

# **An Honest Look at Pit Bulls**

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# **Abstract**

Over the last 30 years pit bulls have come to be perceived in the United States as dangerous and destructive animals. This thesis combines journalistic research and first hand accounts that document what pit bulls truly are as a breed and why they have become so feared in American society. After experiencing a traumatic pit bull fight, the author wanted to take a closer look at pit bulls in everyday life. This article explains and shows what makes people fearful of these dogs and the positives and the negatives of the breed. This article proves that there are many different circumstances that lead up to severe and fatal pit bull attacks and that “breed-type” has little to do with it.

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# Introduction

Animals have always been an important part of my life. Since I was a child, I was coming home with displaced kittens and lost dogs. My mother, whose heart is as big as mine, found it incredibly difficult to say no to anything that needed help. It was a known fact in my neighborhood that if there was an animal that needed a home, we were the family to call.

As I got older, my traits for taking in lost pets never really went away. When I was 18, I began working for a jewelry designer. One day the receptionist came in complaining about a dog her husband had brought home the night before.

“She seems very nice, but she’s a pit bull and I’m not too sure about having her around my daughter,” she said.

I gave her the typical response about pit bulls, which I must say was pretty uneducated, since I didn’t know much about pit bulls at all.

“You definitely don’t want her around your kids. They can be really dangerous dogs! How about I take her off of your hands, my boyfriend has been looking for a dog anyway.”

And into my life came Marley.

Without asking anything of this dog, she was hands down the best seven-month-old dog I’ve ever met. She was graceful, kind and strong, but also incredibly obedient. She had the energy of a bull, but never lashed out at home. She always waited until I let her run around outside and she’d dash in figure eights for minutes straight before returning. Marley is five now and I couldn’t ask for anything more of a dog, except maybe for her to stop pulling on the leash so much; not the largest thing

on my list of worries.

After witnessing myself how wonderful a dog Marley is, I could never understand that first conversation I had about her, and how I had been the one to tell my co-worker to give up this dog for safety reasons. Why had I been so stupid to think that this dog was different than any other dog, when in fact, she was better natured than any other dogs I knew. Why did people think these pit bull dogs were so dangerous?

And then I met Beck.

Beck was a young 75 pound macho, muscular dog. He was by far the largest pit bull I had ever seen and, man, he was full of energy. A recent rescue from the Hartford pound, his clueless owners were told he was a lab-mix, and brought him to the doggie daycare I worked at for a temperament evaluation. He passed the test with flying colors; he showed no signs of aggression in any way. He was however, newly adopted, very excited, and showed little to no training or recall. I mean, I think he could sit when enticed by food, but that was about it.

The daycare I worked for doesn't really have any policies about dogs with no recall or obedience training, so as a dog that showed no signs of aggression, he was good to go.

The only thing his parents told us was, "Don't point in his face, he's doesn't like it."

Fast forward about a month. Beck still hadn't received any behavior training, and his owners still didn't seem to care too much about researching the breed or working with him, even though we had spoken to them a few times about his

exuberance and lack of listening skills.

It was noon-time, Beck has just gotten in about 20 minutes prior, and I was getting ready to clock out and go home. Typically a dog coming in later in the day can get the group hyped up, especially if it's a dog with the energy that Beck had. He was playing vigorously with another dog when a delivery truck pulled into the driveway and proceeded to back up to the building.

Beep-beep-beep. All 45 dogs run towards the windows and erupt into hysteria. I grabbed my squirt bottle and started yelling, "ENOUGH" over the barking. My co-worker came in to help calm the pups down. This is stuff we are used to. What happened next we're not.

A mix-breed dog named Chief continued to bark relentlessly, stirred up from all the excitement. Beck shot him a look I could immediately tell was trouble. "Beck!" I yelled. Nothing. Chief continued to bark in his face. Beck shot him a warning bite and snapped at his face. I could see him almost saying, "Get out of my face." Chief continued to bark at him. Beck started charging.

I got behind Beck, grabbing his hips, trying to pull him backwards. My co-worker, Kate, was trying to wrangle Chief, who continued to bark. I pulled Beck as hard as I could, but he wouldn't budge. His stance was solid. I've never felt pure strength like that before. He was set; his eyes were locked. I knew what was coming. I threw myself in front of him. My arms wrapped around his chest. He bit me; hard and I let go. And then he lunged forward and sunk his teeth into Chief's neck and didn't let go.

Somehow I ended up with Chief in my arms, and Beck was in Kate's.

Another co-worker, Jess, heard what was going on and ran into the room throwing punches straight at Beck's head. I reacted to this, and then too began punching Beck as hard as I could in the face. After I gave three good blows, I realized we had no affect on him. Our strength could in no way match his. The three of us, me with Chief and my co-workers with Beck, just held on for dear life. I was doing my best to push Chief closer to Beck, trying to relieve the pressure off of his neck, and preparing for the head-shake, that I knew would tear his neck apart. I began picturing blood everywhere. Kate must have began picture the same thing, because she began crying "Oh God no, oh God please."

It was then that I realized panic was setting in, and we were helpless against this creature. It was very real to me that Chief was going to die in my arms and there was nothing I could do about it. Jess ran away and came back, screaming about the spray. She couldn't find it. It flashed over my face, I knew where it was. I screamed at them to hold both the dogs on the ground and I took off. I ran into the other room, scrambling through the shelves until I found the citronella "animal deterrent" spray that we were told to use in emergencies. I ran into the room, almost smiling, knowing that this would work. I ran up to Beck and sprayed the whole can. First I started with his face, and to my shock, I moved closer to his eyes. I sprayed it directly in his eyes. The spray did nothing; he didn't even blink.

