

Pit bull faq

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Q: What is a pit bull type dog?

A pit bull type dog is a combination of dog breeds that includes the American pit bull terrier, American Staffordshire terrier, Staffordshire bull terrier, American bulldog¹ and any other pure bred or mixed breed dog that is a combination of these dogs. Weight and shape can vary significantly amongst pit bull type dogs, from 35 to 100 plus pounds. (Please see Disguise Breed Name to learn more about the deliberate renaming and mislabeling of pit bulls throughout history.)



From left: American pit bull terrier, American Staffordshire terrier, Staffordshire bull terrier and American bulldog.

Q: What is the history of the pit bull?

The blood sport of "bull baiting" began over 1,000 years ago in England (various sources dispute this date). What is undisputed is that by 1500, bull baiting had progressed to Britain's national pastime. Bulldogs were reportedly first mentioned by name in 1631, referring to their function rather than a distinct dog breed. By 1800, and through further selective breeding, the bulldog developed into a compact muscular dog characterized by tremendous jaw strength.²

Due to public outrage, bull baiting was banned in England in 1835. Bulldog breeders and owners then moved to the sport of "ratting," where a number of rats were placed into a pit and wagers were made on how many rats the dog could kill in a certain time period. To increase agility, quickness and prey-drive in the bulldog, ratters crossed the breed with terriers. Essentially, it was the sport of ratting that combined the bulldog and terrier into the modern day pit bull terrier.

¹ Progressive pit bull legislation includes the American bulldog in its definition of a pit bull.

² The History of Bull Baiting, by Amy Fernandez, DogChannel.com.

On the heels of ratting, dogfighting developed. Pit bulls and dogfighting were exported to America as settlers made their way to the New World. In 1884, the American Kennel Club was formed but rejected pit bulls due to their use in dogfighting. In response, Chauncey Z. Bennett formed the United Kennel Club in 1898 to bring formal recognition to the pit bull breed. At that time, Bennett also drew up rules and regulations for dogfighting to bring "organization" to the blood sport.³

Q: What is dogfighting and what does it have to do with pit bulls?

Pit bulls are the dog of choice amongst *dogmen*, individuals who fight their pit bulls against other pit bulls. Dogmen consider pit bull terriers, who they commonly call "100% bulldogs," to be the ultimate canine gladiator. Pit bulls were selectively bred for "gameness," the ability to finish a fight. A truly gamedog will continue fighting "on stumps," two or more broken legs, and far worse.⁴ (Please see excerpts from *The Complete Gamedog*, by Ed and Chris Faron to learn more).

The blood sport of dogfighting involves a contest between two dogs, primarily pit bulls, fighting each other in front of spectators for entertainment and gambling purposes. Other felonious activities, such as illegal drugs, often accompany dogfight matches. A single dogfight averages about an hour in length but can last two or more.⁵ A dogfight begins when a referee says, "Face your dogs," then says, "Let go." The fight ends when one of the dogs will not or cannot continue.

The arrest and conviction of Michael Vick shows that dogfighting still proliferates in the U.S. Law enforcement education, however, is on the rise. In July 2009, authorities unleashed an 8-state simultaneous dogfighting sting and seized over 450 dogs.⁶ In December 2008, Edward Faron of Wildside Kennels, known as the "godfather" of dogfighting, was arrested and charged. Authorities seized 127 pit bulls from his property. Faron pleaded guilty to 14 counts of felony dogfighting.⁷

Q: Why do I always read about pit bulls in the news?

When a pit bull attacks, the injury inflicted may be catastrophic. First responders, such as police officers and firefighters, understand this as do members of the media, who are quick to report these attacks. Ongoing social tension also keeps pit bulls in the news. The pit bull problem is nearly 30-years old.⁸ In this time, most lawmakers have been "too afraid" to take breed-specific action to correct the problem. Due to this failure, horrific maulings continue to make headlines.

About half of all media reports regarding pit bulls involve police officers shooting dangerous pit bulls in the line of duty.⁹ Since the late 1970's pit bulls have been used extensively in criminal operations for drug dealers, gang members and other violent offenders. The pit bull terrier is the

³ American Pit Bull Terrier Handbook, by Joe Stahlkuppe, Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 2000.

