

What breed of dog is considered so even-tempered and good with children that the British nickname is the “Nanny dog?” Remember “Petey” the cute white dog with the dark circle around one eye from the “Lil’ Rascals and “Our Gang” comedies with Spanky and Alfalfa? “Petey” was one of these dogs.

What breed of dog is considered so loyal and fearless that one was chosen as the U.S. mascot during World War I? Recently, a representative of this same breed was named the mascot for a U.S. Marine unit in Okinawa, Japan.

What breed of dog is so trustworthy and trainable that they are used to assist disabled people and for therapy in nursing homes and hospitals? Here’s a hint, perhaps the world’s most famously talented yet seriously disabled person, Helen Keller, kept this breed as her faithful companion.

Now, could you imagine that this same type of dog was bred for decades to fight in pits, even until death? Even though dog fighting is now a felony in most places, dog fighting continues underground and abroad.

And would you believe that this breed has been bred by unscrupulous breeders to be aggressive to dogs and humans while guarding his owner and owner’s property? Today, this same breed is routinely depicted as a vicious killer in our media and even by some animal rights groups. Who has not seen the 1987 film footage first aired on television’s “Maury Povich Show” depicting a dog brutally mauling an animal control officer after being given a command to attack by his owner?

Hard to imagine, but the dog in each case above may be loosely classified as a “pit bull.” Dogs identified as pit bulls come in every color, combination of white, brown, black, and tan and can take a variety of shapes, weighing from 30 to 130 pounds.¹ This is truly a *yin, yang* dog!

AMERICAN PIT BULL

Friend
or
Foe?



by Susan Anthony

What is the History of this Breed?

Three recognized breeds are referred to as “pit bulls”: 1) the American Staffordshire terrier, 2) the American Pit Bull terrier, and 3) the Staffordshire Bull terrier. All three are decedents of the English bull-baiting bulldog – a small Mastiff-type dog that excelled in the old “sport” of bull-baiting and helping farmers and butchers bring down unruly cattle as early as the late 18th century.²

Although England banned bull baiting by 1835, these dogs soon adapted to a new occupation – dog fighting in pits. Some experts believe the pit fighting dogs were actually a cross between bull-baiting dogs and working terriers. By the mid-19th century, Irish and English pit fighting dogs were shipped to the United States for fighting as well as for catching stray hogs and cattle, and as family guardians.

American breeders started to produce a larger, leggier pit bull, but few dogs weighed above 50 pounds until late in the 20th century. Historically, the dogs were bred for athletic abilities and “gameness” – rugged determination to fight to win – as well as extreme tolerance toward human handlers.³ Although pit bulls are renowned for their locking jaws, there is no scientific evidence to support that the breed has a unique locking mechanism.⁴

As bans prohibiting dog fighting took effect, and especially in the 1980’s, some people started breeding the dogs for aggression towards humans, in defense of their owners’ property. The media highlighted and continues to air gruesome reports of pit bulls causing human fatalities or serious injuries. These stories lead to fear of the breed, persecution and ostracism of pit bull owners, pit bull bans and other breed restrictive legislation, and the death of thousands of pit bulls and potential pit bull mixes at shelters each year.

Are Breed Bans a Viable Solution to Prevent Fatalities and Nonfatal Bites?

A recent report published in the *Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association*, (largely using data collected from The Humane Society of the United States and media accounts) found that “pit bull-type dogs were involved in approximately a third of human dog bite-related fatalities reported during the 12-year period from 1981-1999.” Specifically, from 1978 through 1998, “pit bull-type dogs” were involved in 66 dog bite-related human fatalities in the U.S.⁵ However, the report went on to note several biases in the study, including the newsworthiness of attacks by certain breeds (e.g., pit bulls) and the subjective nature of breed identification. The report also notes that breeds responsible for human fatalities have varied over time. Since 1975, more than 30 breeds, including Dachshunds, a Yorkshire terrier, and a Labrador retriever, have been responsible for human fatalities.

The report notes a number of practical and legal problems with breed specific legislation. Objectively identifying the breed of a particular dog would require pedigree analysis and DNA testing – both time consuming and expensive. Mere descriptions of the dogs to be banned rely on subjective observation and dog owners may successfully challenge such laws as unconstitutionally vague and in violation of due process. Because all dogs may inflict injury on property and people, ordinances singling out a breed are incomplete and in violation of the owner’s equal protection rights

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under the Constitution. Furthermore, people who want an aggressive dog will simply pick another breed bred or trained for aggression.

Although the recent statistics on fatalities caused by “pit bull-type dogs” are undoubtedly troubling, the report notes that “fatal bites constitute less than 0.00001% of all dog bites annually” and have “remained relatively constant.” This is in sharp contrast to the dramatic increases in nonfatal dog bites – “36% increase in medically attended bites from 1986 to 1994.”

Reliable nonfatal bite statistics are not available by breed, nor is information available on the total number of dogs by breed in the U.S. Further, temperament studies do not support a theory that pit bulls are more likely to bite than other dogs. The most recent statistics (December 1999) from the American Temperament Test Society, Inc., a national nonprofit organization for the promotion of uniform temperament evaluation of purebred and spayed/neutered mixed-breed dogs,

reveal that pit bulls (American Pit Bull terrier and American Staffordshire terrier) score better than the national average and some 37 points higher than the popular Akita, for example. Aggression is a key component of the test. Dogs displaying unprovoked aggression fail the test.

