

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,¹ 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."² 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.³ (Please see Disguise Breed Name to learn more about the deliberate renaming and mislabeling of pit bulls throughout history.)

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 *Bullenbeisser*, "the Butcher's Dog," developed through bull-baiting in England, which progressed into a blood sport and a national pastime by 1500.⁴ 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.⁵

Due to public outrage, the blood sport of bull-baiting was banned in England in 1835. Bulldog owners and breeders then moved to the sport of "ratting," 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 of the time. Essentially, it was the sport of ratting that combined the bulldog and terrier into the modern day pit bull terrier.⁶

"Other breed historians contend that no such cross was made and point out that the bulldog of the time, the *Bullenbeisser*, was, in fact, so similar to the modern pit bull that it was simply a matter of selecting the most successful fighters."⁷ - D. Caroline Coile, Phd, Wiley Publishing, Inc., 2001

On the heels of ratting, 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 the pit bull breed 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, a "pit contest," to bring "organization" to the blood sport.^{8,9}

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, with a cracked skull and worse.¹⁰ Excerpts from [The Complete Gamedog](#), by Ed and Chris Faron delve into more grisly details.

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 and firearm sales, often accompany dog fight matches. A single dog fight averages about an hour in length but can last two or more.¹¹ A dog fight begins when a referee says, "Face your dogs," then says, "Let go." The fight match ends when one of the dogs will not or cannot continue.

The indictment of former NFL player Leshon Johnson in 2025 for running a [large-scale dogfighting](#) operation known as "Mal Kant Kennels," shows that dogfighting still proliferates. Authorities seized 190 pit bulls on his Oklahoma properties.¹² Not long after, law enforcement in South Carolina seized 160 pit bulls in a multi-county dogfighting operation.¹³ From 2022 to

2023, federal authorities seized 425 pit bulls in separate multi-county dogfighting busts across the Midlands and Upstate South Carolina.^{14,15}

There is no evidence that pit bulls selectively bred for dogfighting is slowing down in America or other parts of the world. "Dog fighters operate hidden in plain sight," and "the average person doesn't realize how prevalent dogfighting still is," authorities say.¹⁶

In other states, law enforcement seized over 120 pit bulls in a dogfighting network in southern New Jersey operated by "Royal Bull Kennels."¹⁷ In central Florida, "Operation Pedigree," involving multiple agencies, seized 111 pit bulls from a dogfighting and drug trafficking ring.¹⁸ In Georgia, Vincent Lemark Burrell was found guilty of 93 counts of dogfighting and sentenced to 475 years in jail after authorities raided his Paulding County, Georgia compound in 2022 and seized over 100 fighting pit bulls.^{19,20}

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 40-years old](#).²¹ In this time, most lawmakers have been "too afraid" to take the necessary actions to protect public health and safety. 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.²² Since the late 1970's pit bulls have been used extensively in criminal operations involving drug trafficking, illegal firearms, 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 punishing bite style, tenacity (gameness) and a high tolerance to pain.²³

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."^{24,25} - *Kory Nelson, Municipal Lawyer, 2005*

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 stick on any other dog breed may cause serious injury to the person.²⁶ This is true because no other dog breed possesses the pit bull's tenacity combined with its destructive "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 -- where 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.²⁷

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, lethal firearm intervention may be the only way to stop the canine.

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 [violent pit bull mauling](#), which can constitute hundreds of puncture wounds and extensive soft tissue loss. Despite the "quagmire" of dog bite statistics, [pit bulls lead biting incidents](#) across U.S. cities and counties.²⁸

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 breakdown 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 that "consistent and detailed descriptions of the pit bull dog may be found in canine guidebooks."²⁹ These high court rulings occurred a decade before the invention of Google Search, and 35 years before ChatGPT.

Related appellate decisions

- [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."

"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.'³⁰ - *Twining, et al., Society & Animals, 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.³¹ 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 cases, 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 through redirected or direct aggression. Every year, one or more Americans suffers death due to pit bull dog aggression, including owners like [Donald Gibson](#) and [Juan Ruiz](#) who died while attempting to break up a fight involving their own pit bull.

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 residential homes -- in a home invasion attack -- to kill the pet living inside.³² Owners of the pet may be forced to watch as their dog or cat is disemboweled by the pit bull and pray that the canine 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%.³³ This is true despite the fact that pit bulls only make up about 6% of the total U.S. dog population.³⁴

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, 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 model laws that restrict dangerous dog breeds and documentation of their constitutionality. 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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End notes:

¹ 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.

² 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.

³ 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)

⁴ "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.

⁵ [The History of Bull-baiting](#), by Amy Fernandez, DogChannel.com (www.dogchannel.com)

⁶ [When Our Best Friend Becomes Our Worst Enemy: The Story of American Bully XL Attacks and the Campaign That Banned the Breed in Britain](#), by Lawrence Newport, *Skeptic*, December 20, 2024 (skeptical.com).

⁷ [Pit Bulls for Dummies](#), D. Caroline Coile, Phd, 2001, Pg 9.

