

The Confinement, Handling and Care of Fighting Dogs

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History

A robust dog was bred specifically for the sport of baiting bulls in England during the 17th Century.^{1,2} When bull baiting was outlawed in 1835, the pitting of one dog against another was popularized. The large mastiffs which had been used for bull baiting were cumbersome and uncoordinated, thus smaller, faster dogs were selected for contests in the pits. Enterprising enthusiasts bred several of the terrier types of the 1800's with the mastiffs to produce a breed particularly adapted for the sport of dog-fighting. The goal of the breeders was to develop a fighting dog with agility, strength, and tenacity and some of these animals are currently recognized as official breeds by the American Kennel Club and United Kennel Club.

Breeds

British "Gentlemen" in the late 1800's and coal miners of the Midlands helped to promote and breed dogs which are similar to animals used by the fighting dog enthusiasts of today.²

The use of the term "pit bull" refers to a group of animals and can be likened to using the term "police dog" to describe Belgium and German Shepherds. Both are generic terms and do not refer to a specific breed. There are three recognized breeds observed among fighting dogs confiscated by humane society officials:^{3, 4, i.e.,} 1) Bull Terriers, 2) American Staffordshire Terriers, and 3) Staffordshire Bull Terriers.^{3,4}

The Bull Terrier (Fig 1), a fashionable British fighting dog of the 1860's, is now

rarely used in the "pits". Physically this breed is distinguished by the profile of the head which curves downward with no apparent "stop" from the top of the skull to the nose.

The American Staffordshire Terrier (Fig. 2) is also known as the American Pit Bull Terrier. This breed was registered by the American Kennel Club in 1935 as the Staffordshire Terrier. The breed name was changed January 1, 1972 to the current name, American Staffordshire Terrier. The American Staffordshire Terrier (Fig. 2) is considered to be the dog show counterpart of the American (Pit) Bull Terrier (Fig. 3). The American Staffordshire Terrier is consistent in type when observed in the show ring or publications of the



Fig. 1: Bull Terrier with a short ear crop. This prevents adversaries from biting sensitive ears in a fight. This breed is considered to be the least game when compared to other breeds of fighting dogs. Bull Terrier fanciers are attempting to breed these animals away from gameness.



Fig. 2: American Staffordshire Terrier with boxer ear crop. This animal had many scars and generalized demodectic mange. The mange responded well to our combination therapy of topical and systemic medication and a good high protein diet.

breed. However, the conformation of the American Pit Bull Terrier differs greatly among confiscated animals or in photographs of "underground" fighting publications. This may be due to enthusiasts that promote the "gameness" or fighting ability of these dogs rather than adhering to standards for the breed. Some dog fighters believe breeding to a show standard can ruin the American Pit Bull Terrier in its performance in the pits (Fig. 3).¹



Fig. 3: An American Pit Bull Terrier depicting a common phenotype found in the dog fighting pit. This animal was a dark red color and suspected to be of the Old Family Red blood line much sought after by dog fighting enthusiasts. Note old scars on legs and about face.

The Staffordshire Bull Terrier (Fig. 4) breed history identifies this dog of 1800's as being related to the "Bulldog Terrier" or the "Bull and Terrier" of that era. The Staffordshire Bull Terrier was recognized by the English Kennel Club in 1935 and the American Kennel Club in October, 1974. This dog is smaller in weight (28 to 38 lbs.) and in height (14 to 16 inches) when compared to the 17-19 inches of the American Staffordshire



Fig. 4: The Staffordshire Bull Terrier with a Boxer type of ear crop. This is the smallest in weight and size of the three recognized breeds.

Terrier. Other breeds and crosses are used in pit fights. However, they lack the endurance and gameness of the other recognized breeds of fighting dogs.

Observed Lesions

The prominent lesions observed in fighting dogs presented to veterinarians or confiscated by humane society officials are wounds, abscesses (Figs. 5,7), scars, (Fig. 3), and fractures (Fig. 6).^{4,5}

Most dog fighters treat their own animals with medications purchased from farm or ranch supply stores or use home remedies.¹ However, occasionally a dog fighter will bring a dog to a veterinary clinic for treatment of major fight wounds that are not responding to treatment to "hide out" a stolen dog or to avoid confiscation of a valuable fighting dog if a raid is suspected.⁶

A respectable veterinary hospital provides an ideal sanctuary. This can also be used as evidence in the event of a trial to indicate the owners concern about the animal's care.

Clinic/Boarding Confinement

Boarding or treating a "pit bull" is a serious responsibility. Their strength and intelligence can be a match for the clinic staff, and the practitioner as well as the physical structure of the confinement area (Fig. 8).^{1,7}

It is recommended to isolate suspected fighting dogs or "pit dogs" that are game in sturdy cement and/or metal

enclosures preferably with a primary barrier surrounding the cage (Fig. 9).^{1,7} Kennel assistants should be instructed on the necessity of closing or latching kennel doors and reporting doors and locks that malfunction. A loose pit bull terrier in the clinic overnight will harass recuperating, ill or surgical patients as well as possibly breaking into other enclosures to maim or kill other confined hospital patients.

Behavioral Considerations

Threat Display

Unlike many other breeds of dogs, pit bulls rarely try to threaten or bluff other animals.^{1,3} Generally, they do not bare their teeth, growl or raise their body hair. They direct all of their strength and attention toward combating the other animal or animals. The size or breed of dog will not dissuade nor deter the game pit bull. There are accounts of one pit bull engaging three larger dogs simultaneously and killing them all. Pit bulls maintain eye contact with handlers and do not back down as readily as other kennel dogs.



