

Unwrapping Pit Bulls
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Never in recent history has there been a breed so maligned as the grouping of dogs called pit bull. Lower case pit bull is a generic term for any of several breeds and any mix of dog that is medium to larger in size, short haired, stocky and squarely built. The breeds most often lumped into this generic term are: American Staffordshire Terrier, American Pit Bull Terrier, Staffordshire Bull Terrier, Bull Terrier and its smaller “sibling” the Miniature Bull Terrier. The Am Staff and APBT are basically the same breed. They came from the same stock – descending from dogs found in Great Britain and imported to the United States. When the American Kennel Club recognized the breed, the name was changed to Staffordshire Terrier and later to American Staffordshire Terrier to reduce confusion with the Staffordshire Bull Terrier (a smaller breed) and to try and separate it from the APBT. The American Pit Bull Terrier is the United Kennel Club recognized version of the Am Staff.

The breeds that have become the modern APBT and Am Staff were originally what are called a “Catch dog.” Catch dogs were used by farmers, butchers and hunters to grab and hold cattle, hogs or larger game like wild boar and bear. Eventually, people began to brag about the way their dogs could work and started holding events such as bull and bear baiting. The dogs were judged on how fast they could grab and hang, the tenacity in which they worked, etc. Dogs that were strong, tenacious, had a desire to work, courageous as well as good with humans were bred. The dogs were never developed to be human aggressive. It would be dangerous for a farmer, butcher or hunter to have a catch dog that was human aggressive. The owner has to be able to step in and remove the dog without worrying about risk to self. Eventually the dogs were pitted against each other. When the “sport” of dog fighting became popular, temperament was still key. A dog that could not be safely managed by the handler was risky and eliminated from the breeding program.

So, where did things start to go wrong? As with just about everything, popularity was the beginning of the problem. During the early part of the 1900’s, the American Pit Bull Terrier and Am Staff became very popular in the United States as companions. “Petey” from “Our Gang” was an APBT dual registered with the United Kennel Club and American Kennel Club as Lucenay’s Peter. John Steinbeck owned a Bull Terrier. The original Nipper (“His Master’s Voice”) was a pit bull-fox terrier cross. Helen Keller owned an APBT. President Woodrow Wilson had a dog that won many awards for him. Who can forget “Spuds MacKenzie,” a Bull Terrier? Most recently a Bull Terrier is the mascot for the Target store chain. Stubby, an American Pit Bull Terrier from World War I is thought to be the most decorated war dog from that time. Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall owned a pit bull-type dog: “Harvey.” Unfortunately, popularity brings about bad breeders and bad owners. Just look at what has happened to the Dalmatian thanks to Walt Disney.

In the past decade or two, the breeds grouped into the heading pit have surged in popularity worldwide. The Bull Terrier and Mini Bull have not been as heavily coveted by the general public but are still feeling the backlash from the popularity of their cousins. The strong build and impressive looks of these dogs have made them popular status symbols with the wrong type of owners. These wrong owners may become bad breeders.

Human males (predominantly), to show their machismo, use cars, clothing, guns and now powerful looking dogs as both status symbols and weapons. A minority of undereducated people began breeding the dogs they felt were the most courageous and tough. However, these humans failed to understand courage (sometimes referred to as “gameness”) is NOT how fast a dog will fight or attack or how human aggressive they can make it but how confident the dog is while working in any activity. A few bad people started breeding dogs that were overly dog aggressive and encouraging human aggressive. (Please note: human aggression and dog aggression are two separate traits in dogs). Sadly, these people are a very visible minority in the world of the “bull” breeds. It is this visible minority that is the reason lawmakers call for breed bans.

What is the best environment for one of these dogs? First, the owner must NOT be looking for a dog as a status symbol. These people have no business owning any living creature. These are the people that are intentionally breeding poor temperaments in these dogs. Second, the home must NOT be looking for something to keep outside all day like a sentry. These people should get an alarm system installed. A well-bred pit bull can make a terrible sentry. It is more likely to beat someone to death with a wagging tail or drown him in kisses! However, the owners looking for a live alarm system are often the ones doing things that create dangerous dogs. The various breeds lumped into pit thrive on human companionship. The best home for one of these dogs is with someone who has more than an hour or two a day to devote to a dog. A home where the dog will be properly chosen from a good breeder, trained and socialized. The best home is one where the dogs will be given a “job” to utilize their desire to work. These dogs can excel in Agility, Flyball, Weight pulling, and Obedience competitions. Some of these dogs are even being used as drug detecting dogs and search and rescue dogs.

The breeds of dog lumped into the generic pit bull heading are a wonderful, hardworking, affectionate, devoted and even silly group of dogs. They are not the best dogs to take to your local dog park. They may not start a fight but neither will they back down from a perceived challenge. If a group of dogs is chasing a ball and the pit wants it, the pit will get it. If another dog approaches a pit in a menacing way, the pit will often rise to the challenge. Owners have to realize this and understand that these dogs are great with humans but may not be so with other dogs. However, this trait is found in many dogs, not just these few breeds. Understanding the background and temperament of any breed of dog is vital to being able to properly manage the dog.

These dogs are not the vicious killers the media and many lawmakers want us to believe. The problem is strong dogs that have strong work drives are falling into the wrong hands. A very visible minority of people who have no business at all owning another life is

destroying the public perception of these breeds. This is where we end up with problem dogs: when any breed or cross of dog falls into the hands of the wrong owners.

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