

## Pit bull faq

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### Q: What is a pit bull?



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

The legal definition of a pit bull is a class of dogs that includes several breeds: American pit bull terrier, American Staffordshire terrier, Staffordshire bull terrier and any other pure bred or mixed breed dog that is a combination of these dogs. Progressive legislation also includes the American bulldog,<sup>1</sup> a related breed that shares the same blood sport heritage of bull-baiting. In 1999, the United Kennel Club became the only major kennel club that recognizes the American bulldog.

In the State of Ohio, the legal definition of a pit bull is a "breed of dog commonly known as a pit bull."<sup>2</sup> The American bulldog became part of this definition after a series of appellate court rulings, *The State of Ohio v. Anderson* (1991) and *Toledo, Ohio v. Paul Tellings* (2007). Weight and shape can vary significantly amongst pit bulls, from 35 to 100 plus pounds.<sup>3</sup> (Please see Disguise Breed Name to learn more about the deliberate renaming and mislabeling of pit bulls throughout history.)

<sup>1</sup> Jurisdictions, particularly in Ohio and nearby states, are also incorporating canary dogs (presa canarios) into their breed-specific dog ordinances. See the Wheeling, West Virginia example.

<sup>2</sup> From 1987 to 2012, Ohio had a statewide pit bull law. This document references the statute at that time, Section 955 of the Ohio Revised Code. By 2006, "a breed of dog commonly known as a pit bull" included: American pit bull terrier, American Staffordshire terrier, Staffordshire bull terrier, American bulldog and any other pure bred or mixed breed dog whose appearance and physical characteristics is predominately those of any of the dogs listed above, or is a combination of any of the dogs listed above. Though the state law was repealed in 2012, many jurisdictions in Ohio maintain their pit bull ordinances. The appellate decisions pertaining to this issue remain intact.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Raising Cain Kennels, breeds and sells XL and XXL red nosed pit bulls. Google query, "XXL pit bull breeders," to find more 100 plus pound pit bull breeders. (Accessed: August 20, 2015)

## Q: What is the history of the pit bull?

The phenotypes of dogs that share the common definition of "pit bull" derive their heritage from "the Butcher's Dog"<sup>4</sup> developed through the sport of bull-baiting in England, which had progressed to Britain's national pastime by 1500. Bulldogs were 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.<sup>5</sup>

Due to public outrage, bull-baiting was banned in England in 1835. Bulldog breeders and owners then moved to the sport of "rattling," 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 rattling that combined the bulldog and terrier into the modern day pit bull terrier.

On the heels of rattling, 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 the rules and regulations for dogfighting to bring "organization" to the blood sport.<sup>6</sup>

## 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.<sup>7</sup> (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.<sup>8</sup> 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 2008, Edward Faron of Wildside Kennels, known as the "godfather" of dogfighting, was arrested and charged. Faron pleaded guilty to 14

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<sup>4</sup> "A subtype of Molossian dogs known as *Bullenbeissers* were valued for their ability to control unruly cattle, earning their keep as butcher's dogs. These dogs had to catch and grip escaping or uncooperative bulls on their way to market. The dog would hang on the bull's nose without letting go until the butcher could regain control. As with all people who depend upon their dogs, butchers were proud of their best 'bulldogs' and anxious to prove them better than the neighboring village's butcher's dog." *Pit Bulls for Dummies*, by D. Caroline Coile, Wiley Publishing, Inc. 2001.

<sup>5</sup> *The History of Bull-baiting*, by Amy Fernandez, DogChannel.com ([www.dogchannel.com](http://www.dogchannel.com))

<sup>6</sup> *American Pit Bull Terrier Handbook*, by Joe Stahlkuppe, Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 2000. Also see the rules governing recognized dog fight matches: *The American Pit Bull Terrier (History of Fighting Dogs Series)*, by Joseph L. Colby, The News Publishing Company, 1936.

<sup>7</sup> *The Complete Gamedog: A Guide to Breeding & Raising the American pit bull terrier*, by Ed and Chris Faron, Walsworth Pub. Co., 1995.

<sup>8</sup> *Dogfighting Fact Sheet*, The Humane Society of the United States ([www.humansociety.com](http://www.humansociety.com))

counts of felony dogfighting.<sup>9</sup> In 2009, authorities unleashed an 8-state simultaneous dogfighting sting and seized over 450 dogs.<sup>10</sup> From 2013 to 2015, major multi-state raids occurred as well.<sup>11</sup>

## **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 now over 30-years old.<sup>12</sup> 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.<sup>13</sup> 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 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.<sup>14</sup>

## **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] inflicted 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." - *Kory Nelson, One City's Experience*<sup>15</sup>

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

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<sup>9</sup> Dog-fighting 'godfather' given prison, by Monte Mitchell, Winston-Salem Journal, February 13, 2009 ([www.journalnow.com](http://www.journalnow.com))

<sup>10</sup> Eight-State Dogfighting Raid Largest in U.S. History, by Wayne Pacelle, The Humane Society of the United States, July 9, 2009 ([blog.humanesociety.org](http://blog.humanesociety.org))

<sup>11</sup> High Stakes Dog Fighters And Gamblers Arrested 367 Fighting Pit Bulls Seized, Department of Justice, August 26, 2013 ([justice.gov](http://justice.gov)) and Nine People Charged in Multi-State Dog Fighting Conspiracy, Department of Justice, June 1, 2016 ([justice.gov](http://justice.gov))

<sup>12</sup> Pit Bulls -- Family Pets and Fierce Fighters, by Tom Greely, Los Angeles Times, July 25, 1982.

<sup>13</sup> 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.

<sup>14</sup> One City's Experience, by Kory A. Nelson, Senior City Attorney for the City of Denver, Municipal Lawyer, July/August 2005.