⁴ *The Complete Gamedog: A Guide to Breeding & Raising the American pit bull terrier*, by Ed and Chris Faron, Walsworth Pub. Co., 1995.

⁵ Dogfighting Fact Sheet, The Humane Society of the United States.

⁶ Eight-State Dogfighting Raid Largest in U.S. History, by Wayne Pacelle, The Humane Society of the United States, July 9, 2009.

⁷ Dog-fighting 'godfather' given prison, by Monte Mitchell, *Winston-Salem Journal*, February 13, 2009.

⁸ Pit Bulls -- Family Pets and Fierce Fighters, by Tom Greely, *Los Angeles Times*, July 25, 1982.

⁹ Combined data from: Mid Year Results: U.S. Pit Bull Attacks 2009 and Mid Year Results: U.S. Police and Citizen Shootings of Pit Bulls 2009, by DogsBite.org, August 2009.

breed of choice for criminals. This choice is directly linked to the pit bull's selectively bred traits of robust jaw strength, a deadly bite style, tenacity (gameness) and a high tolerance to pain.¹⁰

Q: Why do people say that pit bulls "don't let go?"

Through selective breeding, pit bulls have developed enormous jaw strength, as well as a ruinous "hold and shake" bite style, designed to inflict the maximum damage possible on their victims. This bite trait delivered winning results in the fighting pit. When the Colorado Supreme Court upheld the Denver pit bull ban in 2005, the high court set aside characteristics that pit bulls displayed when they attack that differ from all other dog breeds. One of these characteristics was their lethal bite:

"[pit bulls] inflict more serious wounds than other breeds. They tend to attack the deep muscles, to hold on, to shake, and to cause ripping of tissues. Pit bull attacks were compared to shark attacks."¹¹

Leading pit bull education websites, such as Pit Bull Rescue Central, encourage pit bull owners to be responsible and to always carry a "break stick" -- a tool used to pry open a pit bull's jaws -- in case their dog "accidentally" gets into a fight. These same websites also warn that using a break stick on any other dog breed may cause serious injury to the person.¹² This is true because no other dog breed possesses the pit bull's tenacity combined with a "hold and shake" bite style.

One of the most powerful examples of a pit bull "not letting go" occurred in an Ohio courtroom. During the Toledo v. Tellings trial (Tellings was convicted of violating the City of Toledo's pit bull ordinance), Lucas County Dog Warden Tom Skeldon showed a videotape of a tranquilized pit bull hanging from a steel cable. The dog is essentially unconscious and still does not release its grip. At the time of the taping, the pit bull was being housed at the Lucas County Animal Shelter.¹³

Q: Do pit bulls bite more than other dogs?

Depending upon the community in which you live and the ratio of pit bulls within it, yes and no. But whether a pit bull bites more or less than another dog breed is not the point. The issue is the acute damage a pit bull inflicts when it does choose to bite. The pit bull's "hold and shake" bite style causes severe bone and muscle damage, often inflicting permanent and disfiguring injury. Moreover, once a pit bull starts an attack, firearm intervention may be the only way to stop it.

When analyzing dog bite statistics, it is important to understand what constitutes a bite. A single bite -- recorded and used in dog bite statistics -- is a bite that "breaks the skin." One bite by a poodle that leaves two puncture wounds is recorded the same way as a pit bull mauling, which can constitute hundreds of puncture wounds and extensive soft tissue loss. Despite the "quagmire" of dog bite statistics, pit bulls are leading bite counts across U.S. cities and counties.¹⁴

¹⁰ One City's Experience, by Kory A. Nelson, Senior City Attorney for the City of Denver, *Municipal Lawyer*, July/August 2005.

¹¹ Pit Bull Case Report and Literature Review, by Steven F. Vegas, MD, Jason H. Calhoun, MD, M. Eng., John Mader, MD, *Texas Medicine*, Vol. 84, November 1988.

¹² Breaking Up a Fight, Pit Bull Rescue Central.

¹³ Information provided by the Lucas County, Ohio Dog Warden.

¹⁴ Pit Bulls Lead "Bite" Counts Across U.S. Cities and Counties, by DogsBite.org (continuously updated).

