



A Pit Bull Primer: Separating Fact from Fiction What You Need to Know Before Adopting

There are no breeds of dog that are right for everybody and Pit Bulls are no exception. The media hysteria surrounding Pit Bulls has made them controversial. Lovers of the breed point to their numerous good qualities. So, what's the truth?

Pit Bulls originated in England in the 19th Century, bred from selected Bulldogs and Terriers to produce a dog for the dubious sport of dog fighting, the Staffordshire Terrier. The American type, sometimes called the American Staffordshire and sometimes called the American Pit Bull Terrier, is a larger dog, longer in the leg and with a blockier head than its English cousin. Don't confuse these breeds with yet another related dog, the Bullterrier.

The original Pit Bulls were bred for fighting qualities: a fearless willingness to fight on in spite of injury ("gameness"), high pain tolerance, a low threshold for aggression towards other dogs, a high threshold for aggression towards humans, formidable strength, a muscular build and great agility. Dogs without these qualities were culled from the gene pool. Today, dog fighting is outlawed in both Great Britain and North America and very few Pit Bulls are selectively bred for these traits. The result is that, depending on which genetic "cards" an individual dog is dealt, most dogs still have the look and some combination of the original behavioral qualities to a greater or lesser degree.

Although Pit Bull attacks on humans are headline-makers, it is difficult to tease out how much these incidents are due to the genetics of the dogs concerned and how much to the rearing practices of the irresponsible owners that are often drawn to "tough breed of the month" dogs such as Pit Bulls. And, to make matters more complicated, the same irresponsible owners may have selectively bred strains of Pit Bulls that are more aggressive to people. That said, it is probably safe to say that randomly bred or fighting line Pit Bulls that are properly raised are *not* at elevated risk for aggression to humans. It is also safe to say that Pit Bulls, on the whole, *are* at elevated risk of aggression directed at other dogs. This is not to say that every Pit Bull will become dog aggressive. Far from it: they are simply at greater risk compared to most other breeds of dog. Scores of Pit Bulls and Pit Bull crosses are ridiculously dog-friendly or have dog-dog issues that are within the normal range seen by trainers, and are modifiable.

Extensive socialization is therefore an absolute must to stand the best chance of a dog-friendly dog. Well-socialized Pit Bulls will also frequently have an extremely intense dog play-style that is well-known to Pit Bull owners. This can be overwhelming for some dogs, both, physically and psychologically, so it's a good idea to be sensitive to this and supervise all play in order to set limits.

The potential for dog-dog issues is one thing to bear in mind when considering adopting a Pit Bull. There are a few other things to know: they are prodigious pullers-on-leash, tend to be immaculately clean, can be impressive escape artists, are very bright and easily bored, can have very strong predatory drive, are often *REALLY* gregarious with people, are superlative Frisbee dogs and bond very strongly with their guardians. This last point can sometimes put them at risk for developing separation anxiety, without carefully orchestrated alone-training.

It is a myth that Pit Bulls are genetically programmed to be a menace to kids or babies. There is no doubt they have attracted more than their fair share of terrible owners and backyard breeders, who not only neglected to do the right things, but, deliberately did many *wrong* things. For this reason, it is imperative when considering adopting a Pit Bull, to consider his/her source and upbringing. At The Santa Cruz SPCA, we rigorously screen all Pit Bulls before putting them up for adoption. Our screening process is focused on the threshold for aggression towards all other animals, particularly dogs, as well as any aggression towards people. Only those Pit Bulls that have a sweetness towards people are considered.

If you would like help deciding whether a Pit Bull is right for you please speak with one of our adoption counsellors or with our on-staff Behaviorist, David Bloch (831-465-5064).