

## The Care of Pit Bulls in the Shelter Environment

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## Thank You!!!

- Dr. Lila Miller, ASPCA
- Jacque Schultz, ASPCA
- Dr. Julie Dinnage, Kelley Bollen, Scott Giacoppo, MSPCA
  - Shelter Medicine for Veterinarians and Staff (Blackwell Publishing, 2004)

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## "BeeBee" My personal bias in favor of Pit Bulls and Pit-Mixes



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## Introduction

- The vast majority of pit bulls seen in private practice are affectionate pets that present no problem to the practitioner

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QuickTime™ and a  
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor  
are needed to see this picture.

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## Introduction

- However, the dogs presenting in the shelter are often seized by the humane law enforcement department for fighting and have to be held for long periods of time, sometimes more than a year

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## Introduction

- Pit Bulls can undergo a great deal of stress in the shelter from confinement
- Cases of experienced handlers who had developed good relationships with the dogs over a period of months still being attacked without warning or obvious provocation

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## History of the Breed

- Knowledge of hx of the Pit-bull breed can help shelters safely house and handle Pit bulls
  - Safe for the dogs
    - Physical and psychological well-being
  - Safe for the handlers

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## History of the Breed

- "Sport" of dog fighting
- Mid 1800's, bull-baiting events popular
- Bull-baiting: pitted two or more bulldogs against a tethered poll
- Occurred in arena for entertainment

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## History of the Breed

- 1800's fighting bulldogs were different than bulldog breed of today
  - In size
  - In structure
  - 1800's dog more closely resembled today's Bullmastiff

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## History of the Breed

- Humane Act of 1886
  - Outlawed bull-baiting
  - Owners of the fighting bulldogs tried to find an alternative use for their dogs
  - Still high demand for barbaric and bloody sporting events
    - Venue for gambling
    - entertainment

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## History of the Breed

- After Humane Act of 1886
  - New alternative to bull-baiting led to dog fighting
  - Owners pitted bulldogs against other bulldogs
    - Gambling
    - Spectators waged bets on outcome of fights

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## History of the Breed

- Lack of excitement in this new sport of dog fighting
  - Bulldogs were large and clumsy
  - Fights were slow, less thrilling
- Owners looked for ways to change the breed
  - To make better fighters
  - To attract spectators and gamblers

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## History of the Breed

- Goals of changing the fighting bulldog breed
  - Maintain certain characteristics of original bull-baiting bulldog
  - Add traits that would make the dog a more effective fighter in the "pit"

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## History of the Breed

- Selective breeding began in Staffordshire, England
  - Coal mining area of England
  - Bull-baiting bulldogs crossed with various terriers
  - New breed = Staffordshire Bull Terrier

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## Staffordshire Bull Terrier

- Characteristics for fighting dogs:
  - Strength in relation to size
    - Strength of bulldog, but smaller, more compact
  - Bite style
    - Hold, SHAKE, and tear bite style
    - Increased muscle and tissue damage

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## Staffordshire Bull Terrier

- Characteristics for fighting dog:
  - Agility and athleticism
    - Agile to avoid serious injury during fight
    - High level of endurance and athleticism
  - Aggression toward other animals
    - Aggression toward other dogs
    - NO aggression towards humans

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## Staffordshire Bull Terrier

- Characteristics for fighting dogs
  - Ignore signs of submission from other dogs
    - Different than normal dog behavior
    - Fight to the death
  - Give no warning prior to attack
    - Different than normal dog behavior
    - Shows no signs, just attacks

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## Staffordshire Bull Terrier

- Characteristics for fighting dogs:
  - "Gameness"
    - Most sought after trait of all fighting dogs
    - Refers to willingness to continue fighting despite physical pain and suffering
    - "Deep Game" = "Dead Game"

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## Staffordshire Bull Terrier = Pit Bull Terrier

- New breed
- Sport of organized dog fighting grew
- Further attempts to create even better fighting dog
- Bred outside of Staffordshire, England
- Bred for fighting in the "pit"

