

# You're Thinking About Adopting an Exceptional Pit Bull or Pit Bull Mix

Humane Society Silicon Valley (HSSV) strives to place all of our wonderful shelter guests into loving, lifetime homes by matching them with their perfect family. HSSV's Exceptional Pit Bulls and pit bull mixes are no exception—in fact, we go the extra mile for these devoted dogs to ensure their new family is ready for the commitment and the responsibility that comes with owning this breed. Pit Bulls and pit bull mixes make wonderful family pets, and before you consider adopting one, it is important to understand their history, behavioral characteristics, challenges, and needs.

## HSSV'S EXCEPTIONAL PIT BULL

Every dog that is available for adoption at HSSV has been behaviorally and medically evaluated. Pit Bulls are quite popular in our community and are often bred without regard for health or temperament, so we rigorously evaluate these animals to make certain that when they are adopted, they will be ambassadors for the breed in our community. When evaluating Pit Bull type dogs and their mixes, HSSV is looking for qualities and characteristics that make Pit Bulls exceptional.

Any Pit Bull or pit bull mix that shows signs of aggression toward human beings is considered temperamentally incorrect and is not made available for adoption at HSSV. We take signs of aggression in any dog breed very seriously! Experts recognize that a certain amount of intolerance toward other dogs is normal for pit bull type dogs. Therefore, when evaluating pit bull type dogs and their mixes, special focus is placed on the assessment of their behavior around other dogs. Although we believe that experienced and committed Pit Bull owners can often responsibly manage dog intolerance and even dog aggression in this breed, only those pit bull type dogs that are showing tolerant behavior toward other dogs are made available for adoption at HSSV.

Other qualities that make a pit bull type dog exceptional at HSSV include,

- a strong desire to be social with human beings including children and strangers,
- a dog that when aroused will be easily calmed,
- a dog that has not demonstrated a strong prey drive (wanting to chase or kill small animals), and
- a dog that will readily relinquish their valued resources (e.g. food and toys) to human beings.



## PIT BULL HISTORY AND ORIGIN

Like the development of all modern dog breeds, humans selected and mated dogs in order to emphasize desired traits and eliminate undesirable traits. "Pit bull" is a generic term often used to describe several unique breeds of dogs including the, American Pit Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier, Staffordshire Bull Terrier, and mixed dogs that resemble these breeds. Sometimes even physically and behaviorally different Bull Terriers and American Bulldogs are identified as Pit Bulls or pit bull mixes. The selective breeding of Bulldogs and Terriers is often seen as the origin of the modern American Pit Bull Terrier.

Humane Society Silicon Valley identifies dog breeds based on available history, physical characteristics, and behavioral characteristics. At our shelter, those animals that are designated as Pit Bulls or pit bull mixes have the primary characteristics of the American Pit Bull Terrier (APBT) breed.



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For centuries athletic Bulldogs were used for hunting large animals such as bulls, bears, stags, and boars, while tenacious Terriers were used to control vermin like rats, foxes, badgers, and weasels. In 19th century England, Bulldogs and Terriers were being selectively bred together for the work they were performing; this included farm work like controlling cattle, catch work for butchers, and the cruel yet popular entertainment of blood sports such as bull baiting, bear baiting, and dog fighting in the "pit."

Even during the development of this breed for dog-fighting purposes, aggression toward human beings was not tolerated. During pit fights, "dog men" had to be able to handle the fighting animals without being harmed. If an animal bit or harmed his handler during a fight, that animal was removed from the genetic pool. Highly desired traits included aggression towards dogs as well as a high level of trustworthiness and obedience towards humans. Although these inhumane and violent blood sports became illegal in both Europe and most of the United States by the 1860's, underground dog-fighting continues even today.

In the early 1900's, the Pit Bull Terrier was valued for much more than his fighting ability. Pit Bulls became trusted companions by protecting homesteaders' families from predators and helping with farm work.



Pit Bulls reflected the American spirit and values of the time and were a symbol for bravery and neutrality during World War I. They were loyal family members to leaders like Teddy Roosevelt and Helen Keller. "Buster Brown Shoes" used the image of a Pit Bull to represent the toughness dependability of their product.

Perhaps the most popular of all pit bull type dogs was Petey, the companion of the television show *Our Gang's* Little Rascals.

## BREED CHARACTERISTICS

Pit Bulls are highly intelligent, athletic, and devoted companions. They require an owner who is committed to providing a great deal of love, extensive mental and physical stimulation, obedience training, and **plenty** of attention.

Pit Bulls were bred to please their human families; banishing a Pit Bull (or any dog, for that matter) to the backyard or leaving him alone for long periods of time will cause him to become depressed and destructive. Like all dogs, a bored Pit Bull will find ways to entertain himself and may dig, bark or chew inappropriate objects. Also, intelligent Pit Bulls are known escape artists! They have a penchant for climbing over fences, digging under even the most secure yards, and even figuring out how to unlatch a gate! A secure, escape-proof yard is a must for Pit Bull owners (minimum 6 foot fence). It is critical that a Pit Bull spend the majority of his time inside with the family where he is a valued member of the pack.

**A tired Pit Bull is a happy Pit Bull.** Most Pit Bulls will be more than happy to lounge around when they have a structured routine that includes outlets for their champion athleticism. Pit Bull owners should expect that their dog will need a minimum of 30 minutes of aerobic activity each day, which can include playing Frisbee or running with their owners. Pit Bulls excel in agility, obedience, and search-and-rescue type work because these activities provide physical and mental stimulation at the same time. When considering adding a Pit Bull to your family, consider if your lifestyle will provide for the needs of a strong and active dog.