I looked at his face. He wasn't there. Beck had checked out. The blank stare that was on his face was that of what I could compare to only one other thing, well person, in my life; my father. My dad is bi-polar, and during his manic outbursts I could always tell when he was out of his mind. There was something about his eyes

that would change, that would make him different. A blank stare that could see through walls, but not really see anything at all. That was the look I saw on Beck's face, and I knew he was gone, his mind was elsewhere.

We had tried everything. We hit him, we kicked him, we had fingers up his nose, we were digging into his eyes, we threw a chair at him and nothing had worked. Now here we were, holding onto these two dogs with our dear lives, knowing that if we let go, Chief would be dead. Kate was crying, and Jess was screaming into her walkie-talkie for someone to call for help. My brain was racing for ideas. Searching, racing. Then I realized that we had been screaming and panicking for five minutes and nothing had worked. My dog trainer had told me to always give short, quick, firm and confident commands. I realized this.

I got in Beck's face. I looked him dead in the eyes, and firmly and calmly I said, "Beck, no!" and he let go.

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I'm still not sure if my command is what made him let go or if he was just exhausted from fighting for so long. We estimate that he had a grip on Chief's neck for about seven to eight minutes- the longest minutes of my life. For months I felt confused and conflicted. I had spent years defending pit bulls because Marley had always been such a gem. Honestly I had never known the strength they possessed and I don't believe that my Marley could even comprehend what she capable of. Chief ended up being okay physically. He had tubes put into his throat to drain the wounds and about a month later made a full recovery. The first time he came back to daycare after that though, he was nervous and drooling everywhere. I know he was



scarred mentally, way more than he was physically.

I look at the scar on my hand, where Beck bit me, every day and think about what went wrong. Mentally, I think I was scarred for a while, too. It took me months to come to terms with the fact that no matter how much control you believe you have in a situation, you really don't. No matter how much you think you know about dogs, you really don't. But most of all, I think I've learned that preparation for certain situations are key, and that what happened that day was really a convergence of overlooked factors that led up to a nearly disastrous event. Beck's lack of training, I believe, was the number one factor.

The more I think about these pit bulls, the more I think about how we as a society created the breed to be the strong, determined, loyal dog it is today and we as a society cannot blame them for that. We cannot say that this is the fault of the canine, it's the fault of humans for creating such a dog.

It is not the pit bulls' fault that it is strong. It is not the pit bulls' fault that it wasn't trained, or taught how to act in social situations. It is not the pit bull's fault that it was put in a pit and told to fight the one across from it. We as a society have formed the image, and created the pit bull to be what it is today.

Who are these pit bull dogs and what is it about them that make people so nervous and scared? What is it about them that attract millions of people, and even families, to own them? What is it about pit bulls that make them such a hot topic in society today?

## What is a Pit Bull?

The pit bulls that we see today in America are of various shapes, sizes and believe it or not, breeds. There is actually no one breed called “pit bull,” but rather the pit bull category is made up of the American Pit Bull Terrier, the American Staffordshire Terrier, the Staffordshire Bull Terrier and various other bull dog and terrier mixes. Many dogs that are lumped into the category of “pit bull” may in fact, have no relations to any of the pure breed dogs they are thought to be.

Below are pictures of pure-bred “pit bull” dogs:



Photo Credit: AKC.org

**This is a Staffordshire Bull Terrier, registered by the American Kennel Club (AKC).**



Photo credit: ukcdogs.com

**These images show the United Kennel Club's (UKC) American Pit Bull Terrier.**

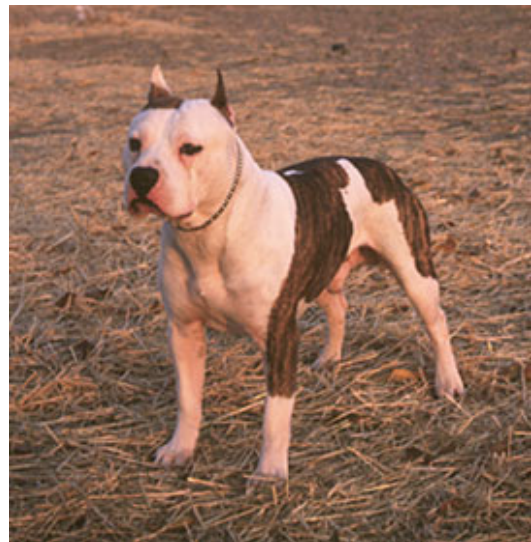


Photo Credit: akc.org

**This is an American Staffordshire Terrier, as defined by the AKC.**

It's noticeable that the AKC's American Staffordshire Terrier and the UKC's American Pit Bull Terrier are very much alike, and it is hard to tell the difference between the two. But, the Staffordshire Bull Terrier has a much shorter stance which

distinguishes it from the other two breeds.

All of the pure-breeds have blocky heads and many people use this to define pit bulls when judging by sight only. However, many dogs have blocky heads. Mastiffs of various kinds, American Bull Dogs, Boxers, Basenjis and even Boston Terriers contain this trait. Many “pit bulls” are actually mixes of many of these other breeds.

A good example of this would be Jessie. Jessie was rescued from a shelter in Ontario, Canada where he was going to be euthanized for a being a “pit bull” due to breed restriction laws in the city. Upon entering the kennel at the Animal Farm Foundation, a rescue and education center in upstate New York for “pit bull-type” dogs, Jessie was DNA tested. Jessie turned out to be a Boxer, Rottweiler, Bulldog mix.



Photo credit: Animal Farm Foundation

**Jessie, a dog at The Animal Farm Foundation, was mistakenly identified as a pit bull in Ontario, Canada and almost euthanized.**

“So in Ontario they were going to kill him because he’s a ‘pit bull,’” said Stacey Coleman, executive director of the Animal Farm Foundation, a rescue,

training and rehabilitation center for pit bull-type dogs, in an interview. “He comes to us, he has a DNA test that says he’s a Rottweiler, and now he’s going to go live in Ohio, because he can live there as Rottweiler and not a pit bull according to their state law. It doesn’t make any sense.”

