

# A ROTTA LOVE

Minnesota Rottweiler Rescue, Re-homing, and Education

## THE AMERICAN PIT BULL TERRIER

**A gentle and courageous pet; a victim of bad press**

### Introduction

Sixty years ago a delightful gang of kids romped across movie screens accompanied in their antics by their faithful dog Petey, a sturdy white pooch with a colored patch over one eye. Petey performed a remarkable array of tricks to help the kids in and out of scrapes -- all in all, he was the consummate childrens' pet.

The original Petey was Lucenay's Peter, a purebred dog registered as an American Pit Bull Terrier with the United Kennel Club and as one of the 50 original Staffordshire Terriers accepted into the American Kennel Club. Whichever breed name is claimed for Petey, one thing is certain; today this dog could not be kept within many city limits without facing arrest and euthanasia. American Pit Bull Terriers, American Staffordshire Terriers, and Staffordshire Bull Terriers are outlaws by city ordinance as vicious dogs.

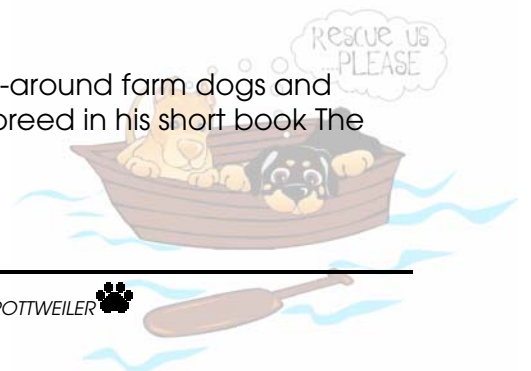
The American Pit Bull Terrier has a long history as a dog of the common man, and it is from his basic stock that the AKC's AmStaffs and Staffs developed.

### History

In 1835 the British Parliament outlawed bull baiting, a sadistic gambling game in which bulldogs were used to attack and harass bulls brought to market with the dubious intention of tenderizing the meat. The dog would assault the bull, avoid the stomping hooves and slashing horns, grab a tender nose or ear, and hang on until the bull collapsed. Commoners and royalty alike sought diversion from the violence and diseases of their day by attending these bloody spectacles until a public outcry forced Parliament to take a stand.

Once bull baiting was banned, dog breeders who appreciated the fierceness, courage, and tenacity of the bull dogs turned their attentions to breeding dogs for dog fighting. They began with the bull dog, mixed in some terrier blood, and produced the Bull and Terrier, a dog that met all of their expectations. The Bull and Terrier was bred for aggression to other dogs, unrelenting bravery, a high pain threshold, a willingness to fight to the end, and an affection for people.

Bull and Terrier dogs came to the US in the early 1800s as all-around farm dogs and frontier guardians. Samuel Clemons featured a pup of this breed in his short book The Celebrated Jumping Frog of Calaveras County.



The United Kennel Club recognized the Bull and Terrier Dog as the American Pit Bull Terrier in 1898. Buster Brown shoes put its mascot in every shoe with the image of Tige, an American Pit Bull Terrier, to enhance its image as a sturdy, dependable shoe. RCA used Nipper, a pit bull of unknown ancestry, to illustrate the clarity of sound emanating from its phonograph -- after all, it could fool the loyal pit bull into thinking he heard "his master's voice" in person. The breed was used to illustrate American neutrality without fear in 1914, the toughness of Levi jeans, and as a "defender of Old Glory."

The AKC eschewed breeds called "pit bulls" until 1936, when it recognized the American Pit Bull Terrier under the alias Staffordshire Terrier, named after the miners of Staffordshire, England, who had a hand in developing the breed for the fighting pit. The name was changed in 1972 to the American Staffordshire Terrier to distinguish the breed from the Staffordshire Bull Terrier of England, the ancestor of the American dogs, which was recognized by AKC in 1974. The British version of the dog is 14-16 inches tall and weighs up to 45 pounds. The American cousin is 18-19 inches tall and weighs up to 80 pounds. UKC's American Pit Bull Terrier is preferred to range from 30-60 pounds with females generally, but not necessarily, smaller than males.

