

What Happened to America's Dog?

Pit Bulls were once loved and revered in America. How did they become so maligned in today's society?

By: Mutts Matter Rescue

You may have thought this story would be about a Labrador or Golden Retriever, but it's about a group of dogs commonly referred to as 'Pit Bulls' and their fall from grace in our society.

During the first half of the 20th century, Pit Bulls were the closest thing the United States had to a national dog. They were featured on U.S. recruiting posters in World Wars I and II, prominently featured as corporate mascots and cast as the ideal family dog in television and movies.

Now the breed is demonized and battles everything from a media-driven reputation for being predators, to abuse from their owners, to legislation that seeks to outlaw their existence. How did this happen to a dog that was once America's sweetheart?

WHAT IS A PIT BULL?

The term "Pit Bull" doesn't describe a single breed of dog; it's a generic term used to define multiple breeds of working dogs that were initially bred by crossing bulldogs with terriers. The core breeds include the American Pit Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier and the Staffordshire Bull Terrier, but the term is now used to encompass a wide array of muscular dogs with short hair, many of which are mixed breeds with a similar look but a different lineage. Dogs commonly mislabeled as pit bulls include Boxers, Mastiffs, American Bulldogs and Plott Hounds, among others.

For the purposes of this story, "Pit Bull" will be used to describe any mixes, mutts, or purebreds that share either the breed or visual traits common to these dogs, and thus face the stigma. While it's technically incorrect, this is how it's used in our vocabulary today.

HISTORY OF PIT BULLS IN AMERICA

It's believed that the first Pit Bulls were brought to America by English and Irish immigrants before the Civil War. In Europe, the dogs had a mixed history of being used as working dogs to protect the family and field, and misused for savage sports like bull baiting, which was outlawed in the Cruelty to Animals Act of 1835.

When Pit Bulls came to the U.S., they were brought over as prized family possessions, and were typically general purpose herding and working dogs, earning their keep as hunters, herders, guardians and household pets.

By the early 1900s, the Pit Bull was one of the most popular breeds in the U.S., and had become a symbol of American pride. They were used in posters to recruit soldiers and sell war bonds, and a Pit Bull mix named Sgt. Stubby was the first dog to be awarded Army medals. He not only survived being wounded twice in combat, but also saved his entire platoon by warning them of a poison gas attack. Stubby went on to become an American celebrity, meeting three different presidents and becoming the mascot for the Georgetown Hoyas football team.

Pit Bulls were also embraced in popular culture, with respected companies like RCA and the Buster Brown Shoe Company using the Pit Bull as their mascot and in advertising. Petey, the beloved dog with the ring around his eye from The Little Rascals, was also a Pit. Popular figures from this era like Theodore Roosevelt, Laura Ingalls Wilder and Helen Keller were all proud Pit Bull owners. Because of their loyalty and temperament, they even earned the nickname “nanny dogs,” entrusted to watch over and protect children while parents worked on the farm. Pit Bulls were America’s sweetheart breed: Admired, respected and loved.

REVERSAL OF FORTUNE

After WWII, the Pit Bull’s popularity began to decline, as other breeds came into favor. But they were not feared or maligned until the 1980's, when the myth of the dangerous fighting dog started to take hold in the media. The negative publicity surrounding Pit Bulls actually served to encourage bad people with bad intentions to buy and breed these dogs, using brutality and torture to teach fighting and aggression. Gangs began assimilating Pit Bulls into their operations, and the dogs became guilty by association with this violent, criminal culture.

The dogs that are born into and raised in this environment are victims; they are beaten, electrocuted, chained, starved and even fed gunpowder to make them tough and mean. Those that don't fight back enough are killed or used as bait. They are seen as a form of protection and symbol of strength in these bad communities, and they continue to be exploited for profit in dog fighting, a cruel and sadistic sport that is now illegal in all 50 states.

Through no fault of their own, many dogs are thrown into a very dark world of violence, and face a very difficult road out of it. While these extreme cases are a minority of the Pit Bulls in the country, these brutalized dogs represent the vast majority of dog bites and news stories that contribute to the cycle of sensationalized media coverage, vilifying the dog as inherently aggressive and dangerous.

MEDIA BIAS

The media has been a driving factor in shaping America's perception of Pit Bulls, and their coverage has been widespread and overwhelmingly negative for the last 30 years. The sad truth is that a dog biting a person only becomes a story if there is reason to believe the dog might be a Pit Bull.

Dog attacks involving a Pit Bull-type dog or Pit mix have the power to make national news, while attacks by other breeds go largely unnoticed. In fact, the ASPCA has reported that animal control officers have been told by media outlets across the country that they only have interest in reporting on Pit Bull attacks. Inaccurate reporting is also a problem, and the assumption is often made that muscular, short-haired dogs are Pit Bulls, while those that look different are simply referred to as "dogs." To compound matters, most organizations that assess dog bite statistics do so based on media accounts, which is already distorted data. It's a cycle.

If you're not sure this is true, and you believe Pit Bulls are inherently dangerous, ask yourself how you've arrived at that decision. If you haven't ever seen a Pit Bull be dangerous or aggressive, it's very likely that the media has defined this perception for you. All dog breeds - including Pit Bulls - bite people. However, try to think of the last story you read where a dog attack involved something other than a Pit Bull.

FACTS (statistics from the [Humane Society](#) and [BestFriends.org](#))

- In 2007, Pit Bulls were involved in 25 percent of reported dog-abuse cases.
- About half of the dogs killed in shelters today will be Pit Bulls or Pit Bull mixes.
- Nationwide, 75 percent of shelters euthanize all Pit Bulls, regardless of temperament, age, history, etc.
- No breed of dog is inherently aggressive or dangerous.
- The biggest risk factors for dog aggression are malicious or neglectful dog owners, and dogs that have not been spayed or neutered.
- Pit Bulls are commonly used in police work, rehabilitation therapy, search and rescue and in bomb and narcotic detection.
- Like any dog that's raised responsibly, Pit bulls are gentle, loving and loyal, and they make great family pets.

RESPONSIBLE OWNERSHIP

Pit Bulls are not for everyone, and typically not the best fit for the first-time dog owner. They are intelligent, energetic and strong-willed dogs who need consistent leadership from their owner, a commitment to their training, daily exercise and socialization. Owning any powerful breed of dog comes with this additional responsibility. When you own a Pit Bull, you need to be prepared for

negative comments and bias towards your dog, and be ready to educate and address them in a positive way. You must also lead by example and make sure your dog is an ambassador for the breed. The defamation of Pit Bulls and their portrayal as predators is a man-made problem. They are victims of widespread abuse, and their problems are amplified by sensational media. No dogs are inherently dangerous, but as a strong breed, Pit Bulls do require responsible ownership.