In fact, the National Canine Research Council has recently published a book called “The Relevance of Breed in Selecting a Companion Dog.” The author, Janis Bradley, states, “DNA identification of breeds, which is now readily available, has shown that labeling of mixed-breed dogs according to morphology is extremely unreliable” and “...even a small proportion of a particular breed in a dog’s ancestry may result in a strong resemblance to that breed. So we cannot attribute ‘predominant breed’ identification to any dog based on appearance, no matter how striking the resemblance.”

“I’ve travelled a lot across the country and the [pit bull-types] look very different by region,” says Kate Fraser, care and enrichment staff of the Animal Farm Foundation, in an interview. “Even if you look through our kennel you will see that all of these dogs look different.”

If it’s understandable how easy it is to misidentify a pit bull based on looks; it’s also understandable that many media reports and dog bites statistics might be way off in identifying “pit bulls.” The only true way to know for sure if a dog is true American Staffordshire Terrier, an American Pit Bull Dog or a Staffordshire Bull Terrier is through a DNA test, end of story.

Pit bulls have a bad reputation mostly because of thier history in the dog-fighting ring. Bulldogs were originally used in boar hunting as early as the 1500’s

and eventually in Bull baiting, a sport in which dogs were put in a pit and set against a Bull. The object of the “game” was for the pack of dogs to take down the Bull. This is where the name “pit bull” comes from.



Photo credit: Toughdog.com

Eventually, Bull baiting became illegal because of its inherently cruel nature to both the Bulls and the dogs, so fighters began to use the dogs against each other. Since then dog fighting has become a large underground and illegal movement in which dogs will fight each other until one of them is killed. In the last four decades dog fighting has slowly been introduced to the mainstream by the media. Finally, in 2007 the most high profile dog fighting raid occurred at the home of Michael Vick, one of the National Football League’s best quarterbacks. Dog fighting may have been well known to many people before hand, but now it was a topic of discussion on everyone’s tongue.

However upsetting the cruelty was, the Michael Vick raid ended up doing

quite a few good things for the breed. First, it made people aware that dog fighting was happening everywhere, not just off in some distant place. Second, almost all of the dogs that were rescued were rehabilitated and adopted, and it showed that pit bulls could be family pets, and weren't just a bunch of vicious creatures.

But still, the image of the vicious killer remains among many Americans, and it would be unfair to discount the thousands of first hand accounts that people have had with dangerous pit bulls. So let's look a little further into the breed to determine the truth about these dogs.

# Why are they Feared?

## The Bite and Hold

One of the main reasons that pit bulls are most feared is the Bulldog trait of biting and holding their prey. There is no such thing as “lock-jaw” in a pit bull no matter how many times you’ve seen it reported; there just isn’t. Numerous animal anatomy specialists have scientifically disproved this myth.

“They have that same bull dog, bite and hang on thing, which is not what some people think is a physical structure, like a locking mechanism, its just mental tenacity and physical strength,” says Dr. Nicholas Dodman over the phone. Dodman is a professor, section head and program director at Tufts University, a school well known for it’s veterinary programs. He is considered a top professional in his field for his work in veterinary behavior.

It is sheer strength and determination that gives these dogs the ability to hold on, even when they are trying to be stopped. Not all pit bulls are even aware that they have this trait in them, and never use it. In the daycare setting, many pit bulls have come and gone, some of them have even gotten into the average scuffle with other dogs, but none of them ever did what Beck did. In fact, it would be hard to picture many pit bulls that I’ve worked with doing what Beck did.

The Pit Bull Rescue Central (PBRC) is one of the nation’s most recognizable pit bull rescues and information resource regarding the breed. The PBRC took in many of the Michael Vick dogs after they were seized. The PBRC recommends that pit bull owners avoid off-leash dog parks (and doggie daycares).

A statement taken from the PBRC’s information packet:



“It is a FACT that our pit-bulls, AmStaffs and pit mixes come with a built-in fighting heritage...The majority of pit bulls will, at some point in their lives, exhibit some degree of dog-on-dog aggression. This type of animal aggression is completely separate from human-aggression; a well-socialized pit is very good-natured with people...Pit bulls may not start fights, but they will finish them.”

Another dog may start the fight, such as Chief, but the pit bull has the strength to finish it, much like Beck. Once any dog decides it is going to attack to kill, it is going to be difficult to get it separated from whatever it’s attacking. But once a pit bull decides it is going to attack to kill, and grips onto it’s prey, it is going to be close to impossible to get its jaws separated without the use of a tool.

There is one specific tool that has been created to pry the jaws of pit bulls off of whatever they are gripping. This tool has a few different names: break stick, bite stick and pit stick. It is basically a plastic, nylon or wooden flat stick that can be inserted behind the dog’s molars and used as a pry bar to help release its grip.



Photo credit: PBRC.net

The issue with trying to be a “responsible pit bull owner” and having a break stick on hand, and why some people refuse to own one, is that in most situations, even if the fight wasn’t started by the pit bull, owning the break stick is considered a

sign that the owner knew the dog was aggressive and the stick inadvertently admits the owner is at fault. In some states break sticks are also considered fighting paraphernalia because dog fighters originally created them. Even if an owner is trying to do the right thing by having one for their dog just in case of an accidental fight, they may become a target for legal action against them.

Regardless of the break stick, the point is that these tools can be necessary in the occasion that a pit bull does attack another living thing. I've heard of people trying numerous things to separate a pit bull's grip. Shoving a garden hose down the aggressor dog's throat was one and using gardening sheers as a pry bar is another example. So it's true that these dogs have the ability to cause some serious damage, but is this trait exclusive to pit bulls?