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## Pit Bull Terrier

- America's dog, early 1900's
  - WWI posters
  - Advertisements
  - "Stubby" (decorated war hero, first "therapy dog")
  - "Petey" (Little Rascals)

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## Today's Pit Bulls

- Professionally bred fighting dogs
  - Aggressive and athletic traits mentioned earlier
- Beloved family pets
  - Staffordshire Bull Terrier came to America in late 1800's
  - Attempts to remove aggressive traits
- Pit Bull mixes

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## Today's Pit Bulls

- Name
  - Staffordshire Terrier (AKC 1935)
  - American Staffordshire Terrier (AKC 1972, Am Staff)
  - American Pit Bull Terrier or Pit Bull Terrier
- Life span- 12-14 years
- Textbook weight
  - Mature males- 65 pounds and up
  - Mature females-55 pounds and up
- True weight-30 to 130 pounds (?)

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## Pit Bull or Am Staff



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## Reproductive Physiology

- Reach maturity at about 2 years of age
- Onset of estrus is about 10 months
- Average litter is 7-8 pups
- Monorchids may not drop their testicles until 4-5 months of age

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## Breed Health Problems

- False pregnancy
- Hip dysplasia
- Cranial cruciate rupture
- Mast cell tumors
- Increased susceptibility to parvo virus and Babesia infection
- Bite wound abscesses

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## Breed Health Problems

- Dermatological conditions
  - Demodectic mange
  - Ringworm
  - Allergic contact dermatitis (grass)
  - Flea allergy dermatitis and hot spots
  - Pressure calluses
  - Acral lick nodules (boredom?)

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## Pit Bulls Have High Pain Threshold

"The American Staffordshire Terrier has an extremely high pain threshold when excited, and can injure itself with its own strength without realizing it"

*Medical and Genetic Aspects of Purebred Dogs, 1994, Clark and Stainer, editors*

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## Pit Bull Terriers

- Common breed entering shelters
- Still bred for fighting today
- Many Pits entering shelters are dogs bred for fighting
- Many mixed-breed dogs are labeled as Pit Bull Terriers

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## Pit Bull Terriers

- Many Pits entering shelters have been abused or neglected
- Survey by Jacque Schultz, CPDT
  - Pit Bulls #1 breed most likely to be abused/neglected in NYC

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## Fighting Classifications

- The Professional
  - Owner makes substantial investment (time and money)
  - Travels the country for fights
  - Knowledgeable about law enforcement investigation techniques

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## Fighting Classifications

- The Professional
  - Dogs on performance enhancing steroids
  - Dogs on chronic ABS therapy
  - \$\$\$ from high stakes matches and stud fees

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## Fighting Classifications

- The Hobbyist
  - Local fighting circuit
  - Owner spends minimal time and money training and conditioning the dog
  - Gambling is the main focus

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## Fighting Classifications

- The Street Fighter
  - Usually associated with other forms of illegal activity
  - Local street gangs
    - Source of entertainment
    - Status symbol
  - These dogs can be aggressive towards humans and more likely to cause fatal attacks to people than other fighting types

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## Fighting Classifications

- The Street Fighter
  - These dogs frequently kept in sub-standard conditions
  - May show obvious signs of physical abuse
  - Dogs used for "other" reasons
    - Used as guard dogs
    - Used as "dangerous weapons"
    - Used as drug carriers

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## Training and Conditioning of the Fighting Pit

- Shelter veterinarians and staff need to understand how fighting dogs are trained and conditioned
- Extensive training regimen
  - Build strength
  - Build endurance
  - Reinforce aggressive behavior

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### Training and Conditioning of the Fighting Pit

- Training starts at young age and continues through dog's fighting career
- Pups are introduced to rough play and extensive exercise
- Live small animals are used as toys
- Pups are trained to jump up, grab, and hold onto live animal

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### Training and Conditioning of the Fighting Pit

- Bait animals
  - Cats
  - Rabbits
  - Weaker dogs
  - Used to build confidence during training
  - Used to reinforce aggression