Q: How come pit bull owners say, "My dog might lick you to death."

To understand the experience of owning a negatively perceived dog, Tufts Center for Animals and Public Policy did a study on pit bull owners. Researchers found that owners of out-law dog breeds directly feel the stigma targeted at their breed and resort to various tactics to lessen it. One of the tactics included attempts to counterbalance the pit bull's menacing appearance and physical power with overwhelming "affectionate" behavior, such as: "My dog might lick you to death."¹⁵

Q: Why does my friend say, "Pit bulls are dog-aggressive not people-aggressive?"

Due to selective breeding for the purposes of dogfighting, pit bulls are highly dog-aggressive. This aggression is not limited to dogs; pit bulls frequently kill other companion pets and domesticated animals. Leading pit bull education websites warn pit bull owners to, "Never trust your pit bull not to fight." These same websites also state that pit bulls should never be left alone with another dog or animal.¹⁶ The practical question is: Why is "pit bull dog aggression" tolerated at all?

Pit bull dog aggression is unacceptable for two reasons. In many instances it leads to human aggression. A common scenario is the following: A loose pit bull attacks a leashed dog being walked by its owner. The owner gets seriously injured trying to stop the attack. In 2009, two human beings suffered death due to pit bull dog aggression: Rosie Humphreys, who had been walking her two poodles, and Carter Delaney, who had tried to protect a smaller dog in his home.

Secondly, far too many beloved companion pets and domesticated animals suffer a violent death by the powerful jaws of pit bull terriers each year. In some instances, these attacks involve pit bulls charging through screen doors of private homes -- in a home invasion attack -- to kill the pet living inside.¹⁷ Owners of the pet are then forced to watch as their pet is disemboweled by the pit bull and pray that the dog does not turn its attention on an innocent family member next.

Q: What is the best thing we can do for communities and pit bulls?

The best thing we can do for communities and pit bulls is to regulate pit bull ownership and pit bull breeding. Lowering the pit bull population will reduce the number of serious maulings, as well as pit bull euthanizations. In the July/August 2009 issue of *Animal People*, the group estimated that of the 1,663,167 shelter dogs projected to be euthanized in 2009, pit bulls accounted for 58%. This is true despite the fact that pit bulls only make up 5% of the total U.S. dog population.¹⁸

Over 650 U.S. cities and nearly all privatized military housing -- the U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps now have uniform pet policies -- have adopted breed-specific laws to correct the pit bull problem. Such measures include: mandatory sterilization, liability insurance and strict containment rules. The most progressive legislation bans the future breeding of pit bulls (a pit bull ban). In just a few years, these communities see a significant drop in pit bull bites and euthanizations.

¹⁵ Managing the Stigma of Outlaw Breeds: A Case Study of Pit Bull Owners, by Hillary Twining, Arnold Arluke, Gary Patronek, Tufts Center for Animals and Public Policy, *Society & Animals Journal of Human-Animal Studies*, Vol. 8 Number 1, 2000.

¹⁶ 10 Easy to Remember Tips for Responsible Pit Bull Owners, PitBullLovers.com.

¹⁷ Pit bull put down after attack, by Kieran Nicholson, *The Denver Post*, March 3, 2009.

¹⁸ Decade of Adoption Focus Fails to Reduce Shelter Killing, by Merritt Clifton, *Animal People*, July/August 2009.

About Us

DogsBite.org is a national dog bite victims' group dedicated to reducing serious dog attacks. Through our work, we hope to protect both people and pets from future attacks. Our website, www.dogsbite.org, was launched in October 2007 and contains a wide collection of data to help policymakers and citizens learn about dangerous dogs. Our research focuses on pit bull type dogs. Due to selective breeding practices that emphasize aggression and tenacity, this class of dogs negatively impacts communities the most. Our website hosts important dog bite studies, U.S. dog bite fatalities and other key bibliographies. In the Legislating Dogs portion of our site, we offer examples of breed-specific laws (state-by-state) and documentation of the constitutionality of these laws. The Victim Realities section provides a glance into the unforgettable stories victims leave behind and much more. DogsBite.org operates out of Austin, Texas.



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