Karen Delise, author of "The Pit Bull Placebo," a book that compiles over 150 years of research in newspaper articles, peer reviews, journal articles and government studies, says no. She has discovered proof of dog attacks from the 1800's where Mastiffs, Labradors and Newfoundlands had clamped down on victims and not let go.

"Dogs capable of killing a 150-lb. buck or bringing down a 500 lb. steer would have little trouble inflicting fatal wounds on a 2-year-old child. Whether the breed is an 80-lb. Labrador or an 80-lb. pit bull has little to no bearing on the injuries. The determining factors are the intent and the bite inhibition of the individual dog," states Delise in her book.

She mentions bite inhibition as a major factor in fatal dog attacks throughout her book as well. Puppies learn bite inhibition during their first four to eight weeks as a puppy with their litter. During this time puppies learn what bites are too hard to be

considered play. Over the next few weeks and months it is the responsibility of the owner to continue teaching their puppy what kind of biting is appropriate and what kind of biting is not. In many circumstances dogs that are not raised in the family, and are kept outside, or on a chain in the backyard, never learn this idea of bite inhibition. Therefore when they bite, they bite to hurt.

“Puppies are learning from day one. The socialization period ends around 12 weeks old. After that you can still socialize them, but a lot of their personalities and bite inhibition is already set in,” explains Michelle Douglas, Certified Pet Dog Trainer, Certified Dog Behavioral Consultant and former president of Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT), to large group of pit bull owners (and pit bulls) at Connecticut National Pit Bull Awareness Day in September 2011. “The most important thing a puppy needs to learn, and it is your responsibility to teach, is bite inhibition. Dogs that obtain this bite inhibition in this early learning period of their lives, even when they’re in fights and they bite, they don’t do damage because it becomes instinctual. Impulse control is the ability to stop playing and sit and stay on cue.”

Douglas also mentions socialization as an important factor in raising a pit bull, or any dog. Socialization, like learning bite inhibition, should happen at a young age. Puppies, like babies, are curious to the world around them. By introducing them to all different types of situations from the beginning, the dog is less likely to become afraid of those things. During the first few months of a dog’s life, it is important to introduce it to children, walk it around town, bring it in the car and enroll it in a training class or puppy class with other dogs. Introducing the dog to as many things

as possible in its puppy hood (and then throughout it's adult life) is the most effective way to prevent accidents from happening. Although it doesn't guarantee anything, it surely helps improve safety. Most adult dogs can also become socialized, although the process is a bit longer and needs a lot more safety consideration. This should be done by or with the advice of a professional.

When dogs are left to their own accord they will figure out their own way to live and survive, and sometimes that is not what would be considered safe in society. I continuously watch dogs drag their owners across the parking lot into the doggie daycare. I know that Marley will pull on the leash sometimes, but when I instruct her to 'heel' she stops and waits for me to catch up. What I am talking about here is an absolute loss of control. In some of the more extreme cases at my job dog owners make us leash their dogs for them because they jump wildly and claw at them out of excitement when they get picked up. These people literally have cuts and bruises from their own dogs. Sometimes the dogs aren't even big dogs; they are spaniels and corgis. But sometimes they are big dogs, like Bernese Mountain Dogs or Weimaraners, and the total lack of control is absolutely dangerous. If the dog acts like this in a controlled situation, such as our lobby area, what is it like in public or if it gets loose? Even a dog jumping out of excitement on a child can cause serious damage, especially if it's biting and clawing as well. At the Connecticut National Pit Bull Awareness Day, held in New Haven, I witnessed over three hundred pit bulls walking around on leashes greeting each other and not one of them got into a scuffle or jumped on it's owner. I didn't even see one person get dragged by their dog (and

pit bulls like to pull). Why is this? One can only assume that it's because the owner on the other end of the leash was a responsible one who trained their dog properly.

It's important to remember however, that animals are still animals. I learned the hard way, as many others have, that there is no way to ever have complete control over an animal no matter how much training has been asserted.

“A good example is the Michael Vick dogs that were all sent to the big shelter in Utah called Best Friends, and the first word was because they were used in pit fighting they were going to be unadoptable. The fact is a lot of them have been turned around, given new lives, and been adopted out. There are two that remain there that are unadoptable,” says renowned veterinary behavioral specialist Dodman. “So for the most part there is a certain amount of rehabilitation is possible, retraining, relearning, good management, it depends on the severity of the situation. But if you take a dog who is really been under socialized or tortured, abused, made into a raging beast, and one who has an uninhibited bite, even if you have that bite under control in 999 situations, if they go off once, like a loaded gun with an uninhibited bite, they could do so much damage that you have to wonder seriously whether or not a dog like that is adoptable.”

### **Born to be Aggressive?**

It is common for many people to think that pit bulls are more vicious than other dogs and that they bite and attack people more frequently because statistics and media have reported this as truth. However, it has been stated by the Center of

Disease Control, the government agency that collects data on dog bites, that the methods of collecting dog-bite information is very unorganized and faulty.

First of all, not all dog bites are reported; especially if they are given by a small dog, or cause minute damage. Secondly, a “dog-bite” can consist of anything from an excited dog jumping and leaving a scratch mark, to a mauling by a pack. Third, for the reasons talked about previously, such as the mislabeling of breeds and mix-breed dogs, it is hard to determine if the victim can positively identify what kind of dog actually attacked him or her.

“The CDC study, if read in its entirety, explains in detail the inherent problems in attempting to calculate breed involvement in fatal attacks. The CDC further explained that a major flaw in their study was the inability to factor in total breed populations relative to breed related fatalities,” writes Delise in her book “The Pit Bull Placebo.”

