

THE BREED VS THE INDIVIDUAL

This work explores the biases surrounding pit bulls and the stigma that has been pinned upon them. Arguments surrounding pit bulls are often very polarized-- pit bulls are monsters and inherently dangerous *or* pit bulls are just as harmless as other dogs. To dispel the multitude of contradicting facts that I have gathered through my work with rescue dogs, I decided to take a deeper look at which facts hold true and which are a bit more complicated.

Pit bulls are often unfairly judged. To reflect the ambiguous, and often unknown, past of these dogs, I obscured a collage of images that encompass the full past of the breed. On top of this foundation, I sculpted a dog to reflect how pit bulls continue to be judged solely based on their breed. However, dog behavior is much more complex. The three dimensionality of the dog portrays this idea; as pit bulls attempt to retain their individuality, they continue to be dragged back into a two dimensional bias and assumption.

When every pit bull is judged in the same way and assumed to be aggressive or dangerous, it takes away from the need for education. The public needs to know how to properly handle, raise and care for big dogs. Breed is not the sole determiner for behavior and pit bulls and other “dangerous” dogs deserve to be understood individually, not just by their breed.

Edan

**THE PITFALLS OF PIT BULL BIASES:
Monsters or lovers or somewhere in-between?**

Edan



It is no mystery to many of us that, as humans, we are easily influenced by the ideas in world around us and these ideas can create misinformed conceptions about almost anything. With media projections and two sides of an issue spewing incomplete statistics, it is easy for the truth to be muddled or lost. These controversial topics are often hotly debated in the news and on social media networks, topics like abortion and gun control, which are very emotional and heated on either side. Opposing groups in these debates feed the public twisted and partial truths and the media feeds off the fear and anger that these sides stimulate. As someone who has been working closely with pit bulls at local shelters since 2013, I have felt this same controversy and sentiments over this breed. There has always been a storm of contradicting facts that muddle the truth about pit bulls. The media and pro and anti pit bull groups continue to throw shallow, biased facts without taking into account the complex history and genetics of dog breeding, and the even more controversial history and science of the pit bull. In an attempt to better understand these dogs and where the biases come from, I have chosen to look at everything from dog bites, to genetics of dogs and breeding, to the history of the pit bull. Arguments around the pit bull are often extremely emotionally driven and it is necessary to take a step back and understand the facts. Due to a history of fighting and associations with the lower class and criminal activity, the notions that pit bulls are more inclined to bite or turn on humans have flourished, but assuming the behavior of a dog based on its breed is extremely unreliable and can only be lightly taken into account when assessing the behaviors and potential behaviors of an individual dog.

To first consider and dismiss some preconceived notions, pit bulls, while often being more intolerant and aggressive with other dogs, are not inherently more dangerous than other breeds. Janis Bradley, author of *The Relevance of Breed in Selecting a Companion Dog*, wrote, "Genetic markers for behavior might be useful in assessing individual dogs, but may or may not turn out to occur consistently in large genetic families known as breeds."¹ This holds true for all breeds, including the pit bull. While many dog bite statistics pin pit bulls to be responsible for a majority of bites, there are many issues with these studies, which I will discuss later in this paper, and pit bulls are neither more aggressive nor do they have widely different physical characteristics than other big dog breeds. No, pit bulls do not have the ability to lock their jaw. Their jaws are anatomically the same as all other dogs. Nor do they have the strongest bite within domesticated dogs. Dr. Brady Barr from National Geographic measured the bite pressure of different mammals and found that the average bite pressure for domesticated dogs was 320 pounds per square inch (PSI).² He noted that German Shepherds, American pit bull terriers and Rottweilers had stronger bites, but within these three, the pit bull had the lowest bite strength, reaching only 235 PSI, while the Rottweiler reached 328.³ Additionally, pit bulls are not inherently more aggressive, having passed the American Temperament Testing Society's canine temperament test 86% of the time, more than the Golden Retrievers (85% passing rate). 755 out of 870 American pit bull terriers passed, and they were less likely to show aggression than a number of other breeds, like Beagles, German Shepherds, Corgis, Chihuahuas and Bull Dogs.⁴ This does not dismiss the fact that pit bulls have the potential to cause harm to humans and other animals. It only means that pit bulls do not possess super strength or abilities and should still be treated with as much caution and respect as other big, powerful dogs. All big dogs have the