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### Training and Conditioning of the Fighting Pit

- Bait animals
  - Can be killed or found injured and abandoned
  - Fighters have been known to steal neighborhood pets to use as bait animals

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### Training and Conditioning of the Fighting Pit

- As young pups become older and more confident, they are put up against fully conditioned dogs in controlled fight
- = "Rolling"

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### Training and Conditioning of the Fighting Pit

- Strenuous endurance building activities
  - Homemade treadmills
    - Many hours per day
    - Exercised to exhaustion
    - +/- bait animals suspended from front of treadmill

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### Training and Conditioning of the Fighting Pit

- Strenuous endurance building activities
  - Spring Poll
    - Reinforces the hold, shake and tear bite style
    - Muscle building conditioning for hind legs
    - Strengthens force of dog's bite

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## Training and Conditioning of the Fighting Pit

- Unique nutritional programs
  - Maximum level of nutrients and calories
  - Supplements added
  - Often sold by well known fighters through underground magazines

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## Caring for Pit Bulls in the Shelter

- The care of aggressive pit bulls in the shelter should be restricted to 1 or 2 staff (or volunteers) who have been trained in animal behavior and restraint techniques.
- Staff should always work in pairs with aggressive animals.

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## Caring for Pit Bulls in the Shelter

- It is important to establish a good rapport with any animal in the shelter, but especially with pit bulls that may be held for long periods of time
- Establishing a routine and spending time with the dog will go a long way to establishing a relationship of trust

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## Caring for Pit Bulls in the Shelter

- Pit bulls should not be allowed to have unrestricted or unrestrained contact with other dogs
- When cleaning cages they should not be permitted to run free in the ward with other dogs, and should be walked and exercised by experienced personnel only

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## Caring for Pit Bulls in the Shelter

- If being walked in a corridor, for example, no other dogs should be in close proximity
- For personal safety, staff should always work in pairs with any aggressive animal, but particularly with pit bulls
- Pits don't always give the traditional signs of warning before they bite

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## Caring for Pit Bulls in the Shelter

- Restriction of access to the dogs is important in court cases in order to preserve the chain of custody of the evidence, as well as for human safety

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## Caring for Pit Bulls in the Shelter

- Pit Bulls are high energy dogs who can be extremely destructive when bored!

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## Pit Bulls Require:

- Lots of exercise and attention
- Special housing considerations
- Isolation from other animals if dog aggressive or have a high prey drive
- Careful monitoring for weight changes

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## Pit Bulls Will:

- Climb fences
- Chew up stainless steel food and water bowls as well as bedding
- Many shelters use disposable paper food trays and large rubber buckets for water because the dogs can be so destructive

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## Pit Bulls Will:

- Destroy copper tubing of automatic water systems and conventional cages
- Attack other animals through chain link fences
- They can break through conventional cage doors and destroy typical epoxy paint on the floors and walls

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## Pit Bulls Can Be Very Destructive



Water bowl destroyed by a pit bull

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## Housing

- Avoid typical mesh link fencing
- Use kennel or cage systems with guillotine doors
  - Important to minimize the need to handle aggressive animals
- Consider cement or solid metal cages with high cinderblock walls
  - Prevents dogs from climbing walls
  - Blocks their view of other animals

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## Housing

- Secure and padlock doors
  - To foil escape artists
  - To prevent dogs from being stolen



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## Housing

- Avoid placing pit bulls directly opposite or adjacent to other dogs
  - Especially opposite other fighting dogs

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## Housing

- Provide bedding- towels or blankets
  - Thin hair coats
  - Subject to developing pressure sores and other skin conditions
  - Check to make sure not eating bedding
- Provide environmental enrichment
  - Kongs, bowling balls, buster cubes, etc...