Laurie Maxwell, manager of the Humane Society of the United States’ (HSUS) Pets For Life program in Chicago, formally known as “The End Dog Fighting Campaign,” has spent the last five years working with inner-city pit bulls on a daily basis.

“Pit bulls are not inherently more dangerous than other dogs,” says Maxwell during a phone interview. “Every dog has the capacity to bite. Are pit bulls a little more tenacious than other dogs? Yes. Do they have the ability to cause more damage than a Pomeranian? Absolutely. But the breed, the inherent nature of the breed does not make them more likely to bite than any other breed of dog.”

With purebred American Staffordshire Terriers, American Pit Bull Terriers and Staffordshire Bull Terriers it is especially rare to see human aggression because historically they had to be handled by people in the fighting pit. Pit bulls were indeed bred to fight other dogs, but they could not be aggressive towards their owners in anyway. Any dogs that did show aggression towards their human counterpart would have been immediately euthanized.

In an article called “Pitbulls,” Anna Macheil-Allcock of the Animal Welfare Program at the University of British Columbia explains the dynamics of fighting dogs and their humans:

“The rules of the fight required the dogs to be separated a number of times throughout the round to determine if both were still willing to continue. This involved pulling the dogs to a corner of the ring and releasing them to see if they were still willing to cross over the scratch line and fight. Any aggression towards strangers, even in the middle of a dog-fight, would not have been tolerated.”

Maxwell has seen this firsthand breaking up organized pit bull fighting rings with the HSUS:

“They breed one fighting dog with another, and another and another, until they get dogs that all they want to do is kill another dog. I remember being on one fighting raid where these 3 month-old puppies were already starting to tear at each other because their genes had been so manipulated and they had been so inbred to fight each other. Now these same dogs, and I’ve met grand champion fighting dogs, want nothing but to hug and kiss and wiggle with a human.”

Unless socialized properly many pit bulls may develop severe dog aggression issues. Pit bulls do have a higher tendency to be more aggressive towards other animals because of their dog fighting history. But, it's difficult to make a generalized statement about a whole breed experts point out.

“Dog fighting is not in every single one, there are differences even inside the breed,” explains Dodman, veterinary behavior specialist. “The fighting people want pit fighting dogs, and they call those lines inside the breed ‘game dogs.’ Michael Vick, and his collection of pit bulls, would have a preference in looking for a pit bull who was quote, ‘game.’ But there are some other pit bulls who are not ‘game,’ that even though it's sort of in their breed gene pool they personally don't have a very big dose of it. There are some very sweet pit bulls who wouldn't say ‘boo’ to a goose; who make wonderful pets.”

### **Inherently Vicious?**

People have been blaming breeds of dogs for centuries. In the 1800's Bloodhounds were trained and used to track slaves that had run away from their owners, as well as for hunting and guarding purposes. In the book “Uncle Tom's Cabin,” Blood Hounds were made infamous during the “Bloodhound pursuit” of Eliza. Suddenly Bloodhounds became America's most popular dog but also the number one enemy. Coincidentally, like pit bulls, “bloodhounds” are also made up of various pure-bred dogs such as the Cuban Bloodhound, the St. Hubert's/British Bloodhound (“True” Bloodhound), the Siberian Bloodhound and the Russian



Bloodhound. Reports in the media during the late 1800's to early 1900's referred to bloodhounds as vicious dogs, giving off the idea that they were born to be killers.

Over the years numerous other dogs have been blacklisted as the number one enemy and then eventually forgotten about, Mastiffs, Collies, St. Bernards, Fox Terriers, Boston Terriers, Airdale Terriers, German Sheppards, Rottweilers and Dobermans to name a few. Whenever a breed of dog raises to the top of popularity the more dog bites and fatalities get reported of that breed. Pit bulls happen to be at the height of their popularity right now. More dog bites from them are going to happen because there are more of them.

“For me, coming here and working just with pit bull type dogs really brought home to me how much they are individuals, and also working at a shelter that won't take pit bull type dogs really reinforced that for me because they have all types of dogs there...and the one thing that those dogs have in common in that shelter with the ones here is that they are all individuals,” explains Fraser of The Animal Farm Foundation in upstate New York. “Some of them like other dogs, some of them don't. Some of them have fear issues because of experiences they've had before they arrive at the shelter; whether is be from lack of socialization, from breeding, from mistreatment, whatever! But they are all individual cases. “

The Boston Terrier, for instance, caused numerous fatal attacks in the early 1900's. Nowadays, no one would even consider a Boston Terrier a threat. Granted they are a bit smaller now than they used to be, but this bully breed dog had a bad reputation for a while as being a “vicious killer” because they were popular at the time.

“The [Boston Terrier] savagely attacked the boy, grabbing him by the neck and shaking him,” recounts Delise in her book about an attack during the turn of the century. “The uncle rushed into the yard and had ‘great difficulty in forcing the dog to release the boy.’”

The story illustrates that even a dog most people think could be harmless now, was actually a feared breed. In the early 1900’s the Boston Terrier was quite often used as a guard dog and the dog in the above case was tied up in the back yard, which coincidentally has a lot to do with severe and fatal dog attacks.

# **What Kind of Dogs Attack?**

There are two different kinds of dogs, and it is not surprising that one attacks more than the other, regardless of breed. There are family dogs, which are kept in the home and are well cared for. Then there are resident dogs, which are usually kept outside or are kept in the home for purposes other than being a pet. Most attacks, severe and fatal, come from the latter. These dogs are not considered family pets. The dogs typically lack leadership, partnership, socialization and proper veterinary care. These dogs are typically not neutered or spayed. The most severe incidents usually result from the dog(s) breaking loose of their confinement or a person innocently walking into their territory. Packs of dogs are always more dangerous and can inflict more damage faster than a single dog could. In the rare occasion where a family pet does attack another person, it is usually because it is lacking an important thing, which is leadership and control.