¹ Bradley, Janis. "The Relevance of Breed in Selecting a Companion Dog." *NCRC (National Canine Research Council) Vision Series Publication*, 2011

² "National Geographic's Dr. Barr's Bite Pressure Tests." *Reptilia*, 1 Jan. 2014, www.reptilia.org

³ "Which Dog Breed Has the Strongest Jaw." *lovetoknow*, dogs.lovetoknow.com

⁴ Arabia, C. J. "American Pit Bull Terrier Temperament Test Has Shocking Result." *DogTime*, dogtime.com

potential and capabilities to bite and kill. The statistics and facts previously stated are often cited in pro pit bull arguments, but it is not quite as simple and straightforward. There is a full history and past of ownership, breeding, and prejudice placed on this breed and it needs to be taken into account in either the pro or anti pit bull argument.

The breeding and creation of the “pit bull” has spanned over two hundred years, but the breeds we now identify as pit bulls were only established within the last few decades. “Pit bull” is currently not even a breed, but rather a term that encompasses the American pit bull terrier, American Staffordshire terrier, Staffordshire bull terrier, and a newer breed, the American bully (see Appendix A). Within the past few centuries, these dogs have held many different roles. They originated from bulldogs (see left) in the 17th century that were used to aid English farmers with wrangling bulls, by biting on to the bulls that were being unruly, until the farmers could get



them under control.^{5 6} Soon a belief was spread that if dogs were used to “worry” a tethered bull before it was slaughtered, a lactic acid would be released and make the meat more edible. While bull baiting as a practice and recreational sport began to lose popularity in the early 1800’s, bulldog owners began cross breeding them with a strain of terriers to create a more agile dog that could be used for dogfighting and rat killing.⁷ With bull baiting banned in 1835, dog fighting became the new interest of both the poor and wealthy residents of England, an interest which was transferred to America as the English and Irish

owners of fighting dogs began to immigrate.⁸

Even though many pit bulls were bred for fighting, some lineages of pit bulls were bred as companion animals and many others were bred without consideration of the behavioral traits of parents. In the late 1800’s, pit bulls were still being bred for fighting, but they began to diverge from this path in 1889, as the American breeder John P Colby began selling his fighting bulldogs as pets. Over the next fifty years, he bred and sold around 5,000 pit bull type dogs as companion dogs.⁹ He spurred the popularization of pit bull type dogs as pets through his widespread distribution, since previously the Irish and English breeders carefully maintained their bloodlines and only distributed their dogs to close relatives and associates.¹⁰ While others had bred and distributed pit bulls, he was the first to do so on such a large scale. His dogs became so popular that they became the basis for the American pit bull terrier when it was registered as an official breed in 1898.¹¹ In the early 1900’s many breeders tried to separate the breed from dog fighting, by breeding for a similar body shape but without the fighting reputation. In 1911, the Madison Square Kennel Show in New York held a separate class for “pet pit bulls,” where *The Evening World* wrote that “[the pit bull] is an ideal watch and guard dog, in

⁵ Reinagle, Philip. *Bulldog*. 1790

⁶ Dickey, Bronwen. *Pit Bull: The Battle Over an American Icon*. Alfred A. Knopf, 2016, 30

⁷ Dickey, *Pit Bull: The Battle Over an American Icon*, 33

⁸ Fernandez, Amy. "The History of Bull Baiting." *Petcha*, petcha.com

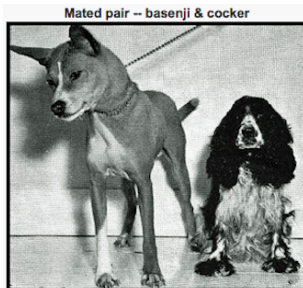
⁹ Dickey, *Pit Bull: The Battle Over an American Icon*, 61

