

# Pit bulls: fighters

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When an Alaskan dog-fight fancier talks about a "pit bull", he (or she — several are women) is usually speaking about the AKC-titled American Staffordshire Terrier.

The American Staffordshire is a larger, stronger version of an English Staffordshire — a cross-breed perfected in the 1800s, combining the best fighting features of a bulldog and a terrier.

Simply put, there is no dog on earth that can match one in a fight.

From the terrier side of its ancestry came a scrap-loving spirit and pure physical agility. From its bulldog ancestry came that breed's muscular jaw and proverbial courage — an unbudging attitude toward a dogfight of "Never back up. Never say enough."

The resulting mix is not a large dog by any means — fighting Staffordshires often weigh in at less than 50 pounds. But even so, they've been known to make quick work out of muscular 120-pound German shepherds more than twice their size.

A Staffordshire owner explained:

"German shepherds and dobermans are slashers. Really sloppy. But a pit bull bites with a purpose. It clamps down and doesn't let go; and its jaws are twice as strong as a German shepherd's. Often it breaks another dog's bones."

In appearance, a training pit bull has an overstated head made stronger than normal by a muscle-building program that begins almost before the dog is whelped and continues for the rest of its working life.

Breeders begin tug-of-war games early-on with their pit bull puppies and eventually strengthen them to the point that they can hang by their teeth from the end of a rope. The trainer will then sometimes swing the rope in circles, forcing the dog's jaws to close down harder and harder against the centrifugal force.

Pit bulls are living proof — in reverse — of the adage about a dog's bark being worse than its bite. The fact is, a Staffordshire doesn't bark or growl at all when in combat, lest it lose its jaw-grip on its opponent.

"Watch two pit bulls in a fight," an owner said. "They don't bark at all. And watch how the tails are always moving . . . it tells you that they like what they're doing."

Pit bull owners usually find that their dog will **attack** in some sort of consistent manner, match after match. Some always go for the legs first, others the shoulder, the stomach, or the face. Owners will refer to them in this way:

"She's going for her first roll this weekend and I'm a little bit worried. Up against a leg dog."

Others might be "riders" — pit bulls that go for the loose flank of the shoulder, holding on and riding their adversary to exhaustion much the way a human wrestler tires an opponent.

But of all types of opponents, breeders say, the "leg dog" is the most hazardous. For while the durability and tenacity of the pit bull will allow it to continue through all manner of abuse during a fight, the cutting of the main artery extending the length of the hind leg spells certain disaster.

Blood begins pumping and squirting across the pit and the fight is usually over. And so the dog often dies.

Through breeding and training and breeding again, pit bull kennel owners begin to pronounce such characteristics. And the result is a dog that — even veterinarians will admit — obviously enjoys the battle.

It comes as a surprise, then, to see how gentle and loving the breed is with people. Staffordshires are excellent house pets — affectionate to the point that they don't really make very good guard dogs, and sometimes are frightened by unexpected visitors.

Even so, they often spell death for fellow pets on the block. One owner put it like this:



## to the death

"If a pit bull hasn't killed another dog, then it hasn't been out of the house."

Anchorage resident Mark Weaver said a friend gave him a Staffordshire last year when he found that he couldn't keep it, and Weaver took it in, hoping it would make a good house pet.

"The dog was only about a year old," he said, "but the second day I had her, she killed the dog next door. It was just in her.

"I would take her to someone else's house and — if there was another dog there — she would get that look in her eye ... eventually she ran away.

In the Anchorage area, pit bull puppies — even without any championship lineage — generally sell in the \$250 range. A pup from a proven fighting line will cost \$400-\$600, and an established winner with promise for future victories can bring anything from \$1,000 on up. Both males or females are fought.

A fighting pit bull is pretty much born into a no-win "Catch-22" situation:

Fights aren't necessarily to the death. But if a young dog loses its first time out — a quasi-competition usually referred to as a "roll" — his owner might very well pull out a .45 in front of the crowd and blast the dog's head off.

So the fighting pit bull's only hope is to win, and then to continue to win. But as he does, he is challenged only by breeders who also own dogs with two or three victories to their credit. The higher the dogs go in their career, the more tenacious the dogfight.

"Pit bulls don't have that many fights," an owner explained. "It's impressive to have two wins. Three wins means they're a champion. A dog that's won three or four fights is REAL tough. They just won't give up."

Fights between champions are so fierce that they're not infrequently fought to the death — the end of a fighting dog's career.

"My dog wouldn't be happy if he wasn't fighting," a kennel owner said recently in an Anchorage bar. "He was born to fight."



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This American Staffordshire terrier, Dooley, been trained for fighting, but displays the build and strong jaws that makes the breed among fighting dog fanciers.