



Pit Smitten

FRISBEE DOG DEFIES STEREOTYPE

In 2005, Wallace was close to being euthanized in a Rochester, Minn., shelter. Identified as a "pit bull"—a term that can refer to any of several breeds or mixes resembling them—he'd been aggressive toward other dogs. Some staff members were scared of him. The shelter was reluctant to adopt him out because of the possible liability. But where some saw a problem animal, Andrew "Roo" Yori and his wife, Clara, saw a victim of stereotype. They took Wallace home and, with patience, perseverance, and a lot of love, helped him become a disciplined athlete. Against all expectations, Wallace blossomed into a Frisbee competition champion, able to ignore crowds of people and a multitude of other dogs to weave deftly in and out of Yori's legs, launch his stocky body into the air, and snatch a spinning plastic disc again and again with his wide mouth.



Wallace, a new book by best-selling author Jim Gorant, tells the story of the dog's transformation and Yori's campaign to change the way people think about dogs commonly referred to as pit bulls. In this edited interview with senior writer Karen E. Lange, Yori reacts to the recent Maryland Court of Appeals ruling that pit bulls are "inherently dangerous," and describes what Wallace has taught him about dogs, discrimination, and life in general.

What would you say to the judges on the Maryland Court of Appeals? There's no one breed of dog that's inherently dangerous. So you're going to ban one [type of] dog, but those same owners that don't know dog behavior are going to get another type of dog, and you're going to have the same issue. You're not going to do anything to prevent other people from getting injured or harmed.

A lot of this is fear-based. Someone will watch Wallace catch a Frisbee, and they'll think he's really great. They'll ask, "What kind is he?" And I'll say, "He's a pit bull." And all the sudden, they back up, they kind of hesitate, and they're like, "Wait a second, I thought they were mean." And I say, "Well, judge for yourself." And they're like, "He's actually a good dog." So it's important that people with their good dogs get out there because Wallace has changed more minds than I ever could by myself.

Do you think that there will come a time when the owners of pit bull types don't have anything to prove? I hope so, and I hope that [the breed discrimination] stops with pit bulls. I hope that people finally realize that the problem is not with the dog; the problem is with education and responsible dog ownership. Because the rottweiler was targeted, the German shepherd was targeted, the Doberman was targeted, now the pit bull is targeted.

I hope that people realize the problem is with us as owners.

Are there any traits that Wallace shares with other pit bull types? I don't believe in judging dogs on what they happen to look like or what they're supposed to be bred to do. Because I've seen enough dogs now that I know every one is just like we are—an individual—and they're going to have their own characteristics and their own strengths and their own weaknesses. When I adopted Wallace, he was very high energy, was high drive. And so I was like, "Well, pit bulls are high drive." As I got into the dog sport world, and I was exposed to other dogs competing at this high level, I realized that all these other dogs also had very high drives. There's cattle dogs, border collies, Australian shepherds, Labrador retrievers, and there's tons and tons of mixed breeds. I don't train or treat a dog based on what that dog looks like. I find out who that dog is.

What made you take Wallace home and be responsible for him? I didn't feel that the reasons people didn't like him were justified. Because I knew, when I would go work with him, I would see progress; I would see a good dog in there once he got some exercise and got a little bit unwound. The [shelter] environment was extremely overstimulating; there was always something to get him riled up.

Was there ever a time after you took him home when you worried you'd made the



World champions Roo Yori and Wallace are the unlikely pair who took the competitive disc dog sport by storm.

wrong decision? We discovered the Frisbee relatively quickly. Once I got started with that, I was just having so much fun. I had never had a really sporting dog before. I had never had a dog that really, really wanted to work like Wallace did. And I'm like that myself. I was an athlete all my life.

There's a description in the book of when you and Wallace were at the pairs championship in 2005. The sentence just says, "Then Wallace happened." Can you describe what that was like? We were out on the field, and it just seemed like everything else would fade away. I wouldn't even hear the music. It's just you and the dog out there, connecting with the disc. It's almost like you're dancing. You know what the other's going to do before they even do it.

Looking back, what does Wallace mean to you now? Through our journey, he's taught me a lot. No matter what came in front of him, no matter what obstacle presented itself—and he had a bunch—he just took it on. Whatever he does, he does with everything he has. He doesn't know he is supposed to fail. How many times when we get something coming in front of us [do] we get down; we think we can't do this—but if we actually just put our best effort forward, who knows what we could accomplish? He doesn't know that that other dog is a little faster than him. He doesn't know that that other dog can jump higher. He knows what he can do. And he goes out there and does the best he can. And as a result, he beat a lot of the dogs that were faster or could jump higher.

What message do you have for our readers? There are a lot of really good dogs in the shelters, waiting for someone to give them a chance. There are a lot of pit bulls out there that are good dogs that get overlooked. Get to know the dog for who the dog is. Think about giving one of these guys a chance.

ON THE iPad: Watch Roo Yori and Wallace in action.

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