Fig. 5: Facial bite wounds. Infected bite wounds heal quickly after surgical drainage and systemic antibiotic therapy. Wounds such as this are common among confiscated fighting pit bulls.

Compatibility With Dogs

Game pit bulls are not compatible with the dogs of the same breed, sex or the opposite sex. A male pit bull will fight with a female pit bull if given the opportunity. It is very difficult to condition pit bulls to coexist with other dogs.¹ Regardless of the length of time for confinement, aggressiveness towards the other animals will not decrease.³



Fig. 6: Compound leg fracture in an adult female pit bull. This injury was the result of an attack by a male pit bull which lasted only a few minutes. The jaw of the female pit dog was also fractured in the encounter. This radiograph illustrates the strength of the bite which is in excess of 650 pounds of pressure per square inch.

Tolerance to Pain

The pit bulls react minimally, if at all, to injections by either the intramuscular or intravenous routes. This may be due to high beta endorphin or other morphinomimetic substances.³ After being anesthetized to suture or debride wounds, a lean pit bull will recover rapidly indicating an active metabolism rate.³

Restraint

The routine methods of physical restraint, since they can chew through ordinary leads and break away from experienced handlers, do not work well on the heavily muscled and forceful pit bulls (Fig. 10). Fortunately, only dogs that are amiable to humans are kept by the fightfanciers (Fig. 11).¹ Dogs that show aggression to handlers in the pits will be destroyed since the dogs must be handled for the pre-fight washing of combatant dogs and the use of the "breaking stick" to separate fighting animals.^{1,8,9}

Organized dog fighting is rapidly spreading in the United States despite the fact it is illegal in all 50 states and by Federal Law.⁵ The Ohio dog fighting



Fig. 7: A puncture wound through the lip. This type of wound is commonly observed in confiscated fighting dogs shortly after a fight and may be a result of automutilation during a fight or inflicted by another animal.



Fig. 8: Damage to areas of confinement. Epoxy paint was removed from the kennel floor by constant clawing during several months of confinement by a pit bull. Metal doors and hardware were also damaged. Dogs should not be separated by only a single woven wire fence since they will attempt to fight through the fence or pull on limbs of other kennel dogs.



Fig. 9: Pit bulls should be confined in large kennels with cement walls obstructing vision or contact with other animals. Kennels must have locking devices which cannot be opened by animals jumping against them. Feeding and watering dishes must be made of heavy metal and securely fastened.



Fig. 10: Handling the pit bulls with heavy nylon loop lead will eliminate the need to reach into cages with exposed hands. Other animals should never be allowed to come into contact or be handled in the presence of a pit bull.



Fig. 11: An American Pit Bull Terrier with infected bite wounds on both jaws. Wounds may be cleaned daily without the animal exhibiting pain or becoming aggressive toward the handler. Note the heavy collar and buckles which are required to securely chain or restrain a pit bull.

law is one of the strongest in the nation making it a felony to promote, engage in or witness a dog fight, or to own or sell equipment or dogs for the purpose of fighting.¹⁰ Dog fighting enthusiasts vary as to their involvements in other illegal activities such as drugs, gambling, prostitution and violent crime.^{4,5} Most exposés of dogfighting have been supported financially by national and local humane groups but the tremendous cost to organize a raid and board confiscated animals for several months before legal action is very expensive and for some smaller humane groups, prohibitive.

Suggestions of Actions That Promote the Crackdown on Dog Fighting

1. Uniform laws in all states, education of lawyers and judges of the cruelty of dog fighting and support of legislature and judicial system in efforts to stop dogfighting.
2. Prosecution of dog fighters with deterrent penalties such as automatic repossession of cars, houses, barns, etc. which were used in dog fighting.
3. Mandatory reporting by veterinarians of clients that are involved in dog fighting. The state of Wisconsin was the first state to enact this legislation. Laws exist to protect individuals that witness and report acts that may be illegal.
4. Tattooing of dogs and registration in a dog registry such as National Dog Registry¹¹ of all fighting dogs. Thus dogs stolen for use in fighting and are seized at residences or in dog fights could be identified. This would provide information on methods of transportation for stolen family pets. Nonfighting dogs are stolen for the training of and conditioning of fighting dogs.
5. Veterinary personnel should advise owners of the three most common fighting dog breeds, that their animals require special attention to avoid being stolen and used in dog fighting.
6. The public should be informed about dogfighting and their support sought through the media and community organizations.
7. Confiscated dogs should be euthanized to prevent the injury of other pets by pit dogs adopted out to homes of well intentioned people. Adopted dogs are being stolen and returned to the pits and this point should be carefully considered

a National Dog Registry
Carmel N.y. 10512

before adopting these animals out to homes. Fighting dogs or their progeny that are game will not make satisfactory pets and the best recommendation is euthanasia. There have been numerous instances where owners, their children, other pets, or the pets of neighbors have been injured or killed by adopted fighting dogs.

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Author's Note

The observations in this article were made on 32 fighting dogs which were seized in Lucas County by the Toledo Humane Society and the Humane Society of the United States in cooperation with other law enforcement agencies and confined at the Medical College of Ohio for a nine month period.

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cost of animals . . .
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number of dogs and cats that would have to be destroyed. There are many people who need their pets for protection, to prevent loneliness, etc.

This is *not* the answer. This is *one* answer. Who asked the question? Nobody did. Nobody has to ask this question. I want to save animal lives any way possible. Are A.H.T.s being used properly? Can we organize to save animal lives?

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