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Man Attacked by 2 Pit Bulls Remains Hospitalized

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A Sylmar man who was the victim of a vicious early-morning attack by two stray pit bull terriers was still hospitalized Thursday in serious but stable condition following four hours of surgery to repair injuries including the loss of an ear and part of his scalp, animal services officials said.

Ascension Cervantez, 40, was attacked by two pit bull terriers, a male and a female, about 5:30 a.m. Wednesday, shortly after reporting to work at Valley Crest Tree Co. in Sylmar.

"This is one of the most vicious, severe cases I've ever seen," said Capt. Richard Felosky of the Los Angeles Department of Animal Services. "[The dogs'] sustained aggression, combined with their power and the way they've been bred combine to make them truly powerful weapons."

Felosky said the department was searching for leads to identify and locate the owner of the dogs, which were captured with the help of Los Angeles Police Department officers. The dogs are being held at the West Valley Animal Care and Control Center.

A county official said the fact the two pit bull terriers were unaltered undoubtedly redoubled their aggression.

"Unaltered males are extremely aggressive, particularly if a female dog is in heat. The only thing on their minds is sex, and if you get in their way, you better watch out," said Dr. Patrick Ryan, Los Angeles County chief of veterinary public health. Pit bulls are particularly aggressive, he said.

Cervantez, a father of three, was taken to Providence Holy Cross Medical Center in Mission Hills and later transferred to County/USC Medical Center, where he underwent surgery to repair injuries to his head, leg and hand, a hospital spokesman said.

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A trucker who often parks his 18-wheeler near the tree nursery, responded to Cervantez's screams and summoned authorities to the isolated area. The Sylmar trucker, Jeff Holman, said what he saw shocked him, adding that he was probably the only person in the area when Cervantez was attacked.

"That was the worst thing I've seen in my life," said Holman, who wielded a binder bar from his truck and a knife as he ran to the victim. By then, the dogs had run off.

"He stumbled toward me saying, 'Dogs, dogs,' and then just collapsed," Holman said. "It looked like his scalp and part of his bone was pulled off from the back of the neck."

On Thursday, the male dog-- heavily muscled and broad bodied weighing 60 to 70 pounds-- still had traces of blood on the crown of his head.

Cervantez's 17-year-old son, Tony, said, "I thought he wasn't going to make it," but added, "he's doing better. He said he's not in so much pain anymore."

Cervantez will have to undergo a series of reconstructive surgeries, said County/USC spokeswoman Adelaida De La Cerda.

The early-morning attack may be added fuel for those who favor an ordinance to require spaying or neutering of all dogs, including animals owned by breeders, unless they pay a \$100 annual fee.

The proposed ordinance is due for a hearing by the council's public safety committee in March, said Dan Knapp, general manager of the Department of Animal Services.

February is the beginning of a seven-month period during which many female dogs are in full estrus--or "heat"--and male dogs in their vicinity become more aggressive, animal services officers said. The majority of dog bites come from unaltered dogs such as the Sylmar pit bulls.

Because pit bulls are often bred for their aggressive tendencies, unaltered animals "can be a very dangerous situation," said Geoff Simmons, program coordinator for Humane Society of the

United States. Spaying and neutering could greatly reduce dogs' aggressive tendencies, he added.

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Currently, two state laws encourage spaying and neutering. One state law fines owners if their unaltered dog or cat ends up in an animal shelter.

Another law--which may apply to Wednesday's attack--imposes criminal sanctions on owners who purposely train their dogs to fight, attack or kill and whose dogs, as a result, cause substantial injuries, said Knapp.

"If the owner [of these pit bulls] knew that these dogs are aggressive and had trained those dogs to be aggressive, this could be a felony," Knapp said.

The city's proposed ordinance could reduce both canine populations and incidents of dog bites, Knapp said.

According to the county Department of Health Services, Los Angeles residents suffered an estimated 72,000 dog bites last year. Every day, an estimated 29 people seek emergency-room treatment because of severe dog bites.