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## Housing

- Install a panic button in rooms housing pit bulls along with other restraint equipment in any room housing pit bulls
- In case of an emergency, staff will know to go to the assistance of other staff immediately
- Pit bulls are tenacious when fighting, and they have very powerful jaws

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## Housing

- Staff should also be trained in ways to break up a dog fight
- Methods to use on pit bulls that are fighting include bite sticks to pry open their jaws, poles, or water directed in their face and nostrils with a hose
- In extreme cases where all else has failed, mace or pepper spray may be sprayed toward their face

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## Behavior

- Fighting dogs are bred for dog to dog aggression, not human aggression
- They often bond very closely to humans
- They often do not signal or warn of an attack, and may not respond to normal signs of submission when fighting

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## Behavior and Placement Considerations

- Temperament test or otherwise evaluate their behavior before considering placement
- Placement must consider all characteristics and adopt to experienced owners only
  - May be dog aggressive and friendly to humans
  - May be people and dog friendly
  - May be dog and human aggressive

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## Placement Suggestions

- Screen all adopters closely as for any adoption, and then for prior dog owning experience as well
- Sterilize all pit bulls before release from the shelter!
- Make follow up calls and visits

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## Placement Suggestions

- Look at adopters environment to determine if a Pit Bull is a good match
  - Urban area, dog parks
  - Small children in the home
  - Other pets

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## Placement Suggestions

- Dog may be OK until social maturity at 18-24 mos of age
  - Concern about adopting out puppies from known fighting lines
  - Need experienced guardians
  - Counsel adopters

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## Placement Suggestions

In this author's opinion, the placement of dogs with a history of dog fighting should be strongly discouraged, if not outright prohibited

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## Nutrition in the Shelter

- Feed high quality dry food twice a day
- Feed on a higher plane of nutrition- avoid generic food
  - Used to lots of exercise and activity
  - Can lose weight due to stress
- Use treats judiciously to avoid unwanted weight gain in sedentary dogs

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## Guidelines for Cruelty Cases and Holding Animals Long-Term

- Document a complete and accurate description of the dog
- Good medical records can be essential to the successful prosecution of a cruelty case
- They may be admitted as evidence in the case

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## Guidelines for Cruelty Cases and Holding Animals Long-Term

- Maintain ongoing records, with photographs, throughout the course of the animal's stay and initial them

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## Guidelines for Cruelty Cases and Holding Animals Long-Term

- Medical records should be neat and legible
- Avoid the use of white out to correct mistakes
- Mistakes should be crossed out and initialed

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## Guidelines for Cruelty Cases and Holding Animals Long-Term

- Cruelty cases may stay in the shelter for weeks to months
- Important to maintain a written record of their health status even if they are no longer being treated

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## Guidelines for Cruelty Cases and Holding Animals Long-Term

- Perform a complete physical exam (PE) on entry to the facility
- PE should include an all systems evaluation, not just a record of the abnormal values and findings

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### Guidelines for Cruelty Cases and Holding Animals Long-Term

- If necessary and not medically contraindicated, the dog should be tranquilized to perform the exam
- PE should be performed within the first 24 hours of the dog's entering the shelter.

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### Guidelines for Cruelty Cases and Holding Animals Long-Term

- Document all entries legibly in the medical record. This is a legal document. Do not white out or erase incorrect entries
- Record the dog's initial and subsequent weights
- Scan for a microchip and check for a tattoo (inner ear, thigh and groin most common)

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### Guidelines for Cruelty Cases and Holding Animals Long-Term

- Take good quality photographs before, after and throughout the course of treatment
- Photographs are important visual records that have a dramatic impact on judges and juries

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### Guidelines for Cruelty Cases and Holding Animals Long-Term

- Maintain the chain of custody of the evidence- know where the evidence is at all times
- The chain of custody of the evidence refers to the ability to identify, with certainty, the whereabouts of the evidence at all times

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### Guidelines for Cruelty Cases and Holding Animals Long-Term

- Evidence should be initialed and kept under lock and key.
- Consult closely with prosecutors and investigators on proper procedure

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### Cruelty Cases

- Try to ascertain the actual cause of the injury or condition
  - Include neglect or abuse
  - Rule out medical conditions (such as diabetes or neoplasia)

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## Cruelty Cases

- Be prepared to answer the questions:
  - How long did it take for this condition to develop?
  - Was this animal suffering needlessly?
  - Prognosis?

