

Written by Pit Bull expert Tia Torres of Villalobos Rescue Center

THE REAL PIT BULL

The following is basic breed information for anyone who is interested in acquiring a Pit Bull. And for those who already have one or more and would like to learn more about the breed, or simply for anyone who would like to understand these great dogs... read on. This page discusses the most notable traits of Pit Bull type dogs, including the potential for dog aggression. You will learn here that while Pit Bulls make great family companions while in the right hands and living situation, they require intelligent, responsible and dedicated ownership. Unfortunately too many people obtain these dogs for the wrong reasons or have little understanding on the inherent traits this breed possesses. It is unfortunate that one of the original purposes of the APBT was (and still is for many) dog-to-dog combat, but it's a fact that can't be denied or ignored. It's very important that every potential Pit Bull owner, understands the selective breeding that took place to make these dogs of today and the inherited characteristics that are potentially within this wonderful breed.

"Pit Bull" is NOT a breed. It is a generic term often used to describe all dogs with similar traits and characteristics often known by the public as Pit Bulls. This article is addressed to owners of any "Pit Bull" type dog including American Pit Bull Terriers, American Staffordshire Terriers and Pit mixes.

Remember, that little is known about the background of rescue dogs. Some may be game bred (from fighting lines), some may be registered show dogs, some may be Am. Staffs, some may look like APBT's, but might be mixed with other breeds, etc. Since there is no way to know for sure unless you have the pedigree of the dog in hand, we recommend the following guidelines for any type of "Pit Bull".

Basic Breed Overview

Pit Bulls are wonderful animals that deserve a chance to have a good life like any other dog. However, it's important to remember that Pit Bulls are not just any other dog. They are a little more of everything a dog can be.

Pit Bulls have great physical and mental characteristics that make them excellent partners for responsible, active, and caring owners. On the other hand, these same outstanding qualities can make them a little difficult to handle for people who don't have a lot of experience with dog ownership or for those who don't understand the breed very well. Luckily, Pit Bulls are very responsive to training and eager to please. It is therefore strongly recommended to take them to obedience classes as soon as they are up to date with their shots. (Pit Bulls are prone to distemper and parvo, so it is important that they receive all their vaccinations before coming into contact

with other dogs or going places that other dogs frequent). A well-behaved and obedient Pit Bull will be a great ambassador for the breed and help fight prejudice and misconceptions.

Pit Bulls are very adaptable and will even do well in urban living, provided they have enough exercise or other positive outlets for their energy. Many Pit Bulls are easy going couch potatoes, but can also be quite rambunctious until they mature. Maturity can come pretty late with this breed (2 to 3 years old in some cases). Pit Bulls remain playful al their life and have a great sense of humor. These dogs will make you laugh like no other.

Pit Bulls are strong, energetic, agile and powerful dogs. They are also very resourceful and driven. "Determination" is one of their most notable traits. Whatever they set out to do, they will put their heart and soul into it. Whether it's escaping out of an inadequately fenced yard or destroying your new couch when left home alone or climbing into your lap to shower you with kisses - they just don't give up easily.

Stahlkuppe (1995) writes: "The American Pit Bull Terrier (APBT) or the Am Staff, is certainly not the right pet for everyone. Being a powerful dog, it will require sufficient and adequate control. Some prospective elderly owners or children will not be able to supply that control. A first time dog owner, in the minds of many experienced dog breeders, should not buy an APBT or an Am Staff. An insecure person who wants only an aggressive dog to bolster some personal human inadequacy should never become an owner of one of these dogs."

Another very important characteristic of Pit Bull dogs is their amazing love of people. These dogs are indeed remarkably affectionate, and crave human attention. They are wonderful cuddlers and nothing beats a belly rub. In fact, most Pit Bulls think they are lap dogs!

Dunbar (1999) writes: "Today, a properly bred Pit Bull is so exuberantly happy upon meeting her owner's friends (or even friendly strangers) that new owners sometimes worry that their dog is too sweet and fun-loving to protect their home and family. A multitalented companion, the well-trained Pit Bull is suited for a variety of exciting activities. He excels at obedience, agility and weight pulling competitions and events, which showcase intelligence, training ability and strength. In addition, the Pit Bull's pleasant nature makes him an ideal candidate for therapy work with people."

Human aggression, severe shyness and instability are not traits typically found and accepted in the Pit Bull breed. Dogs with these traits are not good representatives of the breed and should not be placed in adoptive homes.

Like any other breed, Pit Bulls can develop behavior problems if mishandled, abused, poorly bred; unsocialized, etc. that could result in inappropriate aggression. Any large, strong and powerful dog that attacks can do a lot of damage. This is why serious temperament evaluation is so important when dealing with dogs of certain size. Unlike the myth propagated by the media, human aggression is not a problem specific to the Pit Bull breed. In fact, Pit Bulls tend to do better than average in temperament tests.

The American Temperament Test Society provides testing around the country for dog breeds and provides a passing score for the entire breed, based on the percentage of passed over failed within total number of that particular breed tested. As of March 2001, the American Pit Bull Terrier has a current passing rate of 82.3% which makes him one of the top 5 most stable breeds of dogs in the country.

Pit Bulls make wonderful, loving and very loyal companions. It is important however, to understand the breed's nature, to provide a structured environment and to establish a positive leadership role. In order to do so, Pit Bull owners must understand the original purpose of the breed and respect its limits and potential.