When Cincinnati, Ohio contracted with a county shelter to house dogs impounded under its ban on American Staffordshire terriers and Staffordshire Bull terriers, all dogs that looked like the banned breeds were impounded, sometimes upwards of 50 dogs at any given shelter. Owners challenged the impoundments and county costs for sheltering and legal fees escalated.



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After 13 years, the city replaced the ban with a generic dangerous dog ordinance. Other municipalities and states have had similar problems with breed bans.⁶

Banning or restricting specific dog breeds gives them a certain notoriety that seems to increase their desirability. Residents of Prince George’s County, Maryland where pit bulls are banned, frequently try to adopt these dogs from neighboring counties. The number of reported pit bull bites actually increased slightly in Prince George’s County, after the dogs were banned. Pit bull owners from neighboring counties may not even transport their dogs through Prince George’s County. Where the breed ban is strictly enforced, existing pit bulls may not receive routine veterinary care, thus increasing chances of rabies, and may be prevented from attending obedience training and socialization classes.

Even where the dogs are not legally banned (due largely to fears of liability and bad publicity) most shelters have policies that discrimi-

Historical images of “pit bulls” emphasize the dogs’ loyalty.



nate against pit bulls in terms of handling and adoptions. For example, the Montgomery County, Maryland Humane Society receives pit bulls and mixes each week, yet under its policies the shelter allows only a portion of these dogs to be adopted and none may be placed in foster homes. Generally, without any evaluation of the individual, stray pit bulls estimated to be over six months old are quarantined on arrival and scheduled for euthanasia, allowing their owners one week to claim them. Montgomery County's policies are considered to be more liberal than many other jurisdictions.

According to the attorney for Judy Cahill, a Montgomery County homeowner who has run a private animal rescue service out of her home for over 20 years and routinely takes in pit bulls, Cahill feels persecuted by the Humane Society and her neighbors simply because she has pit bulls, even though the dogs do not leave the confinement of her double-fenced property. According to attorney Barbara Graham, "Personally, I don't think it is worth the risk to own a pit bull, but I would never support a breed ban, because what's next? Every dog can bite, will we ban all dogs?"

What are the solutions?

In order to come up with viable solutions, we must first consider who gets bitten most frequently and under what circumstances. Children are much more likely to get bitten than adults.⁷ Unrestrained

dogs, particularly on the owner's property, are more likely to bite and 82% of fatal attacks involved unrestrained dogs. About 50% of bites are considered

provoked. Dogs belonging to the person's family or a neighbor inflict about 85% of bites. The vast majority of bites are from unneutered males. Unspayed females are more likely to bite than spayed females.⁸

This information suggests that a combination of education, spaying and neutering, and enforcement of leash laws would reduce bites. Children need to learn to recognize and respect a dog's warning signs (e.g., growl, snarling). Adults need to prevent dogs from running loose unsupervised, both on and off their property. Dog owners need to train and socialize their dogs to tolerate other dogs and humans in their territory. Dogs need to learn when to warn (e.g., bark, growl) and retreat from provocation. Municipalities should provide greater incentives to encourage owners to spay and neuter dogs.

For those few individuals who train dogs to attack, carefully crafted laws should be established and enforced requiring such dogs to be confined or leashed and muzzled when in public. Owners of attack dogs should be held liable both civilly and criminally with the possibility of felony convictions, if such dogs harm law-abiding people and their animal companions.

Finally, laws requiring all dogs to be identified and licensed need to be enforced. Before any legally binding conclusions are drawn about particular breeds, municipalities should routinely collect detailed data on dog bites, including identification of the dog's breeder and whether the dog was spayed or neutered.

About the Author: Susan Anthony is a Washington, DC-based animal enthusiast. A volunteer at area shelters and wildlife groups, Susan helps promote humane treatment and respect for animals both in domestic and natural settings. She has personally turned aggressive stray and abused dogs into well-adjusted, social, canine citizens through her individualized training program.

The affectionate nature is a more common and often overlooked feature of this maligned breed.

What You Can Do

- Teach children to recognize and respect a dog's warning signals.
- Train and socialize your dog to accept other dogs and humans who are in his territory.
- Support reasonable, enforceable legislation and community education efforts to reduce dog bites and to spay and neuter dogs.
- Be a role model - adopt or foster a pit bull or pit mix and train that dog to be a well socialized canine citizen.
- Volunteer at your local shelter and educate staff and visitors about dog bite prevention. Reduce stress for the shelter dogs by training them to be obedient, using praise and treats - exercising their minds and bodies.

Web sites to learn more about breed bans and Pit Bull rescue:

Chako Rescue Association for the American Pitbull Terrier, Inc.
<http://pitbull.ourfamily.com/>

DC Dog Coalition
http://members.nbci.com/_XMCM/dcdcoalition/aboutus.htm

Pit Bull Reporter Magazine
<http://www.pitbulls.com/>

Rottweilers Reign Supreme
<http://www.rott-n-chatter.com/rottweilers/laws/breedspecific.html>

Shenandoah Animal Clinic
<http://www-scf.usc.edu/~animal/pages>

The Wolf Dunn
<http://www.inetdesign.com/wolfdunn/>

Endnotes

1. DC Dog Coalition
2. DC Dog Coalition
3. *Animals' Agenda*, "Scapegoats and Underdogs - the Pit Bull Dilemma," July/August 2000
4. Dr. I. Lehr Brisbin of the University of Georgia (see DC Dogs Coalition web site)
5. JAVMA, Vol. 217, No. 6, Sept. 15, 2000
6. Rottweilers Reign Supreme
7. Center for Disease Control. MMWR 1997; 46:463-7
8. JAVMA, Vol. 217, No. 6, Sept. 15, 2000