<sup>15</sup> One City's Experience, by Kory A. Nelson, Senior City Attorney for the City of Denver, Municipal Lawyer, July/August 2005. See also: 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.

stick on any other dog breed may cause serious injury to the person.<sup>16</sup> 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. Paul 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.<sup>17</sup>

### **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 injuries. 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.<sup>18</sup>

### **Q: Can a pit bull be correctly identified?**

Yes, pit bulls are an identifiable dog breed. This is validated by a series of appellate court decisions starting in 1988. (For a break down of each decision see: Pit Bulls Are Identifiable). Each appellate court concluded in its own variance that a "dog owner of ordinary intelligence" or a "layman" could identify a pit bull. Pit bull owners and animal welfare groups, however, still claim the average person, and even professional shelter workers, cannot correctly identify a pit bull.

"Pit bull dogs possess unique and readily identifiable physical and behavioral traits which are capable of recognition both by dog owners of ordinary intelligence..." - *Ohio v. Anderson, Supreme Court of Ohio (1991)*

Nowhere do the high courts make any presumption of "expert" knowledge being necessary to identify a pit bull. Further, appellate courts in Ohio explained in 1989 and 1991 that "an ordinary person could easily refer to a dictionary, a dog buyer's guide or any dog book for guidance and instruction" and "consistent and detailed descriptions of the pit bull dog may be found in canine guidebooks" and more.<sup>19</sup> These rulings occurred a decade before the invention of Google Search.

### **Related appellate decisions**

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<sup>16</sup> Breaking Up a Fight, Pit Bull Rescue Central ([www.pbrc.net](http://www.pbrc.net))

<sup>17</sup> Information provided by the Lucas County, Ohio Dog Warden and viewing the "Gray's pit bulls" (April 11, 1997) video.

<sup>18</sup> Pit Bulls Lead "Bite" Counts Across U.S. Cities and Counties, by DogsBite.org (continuously updated)

<sup>19</sup> *Vanater v. Village of South Point*, 717 F. Supp. 1236 - Dist. Court, SD Ohio 1989. *Ohio v. Anderson*, 57 Ohio St. 3d 168 - Ohio: Supreme Court 1991.

- *Garcia v. Village of Tijeras*, 767 P. 2d 355 - NM: Court of Appeals 1988.
- *Vanater v. Village of South Point*, 717 F. Supp. 1236 - Dist. Court, SD Ohio 1989.
- *Colorado Dog Fanciers v. Denver*, 820 P. 2d 644 - Colo: Supreme Court 1991.
- *Ohio v. Anderson*, 57 Ohio St. 3d 168 - Ohio: Supreme Court 1991.

## 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 conducted 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."<sup>20</sup>

"As a way of counterbalancing the effect of this breed's appearance and physical power, many respondents alluded to images and stories of their pit bulls' affection, which directly contradicted their intimidating reputation. Owners frequently focused on displays of affection as well as the breed's sensitivity and attunement to people. One owner described the introduction between her pit bull and a wary friend who was concerned about the dog because she had young children:

...She came over here and sat down...and [my dog] got up on the couch and started kissing her and everything. And she's like, 'Oh my God; well, I guess this is okay - the dog is just going to kiss my kids to death'!

Another owner, focusing on the contrast between his dog's physical strength and her docile personality, explained, '[My pit bull] is a strong, powerful dog but, you know, she'd lick you to death.'" - *Managing the Stigma of Outlaw Breeds: A Case Study of Pit Bull Owners* (2000)

## 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.<sup>21</sup> The practical and moral 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. Every year, one or more Americans suffers death due to pit bull dog aggression, including owners like Michelle Segerdahl and Rita Woodard who died while attempting to break up a fight between their pit bulls.

<sup>20</sup> *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.

<sup>21</sup> 10 Easy to Remember Tips for Responsible Pit Bull Owners, PitBullLovers.com ([www.pitbulllovers.com](http://www.pitbulllovers.com)) (Accessed: July 9, 2016)

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 tearing through screen doors of private homes -- in a home invasion attack -- to kill the pet living inside.<sup>22</sup> Owners of the pet may be forced to watch as their dog or cat is disemboweled by the pit bull and pray that the animal 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 and the euthanasia of pit bulls. In late 2014, Animals 24-7, a group that tracks shelter killings, estimated that of the 1.3 million shelter dogs projected for euthanasia in 2014, pit bulls accounted for 56%.<sup>23</sup> This is true despite the fact that pit bulls only make up about 6% of the total U.S. dog population.<sup>24</sup>

Over 900 U.S. cities and nearly all privatized military housing -- the U.S. Army, U.S. Marine Corps and U.S. Air Force -- and many public housing authorities have breed-specific restrictions. Such measures often include: mandatory sterilization, liability insurance and strict containment rules. The most progressive law, a pit bull ban, prohibits new pit bulls and new pit bull breeding. In just a few years, these communities see a significant drop in pit bull bites and euthanasia of pit bulls.

## **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](http://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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<sup>22</sup> Pit bull put down after attack, by Kieran Nicholson, The Denver Post, March 3, 2009 ([www.denverpost.com](http://www.denverpost.com)) (Archived by WebCite® at <http://www.webcitation.org/6bcQ8VhI4>)

<sup>23</sup> Record low shelter killing raises both hopes & questions, by Merritt Clifton, Animals 24-7, November 19, 2014 ([www.animals24-7.org](http://www.animals24-7.org))

<sup>24</sup> Dog attack deaths and maimings, U.S. & Canada, September 1982 to December 31, 2014, by Merritt Clifton, Animals 24-7, December 31, 2014 ([www.animals24-7.org](http://www.animals24-7.org))