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## The greatest dog breeds you only think you know

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When it comes to choosing the right dog, it's not reality that bites. It's the seemingly endless list of myths and misconceptions that result in too many people bringing a dog into their family that's exactly the wrong one for them while passing up a dog who might have been a perfect match.

Take two of the dog world's least-known treasures, rescued pit bulls and retired racing greyhounds. Far more of these dogs are available for adoption than ever find homes.

Pit bulls and pit bull mixes are the most common dogs killed in many shelters because no one will adopt them. As for greyhounds, there is a vast network of rescue organizations trying to help them find homes, but there are always more dogs than adopters.

Sadly, far too many of these dogs are rejected or never considered at all, not because they're actually the wrong dog for a particular home, but because the potential adopter doesn't actually see the dog sitting in front of him. Instead, he sees the idea of the dog he has in his head.

### **Pit bulls**

There's no more maligned type of dog than the vast and diverse group of dogs known, rightly or wrongly, as "pit bulls." I say "type of dog" rather than breed because the pit bull is not a single breed of dog, but a group of breeds and mixed breeds favored by dog fighters for their toughness, scrappiness, muscular bodies and willingness to fight with other dogs.

And I say "wrongly" because recent research suggests that many of the dogs in shelters that are identified as pit bulls or pit bull mixes don't actually carry the DNA of any of the breeds normally classified as pit bulls.

Instead, a Labrador retriever or boxer ancestor blessed the dog with a short coat and boxy head, and the next thing you know, some fetch-crazy goofball without a drop of dog-aggression in his stocky body is left without a home, labeled as a pit bull.

But it's not just ersatz pit bulls that are the victims of prejudice. The real thing is just as frequently misjudged and stereotyped.

Just ask Donna Reynolds, co-founder of the legendary organization [Bay Area Doglovers Responsible About Pit Bulls](#) (BAD RAP).

"All you have to do to get an idea of how many types of pit bulls exist in people's minds is to walk down the street with one," said Reynolds. "Some people rush over to say hello. Others cross the street. These dogs evoke strong reactions and controversy just by wagging their tails."

So, just who is the real pit bull? Good question. "These dogs have such a wide range of personality types, from couch potato to ones who want to run around all day -- as long as it's with you -- and everything in between," she said. "People need to look at each dog as an individual, not a breed."

The "classic" or "real" American pit bull terrier is an outgoing, confident, people-loving dog that puts his heart and soul into everything he does.

"That includes climbing into your lap, digging out of an inadequately fenced yard, competing in canine agility trials or just following you around the house," Reynolds said. "Intelligence, determination, trainability and a good sense of humor are the hallmarks of the breed."

Pit bulls may be crazy about people, but that's not always the case with other dogs. "They're terriers, and like all terriers, aggression towards other animals is not uncommon," she cautioned. "And like all dogs, pit bulls and their owners need training to become a good people/dog ambassador team."

The reality is that even pit bulls from known fighting backgrounds, covered in fight scars, often turn out to be complete sweethearts -- even with other dogs. One of the best-known examples of this is [Hector](#), a squirming, face-kissing bundle of love who is a certified therapy dog today, but started out his life as a fighter at Michael Vick's Bad Newz Kennels.

Thousands of dogs seized from fighting rings, including many other Vick dogs as well as those from lesser-known busts, are safe, friendly, much-loved family pets today.

Of course, that's not the case with all pit bulls. Some are only good choices for the most experienced of "tough dog" owners, and others are too damaged by their early lives to be safe pets in anyone's hands.

If you're interested in adopting a pit bull, there are plenty of resources available to help you do it right. A good shelter or rescue group, such as [Pit Bull Rescue Central](#) or the "Ambassador" program at the Oakland Animal Services, will steer potential adopters to a dog with the right traits for that home.

Unfortunately, there is one tough reality that anyone adopting a pit bull, or even a pit bull look-alike, may not want to face. Some cities, counties, apartment complexes and homeowners' associations ban or regulate pit bulls, and often they base their decisions on a dog's appearance rather than his actual breed, often even in the face of DNA testing that shows they're wrong.

"The hardest thing to cope with is discrimination based on what your dog looks like rather than his personality or behavior," Reynolds said. "You have to have a thick skin and a good backbone."

### **Racing greyhounds**

Racing greyhounds are among the animal kingdom's greatest athletes, which is why so many people, especially if they lead sedentary lives, worry they could never give a retired racing greyhound enough exercise.

But while high-energy working dogs like the border collie or the husky go pretty much stir-crazy if deprived of extreme activity levels and mental stimulation, most track greyhounds have already done all the running they care to do, thank you very much.

Sure, they'll get up off the couch and go for a walk with you. They'll race around happily if let off-leash in a safely fenced area. They might even deign to go jogging with you, if it's not raining.

But they're just as happy to cuddle on the couch and join you in watching "Project Runway" every night. A quick turn around the block or trip to the backyard twice a day for a potty break can be plenty of exercise for a retired racer.

"People worry they'll be wild and crazy dogs that are going to be flying all over the place, and need to be taken several times a day to a big field where they can run in order to be happy," said Barbara Judson of [Greyhound Friends for Life](#), a Bay Area organization dedicated to finding homes for retired racing greyhounds. "The reality is that they're couch potatoes."

Modest exercise needs aren't the only reason these dogs can make great pets, however "Greyhounds are very affectionate, very gentle dogs," Judson said. "They get along well with people and with other dogs, and are extremely sweet and quiet in the house. They shed very little, and need almost no grooming. They don't even have 'doggy odor.'"

Greyhounds aren't small dogs, but they're typically much calmer and quieter in the house than many small breeds of dog. Someone who wants a small dog because she lives in a small space, for instance, might find a tiny powerhouse like a Jack Russell terrier - think Eddie on "Frasier," or PBS' "Wishbone" -- appealing, only to discover this bred-to-the-bone working dog is much more likely to eat the sofa than sit on it while she unwinds after a long work day. Not so the greyhound, who is only too happy to unwind right along with her.

Greyhounds do take a little getting used to compared to more familiar pet dogs. They don't fetch, for instance.

"What they do is grab toys and fling them around and pounce on them over and over," said Judson. "When you come home, they'll dance around and act completely overjoyed to see you for a few

minutes, and then go lie down on their bed and go back to sleep."

Although racing greyhounds have become more popular pets in the last few years -- there are now more of them in homes than on the track -- most people have never met one.

If you think a greyhound might be a good choice for you, take advantage of one of GFFL's "[meet and greet](#)" events, or a similar event held by one of the many greyhound adoption groups throughout the country.

Of course, Greyhounds, like all dogs, come in all kinds of personality types. Some are shy, and some are rowdy. Some are good with cats and small dogs, and many aren't. Some don't do well in a very active household, and some just decide that they'll go take a nap in the other room until things quiet down.

A good greyhound rescue group will help you make a match with a dog who is right for you and your family.

Keep in mind, this probably isn't the right breed for anyone looking for a dog to take on off-leash hikes, or who expects the dog to use an unfenced yard or potty area.

"Greyhounds have been bred for centuries to chase movement," said Judson. "They can see half a mile in the distance, and have great peripheral vision. You just can't train that instinct to chase anything that moves out of a greyhound."

### **Choose the dog, not the breed**

The bottom line is this: Any one of the hundreds of dog breeds and mixed breeds could be a good or bad choice for you and your family.

Just be sure to ask yourself, as you wander the aisles of the local shelter or click around the Web looking for a dog, if you're choosing or rejecting a particular dog not because of who he is, but who you think he is.

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