## **The Family Pet**

When I was a child, my dad took us down to the local junkyard to pick out a puppy from their guard dogs' litter. It was Halloween, so we named him Spooky. He was the cutest little puppy one ever saw: a German Sheppard/Chow Chow mix who was black and tan and adorable. Spooky was always wonderful with the family, but as he got older and bigger he got a little more out of control. We never took him to training classes and definitely didn't socialize him very well. My parents worked long hours and Spooky stayed confined in the kitchen until we got home from school.

The first time we took him to a park was after he was already about six months old, and he attacked a guy on a bicycle. Spooky started getting out of the house a lot, running out after us kids. When he did he would bolt down the street, find a person and gun it straight for them. He went after three people on our road who were just out mowing their grass or taking a stroll. Luckily we were always able to catch him before he did too much damage. One day he got out after I ran outside to meet my friends and he went after a woman walking a stroller down the street. He went straight for the carriage as the mom threw herself over it. He bit the back of her legs in several places. My mom put him in the car right then and took him straight to the vet. I cried hysterically for hours. My first dog got put down at one and a half years old because my parents didn't know what they were doing when they got him.

Spooky's lack of training and leadership lead to us putting numerous people in danger every day, and now my family lives with the fact that our irresponsibility is the reason that our beloved dog had to die.

Comparing this one example to numerous severe and fatal dog attacks across the country, it's easy to see how human error is actually the cause for most of the attacks. It wasn't really Spooky's fault that we had never gotten him out of the house as a puppy. As this thesis was being researched a 20-month-old child in New Haven, Connecticut, was mauled by three pit bulls in a third floor apartment. The girl was the niece of the apartment dweller, and was left sleeping on the floor in one room, with the three dogs locked in the other. The adult left the house, leaving a few 10-year-old children in charge. They decided to go play basketball outside and somehow

the dogs got out of their confinement and attacked the little girl. By the time someone was able to get to the child, it was too late.

“The tragedy involved an unsupervised child. This child was left in the house asleep with the dogs. They were not out a lot, which is what I gathered from the news stories,” explains certified dog trainer Douglas at Connecticut National Pit Bull Awareness Day. “They probably did not have a lot of socialization or experience with people or children. The dogs and the child were unfamiliar to each other. That creates a curiosity. Dogs are curious about kids and kids are curious about dogs and they were not supervised. And that’s what’s relevant about this case. What’s not relevant about this case is that they were pit bulls.”

The adult left the child unsupervised in an area with three strong dogs. When reading stories about pit bull attacks it is important to read between the lines. It is often human error that brings about tragedy when it comes to these animals.

### **The Pack**

The truth is that if three “Spookies” were put in the room with that child, the same thing probably would have happened, especially in a pack situation. Dogs act much differently in a pack than they do on their own. Even under constant supervision the dynamic of a pack can be very unpredictable. When a fight would break out between two dogs at the daycare it was not uncommon for two or three more to jump into the middle of it. It’s just what they do. Even putting two dogs together makes a drastic difference in mentality. Using my dogs as an easy example, I’ll show you exactly what I mean:

Charlie loves cats. He snuggles with them, sleeps next to them and all around likes them. Marley LOVES cats, as in, she wants to chase them, bat them around and possibly eat them. If Charlie is with Marley, he mimics her behavior, which I hate, but there's not much I can do about except be smart and not bring a cat into the house. This is just one example of how the pack dynamic can change the state of mind. Now imagine a pack of dogs going after child instead of a cat.

“For example, you have children running down the street and lets say you've got two or three dogs in general, maybe a pit bull and a Rottweiler, whatever, and they sort of get into a pack situation, the child is running and is flailing, they switch into a different mode, predatory, and then there can be a danger,” says Dodman, an accomplished veterinary behavior specialist.

Even though a dog maybe a wonderful dog on it's own, when put into a pack, it will mimic the more confident dog in that situation. This is something that many people tend to over look. In the case of the three pit bulls who mauled the child in New Haven, it's very possible that two of the dogs wouldn't have even initially shown interest in the child. But once one of them did, the other two followed suit, and then all three of them had to be euthanized for aggressiveness. Those three dogs should have never been kept together in an apartment. It was dangerous from the beginning.

### **Backyard/Resident/Guard Dogs**

Backyard, resident and guard dogs continue however to be the biggest threat to humans. These dogs are typically not socialized, under fed, not well taken care of

and encouraged (even if unintentionally) to be aggressive. In the northeast and in more populated areas people typically keep their pets in the home, but people in many rural communities and warmer climates keep their pets outside chained to trees and dog houses or confined to a run. Some people use these dogs to guard property and junkyards. These are never allowed to be part of a family in the home. Most severe and lethal dog attacks come from these dogs, regardless of the breed.



Photo Credit: DogsDeserveBetter.org

“Guard dogs rarely attack and injure criminals or trespassers intent on evil doings—guard dogs attack neighbors, children and persons looking to conduct legitimate business on or near the location of the dogs,” writes Delise in “The Pit Bull Placebo.”

After going through reports, newspaper clippings and other data it’s typical to see that most of the dog attacks come from these backyard dogs.

“The vast majority of dog bites to children are involving with resident dogs,” says Douglas at the Connecticut National Pit Bull Awareness Day. “Seventy-one

percent of fatal dog bites are of children left unsupervised with unfamiliar resident dogs in a place that they are visiting.”

I personally remember as a child walking by the junkyard where we had gotten Spooky from. The male Chow Chow, Spooky’s dad, was always chained to a doghouse in the back and would bark viciously at me as I would walk down the old railroad tracks. I would always quicken my pace because honestly he scared the heck out of me. I could walk past a million dogs, in a million fenced in yards, and that wouldn’t faze me a bit, but that junkyard dog always made my stomach turn.

