streak can come out in them otherwise. If a dog hasn't had a litter, it'll show a lot more aggression to people," he says, letting his bull defence down for a minute.

He shows me their leather harnesses. "No princess, no darling," says Maria, as she picks up the

brass-decorated leather, £35. "You can get them with spikes all over. And you can pick the dog up with it," he says, lifting the creature in the air.

He also has a leather arm protector. "To play with them." Like a piece of leather armour, it also has sackcloth over the hand (£120). And then there's the treadmill (£250), which is like something for a giant hamster. "For walking the dogs when it's raining. They love it."

Once he had a visit from the council's animal wardens. "They said they'd seen us hanging the dogs from the first-floor window. I thought: 'That's a bit strange since we live on the ground floor!' The thing is, the dog was tugging on a piece of rope—and all they could see was the top of the head and a rope."

And has he ever been in fights? "Years ago." His voice goes quiet. "Three or four years ago." That was when he worked as a doorman in clubs. He did that after he ran a security service company.

And has he ever been the wrong side of the law? He's standing up now, towering above my seated position. "Er, yes." For what? "Well, if you read a book by James Campbell there's a chapter in there called *The Professional*—concerning a robbery case I was involved in. I got eight-and-a-half years. That was in 1978 when I was 23, for tying up the chairman of the Walthamstow Building Society and taking some jewels that were given to him by Mountbatten. I lost all my remission."

"But that's years ago. I'm not anti-police. The police have got a job to do. I've had no trouble from the police concerning my dogs."

Pictures: CLIVE HOWES