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BE A TREE

By Pat Miller

The recent Pit Bull tragedy in San Francisco – another in a growing list of such tragedies – highlights once again the need for laws that encourage and require dog owners to be responsible, and the importance of providing information that will help people survive such dog attacks.

First of all, it's important to keep dog-bite deaths in proper perspective. Dog bites usually cause fewer than two-dozen deaths each year in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta, Georgia, dogs killed 22 people in 2004. In 2003, twice as many (23) people were struck by lightning and killed, while in 2002, 113 people died in traffic collisions with deer.

Because dogs are our trusted and loyal companions, a dog-related fatality is more sensational and seems more sinister than most other accidental deaths. Of course, there were many more dog bites in 2004 that weren't fatal, but statistically, the chance that you're at risk of being mauled to death by a dog is very low.

That's small comfort to Nicholas Faibish, the 12-year-old San Francisco boy who was killed by the family's Pit Bulls on June 3, 2005, and small comfort to anyone who is approached or attacked by an aggressive dog.

Dogs are here to stay. If not the Pit Bull, the Rottweiler, German Shepherd, Doberman, Malamute, Chow, or Presa Canario, any large, powerful breed of dog will, occasionally, cause serious injury, even death. Small dogs can certainly bite too – they just normally have less potential to do serious harm – the Southern California Pomeranian who killed a 6-week-old infant girl in the year 2000 notwithstanding. Rather than sinking into paranoia, better to learn how to stay safe – know how to avoid provoking an attack, and how to protect yourself should one occur.

Stupid Primate Behavior

When I was a Humane/Animal Control Officer in Marin County, California, I handled a report of an aggressive male Rhodesian Ridgeback who was allowed to run at large in a San Anselmo neighborhood. As I walked up the front sidewalk toward the house, a reddish-brown flash came speeding around the corner of the house, headed menacingly and directly at me.

I instinctively averted my eyes and held my breath, frozen in place as he charged up and bumped me with his nose, hard. I have no doubt that if I had moved when he hit me with his nose, he would have bitten me, probably badly. Instead I passively held my ground and he backed off, staring at me intensely. Still without making direct eye contact, I

backed slowly to my truck and climbed in, reached behind the seat for my control stick, stepped out, slipped the loop over his head and pulled it tight. Then I breathed.

In her excellent book, “The Other End Of The Leash,” Patricia McConnell makes the important point that, as primates, humans tend to automatically do exactly the wrong things when confronted by a dog. Instinctive, genetically programmed primate behavior causes us to make direct eye contact and confront a threat with full-face aggression – stare at the dog facing him directly, perhaps yell, reach or move toward him or make other defensive moves, escalating rather than defusing aggressive behavior.

Programmed by decades of living and working with dogs, I instinctively avoided eye contact and movement, and froze instead. Lucky for me.

You *can* reduce the risk of being attacked, and reduce the likelihood of serious injury if you *are* attacked, by doing the right things, pre- and post-confrontation. Next time you feel threatened by a dog, remember these tips:

- 1. Be A Tree:** If a dog approaches you with assertive/aggressive body language, be a tree. Stand perfectly still but relaxed. A tense, unnatural position looks weird to the dog; weird can trigger an attack. Avoid direct eye contact, but keep the dog in your peripheral vision. Keep your arms at your sides, and don't speak. By offering appeasement behaviors and not doing anything assertive, you increase the odds that the dog will wander away without attacking.
- 2. Be A Rock:** If the dog *does* attack despite your non-offensive body language, you have two choices. If the dog is small or just nipping at you rather than launching an all-out attack, seek safety – climb up on a fence or tree, the hood of a car, or any object large enough to provide sanctuary. You can unobtrusively scope out the landscape for such objects while you're being a tree. If you feel you're being overpowered by the dog, be a rock. Drop to the ground in the fetal position with your hands behind your neck and legs pulled up to your chest, protecting your spine, face and vital organs.
- 3. Find a Shield:** While you're being a tree, carefully scan the area for possible shields – a gate you can slip through, a garbage can lid you can hold between you and the dog. If you think the dog will allow it – like my attacking Ridgeback – back carefully to your shield, keeping the dog in view, and use it as needed to protect/defend yourself.
- 4. Find a Weapon:** In no way do I advocate hitting dogs in the name of training, but if you're being attacked and have access to a club or other weapon of some kind, do what you need to do to save yourself. Don't attempt to use a weapon, however, unless you're prepared to use it with full commitment. Waving a stick feebly at an attacking dog will only antagonize him further. If you use it, use it as hard as you can. If you must routinely walk in an area with free roaming dogs, consider carrying a club with you, or a shield, such as an umbrella, that you can use to ward off dogs.
- 5. Report Incidents:** Even if you escaped unscathed, don't underestimate the danger of the dog who just accosted you. Report the incident to animal control and the police department, and if you don't feel they're taking you seriously, talk to their

supervisors, and if necessary your local elected representative and the media. You may save the life of the next person the dog would accost.

Complications

The first four tips listed above are much more difficult to implement if you're walking your own dog(s) on a leash, or are accompanied by a child, senior citizen or disabled person. You may need to use your own body as a shield by calmly moving into position between your dependent dog or person and the attacking dog. You may be able to lift a child or your dog onto a raised surface for safety, and then climb up yourself. You can still use the fetal position, either while coaching the other person to do the same, or by folding a small child or small-to-medium-sized dog between your chest and knees, or wrapping them in a jacket if you happen to have one with you. You might practice these maneuvers in advance with lots of positive reinforcement so no one panics if it happens in a real life encounter. Carrying a weapon of some kind is still an option.

There are no guarantees that the above suggestions will save you from being bitten, or even mauled, but it's a good bet that if you do the wrong things when a dog accosts you, or do nothing at all if you're attacked, the damage will be greater. It's sort of like the terrorist threat: you don't want the risk of being attacked to alter your regular activities or enjoyment of life, but it pays to be on heightened alert, and to be prepared to defend and retaliate in case of attack.

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