¹⁰ Harris, David. *The Bully Breeds*. Kennel Club Books, 2008, 36

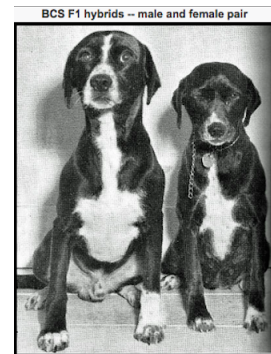
¹¹ Dickey, *Pit Bull: The Battle Over an American Icon*, 61

addition to being tractable and especially suited to the pet realm.”¹² This was the time where pit bulls began to diverge from the path of solely being used as working dogs, as either guard, fighting or watch dogs, and began to enter the homes of Americans. Many of modern pit bulls are derived from lineages of pit bulls that were not bred for fighting, but solely bred for pets. Not all pit bulls were fighting dogs, and many of the pit bulls we see today have been bred as pets since the early 1900’s. It is an inaccurate statement to claim that all pit bulls come from fighting backgrounds, when only certain lineages were bred specifically as fighting dogs.

Pit bulls continue to be used as fighting dogs, but a majority of dogs labeled as pit bulls or pit bull mixes have no direct genetic relation to dogs used in fighting, and often are not pit bulls at all. The term “pit bull” or “pit bull mix” is now used to refer to any dog that physically resembles one of the four pit bull breeds, and now being extended to any dog with a big head,



muscular body and short fur coat. Visual identification of mixed breed dogs has been proven extremely unreliable in accurately identifying the genetic breeds of the dog. This causes issues when, for example, a dog labeled as a pit bull or pitbull mix has a much lower chance of being adopted, due to these biases in the general public.¹³ Many of these dogs labeled as such mixes often hold no DNA of said breeds. In 2009, K. Irizarry and Dr. Victoria Voith took the DNA of 20 mixed breed dogs in four California



shelters. Different shelter workers were asked to identify the breed of the dog and they found that the labels given by the shelter did not match the DNA results 87.5% of the time. In a follow up study, they gave shelter staff photos of 120 mixed breed dogs and asked them to label them by breed. 55 dogs were mislabeled as “pit bull mixes” and the 5 dogs that were truly pit bull mixes were overlooked.¹⁴ Another famously cited study that displays this diversity in appearance of mixed breeds is a study conducted by Drs. John Paul Scott and John L. Fuller in 1965. They bred a pure Basenji and Cocker Spaniel (see above) and found that the puppies looked extremely different than either parent (see right). The next generation was even more morphologically diverse, while still only retaining Basenji and Cocker Spaniel genes (see left). Mixed breeds’ phenotypic characteristics often cannot be used to accurately identify the genetic ancestral breeds. While assuming the potential behaviors of dogs based off their breed is already unreliable in purebreds, it is even more unreliable with mixed breed dogs, as you often don’t know the breeds encompassing the dog without a DNA test. The behaviors of pit bull mixes cannot be accurately predicted solely based off assumed breed and evaluation of any individual is necessary to understand the characteristics of the specific dog.

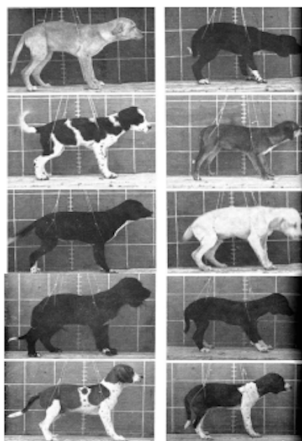
Studies have shown that behaviors of a dog and the behavioral genetic traits that are expressed are more predictably influenced by environmental factors. The environmental factors, like amount of socialization and training, as well as things like living conditions, have been shown to be better indicators of some behavioral traits, like aggressiveness towards humans. Karen Delise, founder of the National Canine Research Association (NCRA), developed a