These dogs cannot control their living situations and it’s not illegal to contain dogs in this type of environment. Although many pet owners do keep their dogs in a loving fashion, providing shelter, food, water and minimal veterinary care are the only things required by law in most states. People can get away with treating their dogs in this manor because it’s not against the law. Since pit bulls have increased in popularity over the last two decades, its not surprising to find a lot of them living in these types of outside, backyard situations.

“The fact that there is no documented case of a single, spayed/neutered pit bull of pit bull-type dog, maintained exclusively as a household pet, involved in a fatal attack on a human in the United States is proof that canine behavior is profoundly influenced by the function of the dog and the quality of care and control practiced by owners,” says Delise in her book.



# Why do we hear about Pit Bulls more often?

## Media, Popularity & Ownership

Over the last few decades pit bulls have gained an enormous amount of national press, leading to an eruption in pit bull ownership. This is a similar effect to when a musician causes a lot of controversy and all of a sudden their album sales skyrocket. Ozzy Osborne, Eminem, Kurt Cobain and Michael Jackson to name a few.

Dog fighting first gained national public awareness in the late 1970's. As more and more newspapers and media outlets picked up, pit bulls began to gain popularity at an enormous rate. According to "The Pit Bull Placebo" between 1966 and 1975 there is only one fatal dog attack that may have been caused by a "pit bull-type" dog. But by the early 1980's pit bull popularity had grown enormously and more frequent attacks were happening. The United Kennel Club saw a 30 percent increase in registered American Pit Bull Terriers in one year between 1983 and 1984. By 1986 over 350 articles were printed about pit bulls in newspapers, journals and magazines. Finally, in 1987 national publications "Rolling Stone Magazine," "Time Magazine" and "Sports Illustrated" ran cover articles on pit bulls. Even though The "Rolling Stone" article focused on abuse that pit bulls face as a part of urban life, the other two magazines spoke of an unpredictable family pet that was malicious and dangerous. The "Time Magazine" headline, "Time Bomb on Legs," included inaccurate information such as pit bulls biting with 1800 psi and "steel trap jaws." "Sports Illustrated" described a "family dog" that attacked and killed a child, when in reality the owners of the dog were charged with criminal neglect for letting their child wander outside to the *four* dogs, which were chained in the backyard.

It's common today to see headlines such as "Four Pit Bulls Destroyed for Mauling Two Joggers," "Pit Bull panic: some defend dogs, some despise 'killers'", "Pit Bull attacks and kills puppy," and most recently for the case in New Haven, "Three Pit Bulls Maul Child." These articles reinforce the idea that the problem is the breed because they label these pit bulls as different than another other vicious dogs. But just before the New Haven incident occurred in September of 2011 two other incidents occurred in Connecticut. Two German Shepards attacked a man and his puppy in 2010, sending them both to the hospital, the man with punctures and the puppy with a broken leg. More recently in 2011 two Newfoundlands attacked and killed a dog at a park. The New Haven pit bull story got national and statewide press almost immediately. The other two stories boasted similar headlines of "Dogs attack..." and stayed local. These pit bull headlines reinforce the rough and tough image that people still think of today, while neglecting to shed light on other dangerous dogs. The national exposure of this new "big, bad pit bull" is exactly the type of exposure that would proceed to get the pit bull into more trouble.

"Exposing breeds of dogs involved in a negative function, through no fault of their own, will not increase their popularity with the average owner looking for a dog," explains Delise in "The Pit Bull Placebo." "Dogs portrayed in negative functions (fighting, guarding drug stashes, etc.) will only serve to increase their popularity with unsuitable owners who seek out dogs to increase their status as a person of power or intimidation."

After the explosion of media related hype to the pit bull, especially as their use in inner-city dog fighting became exposed, more inner city youths across the

nation also began to look at the pit bull as a symbol of toughness. Just like wearing Abercrombie and Fitch and driving a BMW shows a particular ranking among suburban kids; good looking and fighting pit bulls earn urban kids a higher social status. These youthful dog owners do not keep pit bulls as family pets. They usually keep them chained outside, crated for hours at a time in basements, or stored in abandoned buildings and so on. These pit bulls are not socialized or trained to do anything other than to fight.

Unlike organized dog fighting, in which the dogs are kept far away from society, street dog fighting is happening in every major city everyday. Although all forms of dog fighting are cruel and unusual to the animals involved, street dog fighting is also what poses a major threat to the people of the cities. It's these unsocialized, malnourished pooches that are the cause for many fatal attacks; their breed has nothing to do with it.

“These dogs then pose a direct danger to children- not because they are pit bulls, but because they are individually abused, encouraged to be aggressive, poorly socialized and have not had the opportunity to form positive attachments to humans,” writes Delise.

The Humane Society of the United States started working with inner city youth in 2006 hoping make a difference in the communities where street dog fighting occurs. The HSUS hired reformed dog fighters to work with youth dog owners and help them train their dogs in special services and agility.

“The kids are like, ‘Okay well, what else do pit bulls do? What else are they used for?’ You know, that’s all they knew,” explains Maxwell of the Pets for Life

Program in Chicago. “There’s no construct of a pit bull as a family pet in these neighborhoods.”

By reforming the kids to be responsible and have their dogs well trained, the HSUS hopes to make these urban communities safer for both people and animals alike. Although Maxwell acknowledged that many of the reformed dogs would never be dog-friendly, she explained that almost all of them are absolutely wonderful with humans and are perfectly fit to be a pet in the right home.

“Retrievers were bred to retrieve, pit bulls were bred to be the world’s greatest fighting dog. But the key is, dog aggression does not translate into human aggression,” says Maxwell.