Staffs, AmStaffs, and APBTs produced by responsible breeders are bred for temperament. Many dogs of these breeds are therapy dogs; some do quite well in obedience, and one -- Bandog Dread HIC, VB, SchH 1, CD -- even has a herding title. Another, Solomon J. Grundy, is a service dog for quadriplegic owner Arvid Kuhnle of Saskatoon, Canada, and Bullitt, was shown on the 1985 Easter Seals poster with his owner, Gordy Ranberg of Genesee, Michigan.

## So what happened?

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The American Pit Bull Terrier and its AKC cousins had a well- deserved reputation as a loyal and trustworthy family pet in the early years of this century, but of late has been severely castigated as a vicious, man-killing beast, worthy of banishment from the cities, considered guilty with no chance of proving innocence in any case.

"Pit bull" is a generic and derogatory term that encompasses any of several breeds of dogs or crosses on those breeds. Pit Bull fanciers can be divided into several camps: conscientious breeders of the AKC-registered duo who often deny kinship of their dogs with the APBT; ethical breeders of the APBT who face squarely the slander heaped upon them by ignorant neighbors; and unethical breeders of all three breeds who still indulge in dog fighting or promote aggressive temperaments for illegal purposes. Dog fighting rings still exist--it's only been a few years since a ring with national ties was busted in New Richmond and Blanchester, Ohio--and inner city drug dealers often use the dogs to guard their drug supplies and cash.

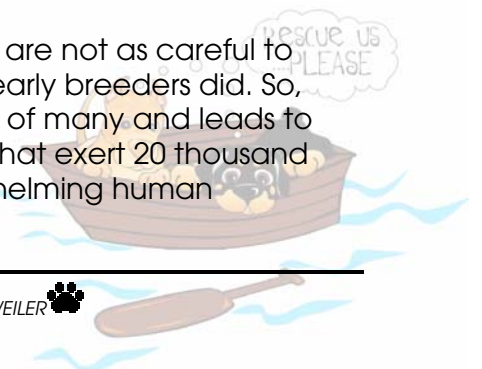
To further complicate matters, those who still breed for fighting are not as careful to preserve the dog's strong instinct to bond with humans as the early breeders did. So, today "pit bull" is a pejorative term that strikes fear in the hearts of many and leads to the spreading of urban legends about dogs with locking jaws that exert 20 thousand pounds of pressure, unstable breed temperament, and overwhelming human aggression.



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In fact, the well-bred American Pit Bull Terrier is a family guardian and protector; an intelligent and obedient pet; a sweet, even-tempered dog that serves well as a help-mate to handicapped owner and friend to small children; and a healthy, hardy dog that complains little and offers much to his family.

Unfortunately, it has been more important for legislators in many jurisdictions to prove to constituents that they have "done something" about community problems. Spurred on by media accounts of "pit bull" attacks described in lurid detail, these councils and commissioners have banned pit bulls in all their forms from their communities. Never mind that the owners are the ones at fault for harboring a vicious dog; never mind that few of these dogs actually bite people; never mind that the breed and its crosses are not always easy to identify. Just ban them.

So, many shelters do not offer pit bulls or any dog that might be part pit bull to be adopted. Insurance companies cancel house insurance if a pit bull is in residence. Neighbors mistake everything from Boxers to Pugs as "pit bulls". And those criminals who used pit bulls as protectors of their illegal activities switch to Akitas or Rottweilers.

### **The standard**

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The United Kennel Club standard for the American Pit Bull Terrier is rather sparse. The dog is square and powerful with a blocky head, prominent cheeks and jaw, and taut, muscular body. He has a deep chest, and a short, glossy coat of any color. His ears may be cropped or not. Size can range from 30- 50 pounds for females and 35-60 pounds for males. Although they are from the same stock and meet the same criteria as the AKC American Staffordshire Terrier, American Pit Bull Terriers cannot be registered as an AmStaffs, but AmStaffs are admitted to the APBT registry.

### **Care and training**

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This short-coated breed needs little grooming and suffers from few diseases. He is subject to hip dysplasia, cataracts, and some tumors.

Training is a critical consideration for the American Pit Bull Terrier. This is a strong-minded dog that needs socialization as a pup to accept humans as the beings in charge and obedience training to keep him from setting out to control the household. Meek and mild potential owners should forget about this breed and choose another.

The training relationship should not be one of master and slave, however. The dog should be shown what to do and made to do it without any yanking, smacking, jerking, or other punishment. Firm guidance will lead to respect and trust; physical penalties will lead to disrespect and distrust.

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