¹² *ibid*, 62

¹³ Burgeson, John. "Pit bulls dominate shelters." *Stamford Advocate*, 22 Nov. 2013, www.stamfordadvocate.com

¹⁴ Dickey, *Pit Bull: The Battle Over an American Icon*, 58

distinction between the two ways dogs interact and live with humans. Dogs are either family dogs and resident dogs. Family dogs live within the family unit and are integrated into their lives, while resident dogs are isolated from regular, positive human interaction, usually by being outside, chained or in a confined dwelling. In a study by the NCRA, they looked at 256 dog bite cases and found that 76.2% of the dogs that bit people qualified as resident dogs. Another test in Hungary found that dogs that lived in close proximity with their owners were much less aggressive than their resident dog counterparts.¹⁵ This was also proven in another one of Scott and Fuller's tests in 1965, where they raised puppies without much socialization in a kennel and the other puppies in a home with much human contact. The puppies from the kennel were much less confident and social with humans.¹⁶ Janis Bradley wrote in *Dog Bites: Problems and Solutions*, that "careless and inhumane husbandry practices, ranging from overt cruelty and neglect to keeping dogs isolated from positive interactions with people to failure to supervise dogs and children, are much more likely to affect behavior in relevant, predictable ways."¹⁷ Environmental factors have a much higher indicator of aggressiveness towards humans than the breed of the dog. When 53% of dogs in America are mixed breeds and genetic makeup cannot be accurately identified by appearance, it is not reliable to base the level of potential aggressive behavior based off of breed.¹⁸



This being said, studies have concluded that pit bulls alone are responsible for anywhere from 50-80% of dog bites in America, but these studies fail to take other factors into account. To begin, many of these studies do not have reliable information to base their findings off of. Some studies have been conducted by looking at news reports of dog bites, but it is common to see news stories leaving out the breed unless it is a pit bull, making it appear that pit bulls are the common instigator. Not only do newsgroups highlight pit bulls in their stories on dog bites, but a study conducted in 2013 found that media identification of dog breeds is also extremely unreliable, as they almost never have documentation and are only accurate 18% of the time.¹⁹ The more common way of collecting evidence is from the medical records in emergency rooms. This too is unreliable, as it relies

on the accurate memory of the patient and the patient's ability to accurately identify the breed of dog. Many people now place the label of pit bull or pit bull mix very loosely and these visual identifications often times very incorrect. In one study from the Children's Hospital of Philadelphia in 2009 analyzed 551 cases where 5-18 year olds were in the emergency room for dog bites and they found that 30 breeds were represented, but 50.9% of cases were pit bulls, 8.9% were Rottweilers, 6% mix of the two.²⁰ Different studies range in percentages, but pit bulls are always in the lead, followed by Rottweilers and German Shepherds. Not only are sources for dog bite studies unreliable, these studies also fail to take into account the other factors that exist due to those who own pit bulls.

¹⁵ ibid

¹⁶ Bradley, Janis. "The Relevance of Breed in Selecting a Companion Dog."

¹⁷ Bradley, Janis. "Dog Bites: Problems and Solutions."

¹⁸ Coren, Stanley. "A National Census of Mixed Breed Dogs." *Psychology Today*, 2011, www.psychologytoday.com

¹⁹ Bradley, Janis. "Dog Bites: Problems and Solutions."