### **Breed Restrictions and Confusion over Pit Bulls**

In an attempt to stop the “pit bull problem” many major cities have placed bans on pit bulls, pit bull look-a-likes, and bully breeds. Some states have similar laws restricting ownership. These laws have been created and publicized by numerous politicians who gain popularity by “protecting” the public.

It is a fact that breed-specific legislations (BSL) have done nothing but punish responsible dog owners and euthanize thousands of innocent animals. The most well known example of this is Denver, Colo. which enacted a pit bull ban in 1989.

“Breed bans endorse the profoundly mistaken notion that the breed of dog is the driving force behind the attack,” is a statement included in a research-based packet by the National Canine Research Council.

In the last thirty or so years dog bites around the country have historically decreased in numbers: Minneapolis by 86 percent, New York City by 90 percent and Baltimore by 91 percent. None of these cities have BSLs; they enforce leash and containment laws.

“It’s looking at the dog as the source of the problem, rather than the human. You can remove the dog from the equation but you still have the reckless owner that’s just going to get another dog and continue their behavior,” says Coleman of the Animal Farm Foundation. “If the way we dealt with things in society was to remove the result, rather than the underlying symptoms that led things to go astray, that would be what the BSL is doing.”

Now that BSLs are in effect, thousands of dogs are being euthanized for no reason. Remember Jesse from Ontario? He wasn’t even close to being a pit bull and he was almost killed.

“Breed specific legislation, and banning certain breeds, will not make any difference in preventing these tragedies. First, the pit bulls who are bred and trained to be aggressive to people are generally done so by criminals who have a reason to keep a trained guard dog because they are involved in illicit activities. If the current laws don’t prevent them from dealing drugs, for example, why would a new law cause them to not have a dangerous dog?” questions Douglas at Connecticut National Pit Bull Awareness Day. “Second, these particular people, if their dogs are taken from them and destroyed, they’ll just raise another one, either of the same breed or they’ll pick another breed and then that breed will be targeted.”

Unless they start DNA testing, every dog that comes into the shelters, how are they even sure they are pit bulls? There have been countless stories of animal control officers taking dogs out of perfectly good homes and euthanizing them because they are “pit bulls.” Is this truly an effective way to end the “pit bull problem?”

## Bringing it All Together

We have come to the understanding that not all pit bulls are going to get along with other dogs, cats and small animals. Because of their terrier traits and breeding history some pit bulls will attack and kill other dogs and small animals, especially when not socialized as a puppy. But that does not translate to human aggression. In fact, human aggression was literally bred out of this breed. In almost all cases of dogs attacking individuals, it is the human that is to blame. Whether it is a child that was not being watched or dogs that were gravely mistreated and got loose, almost every time, the human, the domesticator, is the one at fault.

Dogs need to be judged individually. Not every dog of any breed is going to be a natural born killer. Nor is every dog, of any breed, going to be friendly (I've met some mean Labrador Retrievers). If there is nothing else that I've learned from the two years that I worked with dogs off-leash, it is that every dog had its own personality. Every dog interacts differently. Most importantly I have learned that dogs actually *feel*. I have watched dogs select and play with their best friends, and refuse to give others the time of day. I've seen two dogs bond and fall in love with each other. I've seen dogs that are fine with most dogs, but have to be kept separate from a select few. I've met dogs that are absolutely wonderful with people, and hate other dogs completely. And I've met dogs that are great with their owners, and other dogs, but cannot be near strangers. Each dog is different.

Dogs need to be trained and owners need to be held responsible. Instead of banning certain breeds, strengthen and enforce leash and containment laws. Hold people responsible for neglecting and hurting their animals. Stop previous animal

cruelty convicts from obtaining future pets. These are all ways that would help prevent people from getting hurt, without having to place blame on a specific breed.

That being said, pit bulls are strong, determined creatures. As much as people love to personify their pets, it is important to remember that animals are not humans and respond differently to things than humans do. When an animal is scared, it cannot tell you, so it will bite. Chief bit me numerous times while Beck was attacking him, and it wasn't because he was being aggressive, it was because he was utterly terrified.

When a pit bull does decide to attack with his full force, he can bite and hold on and shake vigorously, and he can hurt really badly. Pit bulls can do a massive amount of damage when the situation allows for it, and that should never be discounted. But, it is important to remember that any large breed dog, a German Sheppard, Rottweiler, English Mastiff, etc are likely to inflict the same amount of damage that a pit bull would if they were also attacking at their full capacity.

“I think any dog can be dangerous. But, I don't look at the dogs, I look at the human element, because ultimately no matter what, it comes back to people. So whether someone has intentionally bred for aggression or whether someone has treated their dogs well or not, or socialized them or not, it's all about us really, it's not about any breed or type, it's about us and what we've done,” says Fraser of the Animal Farm Foundation.

Throughout history man has simultaneously created dogs and feared dogs. From the Bloodhound, to the Doberman, to the Great Dane, to the pit bull, and even the Boston Terrier, society has always been able to pinpoint specific breeds as “public



enemy number one.” Media, popularity and ownership are all factors in contributing to these “vicious outlaw” breeds.

On average, 40,000 people are killed in America each year by car accidents. Last year 34 fatal dog attacks occurred. Is the “pit bull problem” really as big as people make it out to be?

“I hope that people would start to become educated about them, to learn about the breed. That would be my hope. Learn about the breed, and don’t be afraid of the breed,” says Veronica Bickelhaupt, shelter manager of the Danbury Animal Welfare Society in Danbury, Conn.

“I could never think about returning to the office, it breaks my heart to think of the dogs,” laughs Fraser of the Animal Farm Foundation. But then her face turns a bit more serious. “Truth is though, I’ve learned way more from them, than they will ever learn from me. They are fabulous teachers if you just stop and give them the chance.”

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