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## Signalment or Description

- Court cases can be lost if the description of the animal is not accurate
- Owner's name or complaint number
- Species and breed
- All colors
- Gender-include spay or neuter status
- All other pertinent identifying characteristics
  - Scars, different eye color?
  - Dewclaws, etc....

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## Signalment

Fighting dog's ears are often cropped very close to their head

Make note of this

Are the ears cropped?

How close?

Does it appear professional?

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## Physical Examination

- Evaluate dog's overall condition
- Describe all wounds in detail
  - Cause
  - Number
  - Type (abrasions, punctures, bites, lacerations, cuts)
  - Wounds in various stages of healing common in fighting dogs
  - Location (fighting dog bite wounds may be found on face, head and neck, throat, legs)

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## Physical Examination

- Evaluate and record TPR, hydration and condition of mucus membranes
- Evaluate body condition using TACC score
- Check toenails for infections or declawing
- Check mouth for broken teeth from fighting
- Check vocal ability- guard dogs may be debarked

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## Physical Examination

- The medical record should read like the classic text book record, with TPR, capillary refill, degree of dehydration, percentage the animal is underweight, etc..
- Veterinarians who examine animals in cruelty cases are frequently called upon to testify as expert witnesses

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## Physical Examination

- The medical records that are kept during the normal course of business in a private practice or shelter frequently omit information that would be desirable for a court case.

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**Tuff's Animal Care and Condition™ (TACC) scales for assessing body condition, weather and environmental safety, and physical care in dogs.**

Workshop 101: An Animal's role in maintaining its personal, occupational, and overall animal care. American Veterinary Association, 1997

**1. Body condition scale (Palpation essential for long-haired dogs; each dog's condition should be interpreted in light of the typical appearance of the breed)**

**TACC Scale for dogs**

- 5 Emaciated
- 4 Very underweight
- 3 Thin
- 2 Underweight/lean
- 1 Ideal

All bony prominences evident from a distance.  
No discernible body fat.  
Obscure loss of muscle mass.  
Severe abdominal tuck and extreme humpback shape.

Ribs, lumbar vertebrae, and pelvis bones easily visible.  
No palpable body fat.  
Some loss of muscle mass.  
Pronounced abdominal tuck and humpback shape to torso.

Tops of lumbar vertebrae visible, pelvic bones becoming prominent.  
Ribs easily palpable and may be visible with no palpable fat.  
Obscure waist and abdominal tuck.  
Minimal loss of muscle mass.

Ribs easily palpable with minimal SQ fat.  
Abdominal tuck evident.  
Waist clearly visible from above.  
No muscle loss.  
May be normal for long-haired breeds such as sight hounds.

Ribs palpable without contact SQ fat.  
Abdominal tuck slightly visible.  
Visible from the side.  
Waist visible from above, just behind ribs.

Single condition scale adopted from: Lathrop, D.P. Proc. N.A. Vet. Conf. Assoc. 1992; 91: 100-101; and: DePuy, R.A. J. Small Anim. Clin. 1984; 9: 80-87, 1986. Adapted by Erik P. Johnson.

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## Medical Records

- Include the history, including the source if not obtained from the owner
- Include a behavioral evaluation as part of the medical record

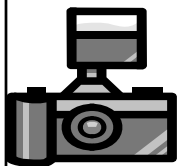
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## Medical Records

- The behavior evaluation is an important part of the medical record and should be under ongoing reevaluation
- If it is inappropriate to evaluate the animal immediately upon entry, a notation should be made to that effect, and why

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## Photographs



- Use 35 mm camera and film
- Digital photography is admissible in court
- Take both close ups and distant views
- Use a label with name, date, etc
- Use a ruler in photo to measure lesions
- Use flash if necessary
- Take lots of pictures