²⁰ Lallanilla, Marc. "Are Pit Bulls Really Dangerous?" *LiveScience*, 14 Feb. 2013, www.livescience.com

As stated earlier, ownership and handling greatly impacts a dog's' behavior, so when more pit bulls are owned by people who lack the resources and knowledge on proper care and training, more pit bulls will be aggressive and have more behavioral issues. Pit bulls have historically been owned by the working or lower class and many people in this demographic continue to own these types of dogs because they are cheap, readily available and are viewed as a breed that can offer protection by acting as guard/watch dog. This causes more pit bulls to be raised in ways which lead to higher aggression and higher bite rates. Resident dogs that are being used as watch or guard dogs and other dogs living outside or tethered, as many dogs in poor communities are, are much more likely to bite humans. A study in 1994 done by two Centers for Disease and Control found that dogs that were tethered or chained were 2.8 times more likely to bite than other dogs. The American Veterinary Medical Association has advised dog owners to "Never tether or chain your dog, because this can contribute to aggressive behavior."²¹ Resident dogs often also lack adequate socialization and a lack of socialization before the age of 14 weeks, as well as a lack of discipline and training, can both lead to higher levels of aggression.²² Dog's being owned by those who do not have access to the resources and knowledge on how to properly raise and care for a dog are more likely to bite, and dogs being owned by this demographic are predominantly pit bull type dogs.

There also remains the notion that pit bulls are often owned by people who engage in criminal activity because of the breed's inherent aggressiveness, but this idea only continues to feed into the hype and incorrect views of pit bulls. If someone is looking for a dog that will be intimidating and aggressive, they will procure a pit bull, not because that breed is best fit for the job, but because of the reputation it has cultivated. Since the eighteenth and nineteenth century, pit bulls and their bulldog ancestors have been viewed as the dog of the poor and criminally inclined. An observer in England in 1802 commented, "In many cases a poor man who keeps a bulldog is looked upon as a suspicious character... In some such cases, no doubt, there is reason for accusation but in most it is the fact of his keeping a bulldog that brands him a rascal."²³ Pit bulls have maintained an image that draws people who are looking for an intimidating and powerful dog. One test conducted in Hamilton County, Ohio looked at 355 dog owners of 44 different breeds (pit bulls consisted of 153 of the dogs, a number extremely higher than any other breed). They were separated into four categories: low risk licensed, low risk cited, high risk licensed and high risk cited (cited dogs are one that were not officially registered or licensed by the county). They found that owners of high risk, unlicensed dogs had much higher criminal conviction rates, being 9 times more likely to be arrested for crime involving children, 3 times more likely to be arrested for domestic violence and 14 times more likely to be arrested for crimes involving alcohol than the other dog owners.²⁴ People with criminal backgrounds often obtain pit bull breeds due to their reputation and the sentiments of strength and power connected to them and people often treat their dog differently when they hold preexisting expectations of the breed when chosen for a particular reason. As Janis Bradley wrote in *The Relevance of Breed in Selecting a Companion Dog*, "the person who chooses a dog with the expectation that it will be an enthusiastic watchdog is likely to treat the dog differently than he would treat a dog he had

²¹"Official Findings on Chained Dogs." *PETA*, www.peta.org

²² "Chaining, Being Male, and Other Causes of Dog Bites." *Dog Bite Law*, dogbitelaw.com

²³ Dickey, *Pit Bull: The Battle Over an American Icon*, 32

²⁴ Barnes, Jaclyn E., et al. "Ownership of High-Risk ("Vicious") Dogs as a Marker for Deviant Behaviors." *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, vol. 21, no. 12, Dec. 2006, www.dogsbite.org

chosen with the exception that it will be rambunctiously friendly with everyone it meets.”²⁵ If someone chooses a pit bull as a pet based off the idea that the dog will be intimidating and aggressive, they will raise it as such and consequently the dog will be more aggressive than its counterpart raised as a family dog. This creates an illusion that pit bulls are more dangerous than other breeds, as they are the favored dog by those with criminal backgrounds, but in reality they are just as inherently dangerous as other big dog breeds.

