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Pit Bulls: Menace or misunderstood?

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A political pundit says of a political candidate, "It was important that he not be perceived as a pit bull...." A sensational headline screams, "Infant killed by pit bull!" A municipality attempts to ban ownership of pit bulls. An insurance company won't give you homeowners insurance if you own one.

Why the bad rap? Is it justified or just the product of the overreacting, overzealous and uneducated? Why isn't the story of Weela, an American Pit Bull Terrier who was named Ken-L-Ration's Dog Hero of the Year for saving the lives of 29 people, 17 dogs, 13 horses and a cat during the California floods, the story we remember when we hear the phrase "pit bull"? Why don't we think of General George S. Patton's dog, Willie, or of Petey, of Little Rascals fame, or envision the RCA dog listening to "His Master's Voice"? The answer may lie in the educating — or the lack of it.

In the early 1800's, Bulldogs and Terriers were crossbred primarily for baiting bulls or rapping. Those who bred these "Bull and Terrier" dogs sought to marry the courage and ferocity of the bulldog with the greater agility of the terrier. From this crossbreeding came what is now known as the Bull Terrier and Staffordshire Bull Terrier. The Bull Terrier, also known as the English Bull Terrier was accepted into [American Kennel Club](#) registry in 1895, but the Staffordshire Bull Terrier (often called a Staffy Bull) did not gain that recognition until 1975. The American Staffordshire Terrier (commonly known as an AmStaff) resembles its English ancestor, but is taller and heavier. Known as intelligent and determined, this dog too was originally used to bait bulls. It was granted recognition by the American Kennel Club in 1936, which has redirected the focus of its breeding to conformity and temperament rather than performance. The American Pit Bull Terrier is yet another descendent of the Staffordshire Bull Terrier, but was bred specifically for dog fighting, and, although more commonly bred for performance today, is still used illegally for fighting. The APBT is recognized and registered by the [United Kennel Club \(UKC\)](#) and American Dog Breeders Association, but is often dual registered as an AmStaff with the AKC.

The Staff, AmStaff, Bull Terrier and ABPT have all come to be known as "pit bulls", and all carry with them varying degrees of a terrible stigma. Despite that fact that there are thousands of loyal, even-tempered pit bulls living with responsible owners, the few sensational cases have cast a black cloud over these breeds resulting in discrimination virtually all over the world.

Pit bulls are very human friendly. Genetically, they were bred to be aggressive toward other dogs, but very agreeable to humans. When a dog was in the fighting pit, the owner needed control. If the dog was ordered to stop and didn't, or turned on the owner, it was, very simply, killed. This resulted in selective breeding which virtually eliminated the human aggressiveness in the breed. People who know the breed say that a pit bull who shows unprovoked aggression toward humans has most likely been mistreated at a young age. Alfons Estelt of the American Temperament Test Society, Inc., said, "The American Pit Bull Terriers participating in our temperament evaluation have thus far shown a passing rate of 95%. The other 121 breeds of dogs in our tests showed the average passing rate of 77%. While the heredity factor is of measurable importance, these results show that a dog, even if used for dogfighting, is not pre-disposed as such, but is brought by his

environment."

Pit bulls can be found doing "angel duty" in many capacities. [The Chako Rescue Association](#), a California based APBT Rescue group, has a unique service dog program, which "encompasses training dogs not only to assist persons with disabilities, but also to perform animal-assisted therapy." These dogs go into nursing homes and hospitals visiting patients of all ages where they are well received and showered with hugs and attention.

Most shelters find pit bulls to be very adoptable dogs. The biggest problem is screening out undesirable prospective owners. Cindy Stark, manager of the [Luzerne County SPCA](#) in Wilkes-Barre says they do adopt out Pit bulls. "Each dog is judged individually, regardless of breed," she said. "We don't adopt out aggressive animals....Each dog has its own problems, and we evaluate both the dog and the prospective owner for compatibility."

Sue Frisch, manager of the [Dessin Animal Shelter](#) in Honesdale says Pit bulls are her favorites, and she personally owns one APBT as well as a Pit bull mix. "In my opinion, Pit bulls are the least likely to be human aggressive," Frisch said. "On the whole, you have to do a lot of work to make them aggressive to people." At Dessin, all dogs are temperament tested using a program developed by Sue Sternberg, well known in the sheltering community for her knowledge of animal behavior, and her advocacy for shelter animals. The program weeds out dogs that are aggressive to other animals. It also shows tendencies toward food aggression or toy possession. But, Frisch said, she has never had to fail a Pit bull for either of those problems.

Marjorie Inden of the [Dutchess County SPCA](#) in Hyde Park, NY, says they are very "pit bull friendly". "In fact, every year we put a dozen or so pits through the AKC Canine Good Citizen course, and market them as St. Francis Terriers. We have done this for four years now," she said. The St. Francis Terrier program was originally founded at the [San Francisco SPCA](#). The program takes hard-to-place dogs, not exclusively pit bulls, and puts them through obedience training. Candidates for the program must pass a rigorous round of temperament testing and be healthy.