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**A picture can be worth a thousand words**

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## Treatment Protocols

- Vaccinate
- Perform fecal and use broad spectrum dewormer as a matter of routine
- Consider performing heartworm test
- In all cruelty cases, perform lab work and take radiographs

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## Radiographs

- If abuse is suspected, take whole body radiographs and look for fractures in various stages of healing- pay special attention to ribs
- Use radiology specialists as experts to testify to age of fractures

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## Treatment Protocols

- Treat all medical problems promptly
- Dogs that have been used for fighting are frequently treated by their owners with antibiotics they obtain from various sources
- The repeated and inappropriate use of these drugs may create some resistance problems

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## Treatment Protocols

- Monitor weight regularly as long-term boarders may gain or lose
- Dogs that enter the shelter as victims of neglect or abuse usually experience a weight gain initially
- However long term boarders may eventually begin to lose weight, or become overweight due to inactivity

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## Vaccinations

- Vaccinate on entry for major core diseases if health permits
- Consider parvo booster for long-term residents in 6 months
- Consider intranasal bordetella vaccine if kennel cough is a problem and the dog is tractable enough for this route of administration

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## Vaccinations

- Vaccinate for rabies upon release or follow regulations for rabies vaccination if a bite case
- If the dog has bitten someone, he must be held for 10 days and vaccinated at the end of that period.

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## Vaccinations

- If the dog has been bitten by an unknown animal and has no vaccination history, he should be treated as a rabies exposure and should either be euthanized for rabies testing or held in quarantine for 6 months and vaccinated one month prior to the end of the quarantine.
- If the dog is currently vaccinated, he must be revaccinated and held for 45 days for observation.

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## Observations About Pit Bulls



Pit bulls are often extremely well muscled, making diagnosis and treatment more difficult

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## Observations About Pit Bulls

- Gunshot victims may present as clinically normal
  - No outward sign of distress
- Elicitation of pain can be an unreliable diagnostic indicator
  - They also show little reaction to normal pain stimulus
- In cases of cranial cruciate rupture, these dogs can be so well muscled it is difficult to elicit a drawer sign

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## Observations about Pit Bulls

- If excited, Pits may initially require high doses of tranquilizers to calm or sedate them
  - But then they can become too heavily sedated
- Some veterinarians report resistance to acepromazine
- Others report sensitivity to ace
- Be careful when sedating

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## Observations About Pit Bulls

- Temperament changes may be observed as sick animals regain their strength, going from meek to aggressive
- Staff frequently become very attached to these dogs during the initial stages of their recovery when they are very docile, affectionate and calm

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## Observations about Pit Bulls

- As they regain their strength and vigor, they may revert to their normal behavior and sometimes become more aggressive
- It is very difficult to make the decision to euthanize after the staff has bonded with an animal that has been rescued from an abusive situation

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## Observations About Pit Bulls

- Use treatment regimens that minimize risk
  - Once or twice a day dosing
  - Oral drugs that can be hidden in food
  - Ivermectin for mange instead of dips

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## Observations About Pit Bulls

- Pit bulls often enter the shelter under heavy or over-sedation
- Treat aggressively with warmth and IV fluids
- Use extreme caution to avoid being bitten as they regain full consciousness
- Although this may occur with any breed, a pit bull bite will cause more damage

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## Observations About Pit Bulls

- Pit bulls that have been properly bred and well socialized can be very affectionate and loyal pets.

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## Pit Bull Program Options

- Pay to Spay Pit Programs
- Breed Rescue Groups
- Pits in Prison Programs
- Legislative activities
  - Promote aggressive dog legislation, NOT breed-specific bans

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## The Two Sides of the Story



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## Great References

- Shelter Medicine for Veterinarians and Staff
  - Edited by Lila Miller and Stephen Zawistowski
    - Blackwell Publishing
    - 1-800-862-6657
- [www.aspca.org](http://www.aspca.org)
- [www.sheltermedicine.com](http://www.sheltermedicine.com)

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