Due to the sweeping claims of the inherent danger of all pit bull type dogs, many cities, counties and countries have implemented breed selective legislature (BSL) as an attempt to lower dog bite incidents. Breed selective legislature is the regulation or prohibition of ownership of “pit bull type dogs,” which often also encompasses other “dangerous breeds,” like Rottweilers, Chow Chows, German Shepherds, Dobermans, Pinschers and Boxers. BSL has decreased in popularity in the past decade, as many are realizing that this method has done very little in changing the amount of dog bites. In Aragon, Spain, they compared the number of dog bites in the five years before and after BSL was enacted, and found that the number of dog bites had not been changed. Denver, Colorado also has had higher rates of dog bite injury hospitalizations since the breed ban was set in place in 1984 than other counties in Colorado that do not have breed bans. It has been deemed impractical by many, as it requires more resources for little change in public safety. The Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association claimed that one would need to remove 100,000 dogs of targeted breed to ensure the prevention of one bite injury hospitalization.²⁶ Targeting certain breeds is often impractical, as the National Canine Research Council found that the most common factors in fatal dog attacks in 2009 were that 97% were not spayed or neutered, 84% had owners who had abused, neglected or failed to contain dog, 78% were kept as guard dogs or in the yard.²⁷ None of the most common factors encompassed breed.

A more practical approach is legislation that targets dogs who have had past incidents that qualify them to be labeled as “potentially dangerous,” “dangerous” or “vicious,” instead of banning all dogs of a given breed. These laws require these dogs to be either eliminated or restricted, meaning either required sterilization, microchipping, training, muzzling in public or consults with an animal behaviorist. One study in Multnomah County, Oregon in 1991 found that the numbers of repeated incidents involving a certain dog decreased from 25% to 7% after this law was enacted. In the same county, a study was conducted from 2004 to 2011 and they found that there was a 25% reduction of reported bites and a 39% reduction of calls to ACC about bites and loose, aggressive dogs.²⁸ It is more effective to target dogs with proven aggressive backgrounds and behaviors, while simultaneously creating an incentive for owners to engage in responsible animal ownership, than simply banning an entire breed with a whole range of temperaments and types of ownership and training.

The complex history of pit bull breeding, dog genetics, behaviors and ownership are often overlooked when arguments are made about this breed, but one needs to be aware of the complex background and that an individual dog cannot be judged solely based off of assumed breed. Ownership, training, socialization and breed are all factors that impact the behaviors of a

²⁵ Bradley, Janis. "The Relevance of Breed in Selecting a Companion Dog."

²⁶ Bradley, Janis. "Dog Bites: Problems and Solutions." *Animals and Society Institute*, 2014, www.nationalcanineresearchcouncil.com

²⁷ Campbell, Dana M. "Pit Bull Bans: The State of Breed-Specific Legislation." *American Bar Association*, July 2009, www.americanbar.org

²⁸ Bradley, Janis. "Dog Bites: Problems and Solutions."

dog and in many cases the first three are often bigger indicators as to how a dog will act than the fourth. Pit bulls are often portrayed as either aggressive and unpredictable monsters or extremely overly loving and loyal dogs, but it needs to be remembered that pit bulls are just dogs. They are just another big dog breed that deserves the same respect and caution as any other. The stigma that has been placed on pit bulls has been born from centuries of breeding and stereotypes and has created this image that causes many people in the general public to shy away from the breed. But these notions and arguments are often constructed with partial facts and statistics that don't take a deeper look at the breed and the argument they are constructing. Pit bulls continue to be a controversial breed, but people fail to remember that pit bulls are just dogs. They are a big, strong dog breed. Just like any breed, individual dogs portray a wide variety of characteristics and certain behaviors cannot be consistently and accurately be applied to every dog within this breed. Some pit bulls are dog reactive. Some are not. Some pit bulls can be aggressive towards people. Some are just as friendly and affectionate with everyone they meet. Some pit bulls form close bonds with cats and small dogs. Some have prey drives and cannot live with such animals. There is such a wide variety of behavioral traits within any breed that any overarching claim about a breed cannot be accurately applied to every dog within this group. Before jumping to incomplete conclusions about any individual dog based on breed, it is important to understand where all the biases come from and where the truth lies and where it falls short.

Appendix A: Pit Bull Breeds



American pit bull terrier



American Staffordshire terrier



Staffordshire bull terrier



American bully

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