⁸ [The American Pit Bull Terrier Handbook](#), by Joe Stahlkuppe, Barron's Educational Series, Inc., 2000.

⁹ [The American Pit Bull Terrier \(History of Fighting Dogs Series\)](#), by Joseph L. Colby, *The News Publishing Company*, 1936.

¹⁰ [The Complete Gamedog: A Guide to Breeding & Raising the American pit bull terrier](#), by Ed and Chris Faron, Walsworth Pub. Co., 1995.

¹¹ [Dogfighting Fact Sheet](#), The Humane Society of the United States (www.humansociety.com)

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- ¹² [Oklahoma Man Charged with Operating Large-Scale Dog Fighting and Trafficking Venture](#), Department of Justice, March 25, 2025 (justice.gov)
- ¹³ Haileigh West, "[SLED dogfighting operation rescues 160 animals, seizes drugs, firearms & cash](#)," WPDE, April 7, 2025 (wpde.com)
- ¹⁴ Ted Clifford, "[120 dogs rescued in major dogfighting bust by federal and SC law enforcement](#)," *The State*, September 23, 2023 (thestate.com)
- ¹⁵ [Joint Operation Targets Massive Dogfighting Conspiracy](#), Department of Justice, September 26, 2022 (justice.gov)
- ¹⁶ Press release: [Paulding County man sentenced to 475 years for dog fighting and animal cruelty](#), Paulding County District Attorney's Office, January 30, 2025 (facebook.com)
- ¹⁷ [AG Platkin Announces Over 100 Dogs Rescued and Eight Defendants Arrested After Search of Cumberland County Dogfighting Compound](#), Attorney General Matthew J. Platkin, State of New Jersey Department of Law & Public Safety, April 5, 2024 (njoag.gov)
- ¹⁸ Evan Axelbank, "[Several arrested as Pinellas deputies seize drugs, guns, money from drug operation and a dog-fighting ring](#)," KSTU, July 24, 2024 (fox13news.com)
- ¹⁹ Amanda Alvarado, "[Man sentenced to nearly 500 years in prison for dogfighting crimes](#)," WCSC, February 6, 2025 (live5news.com)
- ²⁰ After the dogs are seized, when the federal government is involved, the United States Marshals Service (USMS) takes over the "[dog care services](#)" of the pit bulls: the "[relocation, kenneling, vet care, behavioral analysis, expert witness testimony and adoption](#)" processes. [USMS awards contracts](#) worth millions of dollars to vendors for this purpose. Thus, the United States federal government pays millions of dollars to adopt fight bust dogs into our communities.
- ²¹ Pit Bulls -- Family Pets and Fierce Fighters, by Tom Greely, *Los Angeles Times*, July 25, 1982.
- ²² 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.
- ²³ [One City's Experience](#), by Kory A. Nelson, Senior City Attorney for the City of Denver, *Municipal Lawyer*, July/August 2005.
- ²⁴ One City's Experience, by Kory A. Nelson.
- ²⁵ [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.
- ²⁶ [Breaking Up a Fight](#), Pit Bull Rescue Central (www.pbrc.net)
- ²⁷ Information provided by the Lucas County, Ohio Dog Warden and viewing the "Gray's pit bulls" (April 11, 1997) video.
- ²⁸ [Pit Bulls Lead "Bite" Counts Across U.S. Cities and Counties](#), by DogsBite.org (continuously updated)
- ²⁹ *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.
- ³⁰ [Managing the Stigma of Outlaw Breeds: A Case Study of Pit Bull Owners](#), by Twining H, et al., Tufts Center for Animals and Public Policy, *Society & Animals*, Vol. 8 Number 1, 2000.
- ³¹ 10 Easy to Remember Tips for Responsible Pit Bull Owners, PitBullLovers.com (www.pitbulllovers.com) (Accessed: July 9, 2016) ([Archived by the Wayback Machine](#))
- ³² "[Two pit bulls get into home and kill family pet](#)," by Lee Peck, WALA-TV, October 3, 2018 (fox10tv.com)
- ³³ ASPCA Professional, Pet Smart Charities and *Animals 24-7*.
- [Rising from the Pit](#), Dr. Emily Weiss, ASPCA Professional, May 19, 2017 (aspcapro.com) ([Archived by the Wayback Machine](#))
 - [Future of animal welfare intertwined with veterinary profession](#), by Malinda Larkin, American Veterinary Medical Association, August 29, 2018 (avma.org)
 - [Record low shelter killing raises both hopes & questions](#), by Merritt Clifton, *Animals 24-7*, November 19, 2014 (animals24-7.org)
- ³⁴ [COVID-19 boosts Labs, goldens, & small dogs; pit bull breeders crash](#), by Merritt Clifton, *Animals 24-7*, July 9, 2020 (animals24-7.org). The most recent calculation by the nonprofit was completed in July 2020. Breed populations are determined annually by searching classified ad listings of dogs for sale. The last 3-year average of the total pit bull population is 6.2% (8.0% in 2018, 7.9% in 2019 and 2.7% in 2020) and the 11-year cumulative average (2010 to 2020) is 5.5%.