The Breed's Original Purpose

Humans have created very specialized dogs through emphasizing desired traits and eliminating unwanted ones. It is no different with the Pit Bull breed. The American Pit Bull Terrier has been "selectively" bred for hundreds of years to fight other dogs. This is the sad "work" these dogs were created for. In the same way that Labradors were bred to retrieve birds, APBT's were bred to face other dogs in mortal combat. Even in dogs that are not recently bred from fighting lines, the urge to rumble can arise at any time. Not to strongly emphasize this fact is to be negligent. We would be equally negligent if we were placing Beagles and failed to educate the adopter about why the specific traits that scent oriented dogs, hunting dogs, bred to work in packs, present certain challenges to those who wish to obedience train their hound.

We can't blame specialized breeds for behaving like they were bred to do what they do. Certain specific traits were selectively bred into the dogs and are now a part of the breed's character. It's like the digging instinct of many Terriers, the herding behavior in Shelties, the compulsion to run in a Greyhound, etc. Your Pointer may have never spent a day on a real "hunt", but he may still point and flush out a bird as his ancestors were bred to do so. We don't have to condone or glorify it, but dog aggression is not uncommon with Pit Bull type dogs. Owners must recognize and accept this fact or they won't be able to provide competent ownership and have fun with their dogs. It's a mistake to think the fighting gene can be easily trained or loved out of a dog. Or that early socialization will guarantee your Pit Bull will always get along with other animals. Even though we do not in any way condone animal fighting, it does acknowledge the importance of understanding the special traits of this breed and advocates education about proper and responsible Pit Bull ownership. You can have all the dog experience in the world, but it's also essential to understand the distinctive features of the type of dog you own or work with. In this case, a dog with an important fighting background requires extra vigilance around other pets.

There are precautions to take when owning a Pit Bull, especially in a multiple-dog environment. Unfortunately these precautions are often viewed as an acceptance for the sport of dog fighting when nothing could be further from the truth. Knowing how to avoid a fight, as well as how to break up a fight, can be a matter of life or death for your dog and the "other" dog.

Take note that a fight can strike suddenly and for no apparent reason. Warning signs can be very subtle with Pit Bulls and even completely absent in certain cases. Two dogs may be best friends

for years, sleep together, cuddle, play and even eat from the same bowl. Then one day something triggers one of them and BOOM! Often the dogs act like best friends as soon as the fight is over. They might even lick each other's wounds. You have been warned though. They will do it again and get better at it every time.

PIT BULL DOs AND DON'Ts

- 1. SOCIALIZATION** - Socializing your dog is important, especially if he/she is a puppy. If your Pit Bull is young, trips to the dog park and around other dogs is recommended. Realize though that circumstances at the dog park cannot be controlled and sometimes this can bring out bad behavior in your puppy. But as your Pit Bull gets older, the dog park can become a problem, no matter how much he/she has been socialized. Though a Pit Bull may not start the fight, if provoked, they will definitely finish it. As your Pit Bull gets older and stronger, it's best to keep the socialization process safe and in a controlled environment.
- 2. CANINE RACISM** - Be advised that by being a Pit Bull owner, the general public may have some animosities towards this particular breed. You must also realize that if there is any incident involving your dog, whether he starts it or not, he will more than likely get blamed. Because of this, you must be a step ahead of other dog owners and insist that your dog behave like a lady or gentleman when out in public.
- 3. OUT IN PUBLIC** - You must understand that by letting your Pit Bull run off leash, you are only asking to get yourself and your dog into trouble. We **HIGHLY** recommend that even if you have the best behaved dog in the world; always assume the "other guy" does not. Be the responsible dog owner and keep your dog close by.
- 4. PIT BULLS & OTHER PETS** - VRC does not recommend adopting an adult Pit Bull into a household where there cats, small dogs or other small animals. Puppies are recommended for these situations.
- 5. PIT BULL "SCUFFLES"** - If there are multiple dogs in the home, VRC advises that the Pit Bull be kept separate while no one is at home to supervise. Though they may get along great, Pit Bulls can have "temper tantrums" and this can escalate and cause great harm to another dog or cat. It is typical for this breed to "fight" with another dog over what seems like nothing.
- 6. MY PIT BULL & HIS FRIENDS** - There is big confusion in this department. Just because YOUR Pit Bull gets along with YOUR other dogs and cats, does not mean that he will like other dogs or cats. This is very commonly just referred to as a "Pit Bull thing".
- 7. BUT HE LOVES PEOPLE...** - This is probably the most common mistake a new Pit Bull owner makes. Because this breed is wonderful with people and exceptional with children, this is often confused for how they will do with other dogs. Just because your Pit Bull adores people, this absolutely, positively does not mean that he will get along with other dogs. We can't stress this one enough and if you remember anything about this list of do's and don'ts, let it be this one.

8. **KIDS & PITS** - This is a great combination, but under the supervision of adults. Pit Bulls are such strong dogs, that it doesn't take much more than a "head butt" to give a child a black eye. But more importantly are the rules that apply when walking the dog. NEVER allow a child to walk a dog of this caliber without the assistance of an adult. If a dog of this magnitude sees a cat or another dog that he decides to go after, a child does not have the strength to hold him back. You're only asking for a terrible accident to happen and your child to be traumatized.

9. **ADOPTING A PIT BULL FROM THE ANIMAL SHELTER** - Though we always welcome someone who considers a shelter dog, there are some things to consider when adopting this breed. Do not be fooled by the fact that this dog appears to live harmoniously in the cage/kennel with other dogs. Dogs in a shelter environment are just trying to "survive" and tend to do what it takes to avoid confrontation. When adopting an adult Pit Bull from a shelter environment, we highly recommend that you have no other pets in the home.

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