Most shelters keep a watchful eye on Pit bulls. Some prefer to turn them over to Pit Bull Rescue organizations rather than adopt them out themselves. Shelters, rescues, and devoted "Pet Bull" owners themselves agree that this is not a breed for everyone, and insist that they must be placed carefully in responsible homes.

"These dogs are not good for first time dog owners," Sue Frisch said. "They have a high prey drive, a high energy level and tend to be chewers and diggers." She also added that they tend to attract the "wrong type of adopters". Cindy Stark expressed the same concern. "Many people want these dogs because of their "macho" image. We screen adopters very carefully to avoid this type of owner."

The shelters in Northeastern PA are fortunate in that there is not any established dog fighting in the area, and, consequently, few well-trained fighting dogs are seen. True fighting rings are seen in larger metropolitan areas as well as many low income white and ethnic areas. Fighting, and any activity that is remotely related or supportive, is a third degree felony under Pennsylvania's Humane Law, Act 5511. The law states, anyone who



"in any way encourages, aids or assists" in dog fighting is subject to arrest. It, unfortunately, doesn't prevent back alley my-dog's-better-than-yours fighting, and many pit bulls suffer horrendous abuse in order to "make them mean."

Despite all the information that is available about the Pit bull breeds, these dogs are still a target of discrimination. [Pennsylvania Dog Law](#) prohibits "breed specific legislation", yet shelters that are ignorant of the breed and have no knowledge of temperament testing still create blanket policies to kill anything that resembles a Pit bull. And, insurance companies can refuse coverage to homeowners who have Pits in their families. Chris Caterson of Little and Nelson Insurance in Montrose says that the larger the insurance company, the less prohibitive the guidelines, but all companies address the problem of vicious or biting dogs. Allstate Insurance, one of the largest, specifically refuses policies to anyone who owns a Pit bull, American Staffordshire Terrier, American Pit Bull Terrier or American Bulldog. Lebanon Mutual adds Chow Chows, Dobermans, Rottweilers and Boxers to the list. And Penn Millers, with by far the most extensive list according to Caterson, includes all of the others and adds Akitas, Great Danes and Siberian Huskies to the already overwhelming list. Yet, Caterson said he hasn't seen a dog bite claim in recent years.

The United States isn't alone in its frenzy. Steven Vits, a 21 year old resident of Leuven, Belgium, says that currently Pits are banned in certain cities. But, a year ago, laws were on the books banning 13 different breeds from the country. He said, "Right now there is a witch hunt in Belgium against 'dangerous' dog breeds," sparked by an incident where an 8 year old girl was killed by her family's rescued Rottweiler, so abused that dog trainers wouldn't go near the animal. The child was left alone with the dog. "So now dog paranoia has struck my country," Vits said. "I am 21 years old so when I walk my very friendly Pit people look at me like I am a criminal."

Owners, breeders, rescuers and shelter managers alike agree that negative incidents involving dogs are the fault of irresponsible owners. Untrained, off leash dogs left in situations that invite trouble are at the root of the majority of dog bite incidents — from the minor bite to fatalities. Breed bans, shelter death policies, and media hysteria only serve to perpetuate old wives tales like "pit bulls can lock their jaws", "pit bulls have 1600 p.s.i. in jaw pressure", and "when pit bulls taste blood, it causes them to go on a killing rampage and they can never be trusted again." All statements born of ignorance, but repeated so often that they are taken as fact.

So how is the public to be educated? Breed banning is akin to racism, and is unfair to the majority of individual dogs that suffer because of the few. Leslie Sinclair, D.V.M., Director of Companion Animal Veterinary issues for the [Humane Society of the United States](#) wrote: "Pit bulls have been bred for centuries to fight to the death against boars, bulls, and other dogs for centuries for the entertainment of spectators. They have been implicated in the deaths of close to 60 people in the United States from 1979 through 1994.

"Yet pit bulls also illustrate the danger of pigeonholing any particular breed as 'inherently dangerous.' They occupy a prominent place in the hearts and homes of thousands of U.S. families, providing testimony to the breed's shorter history of selection for companion animal qualities. In the vast majority of cases, pit bulls do not pose a threat to anyone in the community."

As Chief Dan George said, "If you talk to the animals they will talk to you and you will know each other.

"If you do not talk to them, you will not know them, and what you do not know, you will fear. What one fears, one destroys.

There is a wealth of information on all dog breeds in public libraries as well as on the Internet. Before selecting any breed, it is advisable to learn all about the breed to be sure

its characteristics fit with your lifestyle.

Thanks to all who contributed to this article, providing opinions, education and moral support, especially the Pet Bull loving members of the Pit Bull-L Mailing List. For information about joining this list go to <http://cyberpresence.net/pitbull-l/>

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