**Pit Bulls need a strong, yet benevolent, leader of the pack.** Pit Bulls are often described as having pushy-yet-clownish personalities. They are known to bond strongly with and look up to their owners. Pit Bulls are often at the top of their class when it comes to obedience training because of a strong desire to please their owners. Pit Bulls are a 'bully breed' and, similar to teenagers, they will push their limits if owners don't consistently ask their dogs to follow house rules. Often the best matches for Pit Bulls are experienced dog owners and those with a considerable interest in dog training and behavior. Successful Pit Bull owners tend to have strong and steady personalities; they become the leader

of their dog's pack and are the source of all good things in their dog's life (e.g. food, treats, toys, and attention).

Good leaders don't need to be forceful or exert physical dominance over their dog. Successful leaders will provide a sense of safety, teach their dog that *Nothing in Life is Free*, and reward their dog for all sorts of appropriate and wanted behaviors.

***Pit Bulls, like many breeds, have a certain level of prey drive.*** All dogs can be described as social predators, that is, if left in the wild instead of our cozy homes, they would live and hunt in groups. All dogs have a certain level of prey drive, which is the instinctual need to chase and catch prey, even when their dinner is regularly served in a bowl. Similar to Greyhounds and other Sight-hounds, Akitas, Shepherds, Rhodesian Ridgebacks, Jack Russells and many other Terriers, Pit Bulls tend to have a strong prey drive. For some dogs, the movement of a cat, squirrel or other small animal will stimulate the chase and sometimes the kill. If they are well-managed, Pit Bulls (and other breeds with a strong prey drive) can live happily and safely in a household that also has cats or small animals. It is imperative that Pit Bull owners understand that their dogs have the potential to inflict serious injury to other animals.

Even though HSSV Exceptional Pit Bulls have not been known to demonstrate a strong prey drive, this can be a difficult behavior to 'test' for in the shelter environment. Savvy Pit Bull owners need to recognize the signs of predatory behavior and keep their Pit Bull away from situations where he may get into trouble. That means a Pit Bull is always on leash when out for a walk! Owners must be constantly aware of the surrounding environment and know how to direct their dog's attention away from appealing things to chase!

***A certain level of intolerance toward other dogs is a normal trait for the Pit Bull breed.*** Responsible owners know that their dog has a genetic tendency to be intolerant toward other dogs. Does this mean that every Pit Bull will readily fight another dog? NO! What this means is that owners need to be able to recognize the signs of dog intolerance and understand that socialization, training, and management will be important for the life of their Pit Bull.

HSSV's Exceptional Pit Bulls have been introduced to and shown tolerant behavior with a minimum of three other dogs. It is important to know that as Pit Bulls mature into adulthood (usually somewhere between 1-3 years old), their behavior around other dogs can change. Even the most social Pit Bull puppies or juvenile "teenagers" can grow up to have a lower tolerance for other dogs. It is therefore critical that new Pit Bull adopters enroll in a pit-friendly obedience class to help their dog learn how to focus attention on their owner instead of on other dogs. This type of management is used to help Pit Bulls live long and conflict-free lives. A Pit Bull owner **must** recognize their dog's limits around other dogs and always be aware of the golden rule: "Never trust a Pit Bull not to fight."

***Socializing your Pit Bull with other dogs is critical, but don't expect it to prevent dog intolerance.*** Socialization is the process during which an animal develops relationships with other living beings in his/her environment. In order to lessen the likelihood that dog intolerance will be a significant issue later in life, socialization with other dogs is especially important for puppies of any breed, including Pit Bulls.

Responsible Pit Bull owners set their dog up for positive experiences with other dogs through a lot of opportunities to socialize. Pit-friendly obedience classes are not only great places to socialize pups and juveniles, they're also ideal places for a dog-social Pit Bull to meet doggie friends!

Despite the best socialization efforts, some Pit Bulls will nevertheless grow up to have a lower dog tolerance as adults. It is up to dog owners to manage their Pit Bull's behavior around other dogs, recognize signs of conflict, and consult with professionals about how to best work with their companion's unique behavioral tendencies.

***What about socializing at dog parks?*** Due to their genetic tendency toward dog intolerance, experts agree that dog parks are not always the best place for Pit Bulls to socialize with other dogs.

Many times, unacquainted canines with different play styles, backgrounds, levels of socialization and experiences populate dog parks. Not all dogs are tolerant of the intense, physical, and

persistent “bully” play-style practiced by Pit Bulls. Although many Pit Bulls will never start a fight, if challenged by another dog that is overwhelmed by rough play, this determined breed often won’t back down from the confrontation.

Instead of taking their dogs to dog parks, many savvy Pit Bull owners organize play groups with well-known doggie friends (*right: Exceptional Alumni Tinkerbelle and Rocco*).



***Pit Bulls can live happily and successfully in multi-dog homes.***

There are countless examples of responsible and experienced Pit Bull owners successfully managing multi-dog homes. The leaders of such homes have taken their time to search for good chemistry among their four-legged family members. Savvy Pit Bull owners know that opposite sex pairings among spayed and neutered canines tend to be most successful. That is why we only adopt Pit Bulls into homes where the resident animals are altered!

“Management through consistent supervision” is the mantra for those who lead successful multi-dog homes with Pit Bull(s). Every human member of the family must be committed to the management of the dogs in order for the dogs to feel consistency. When there is nobody home to supervise, even the best of doggie friends are separated and often crated. When owners are home, they watch how their dogs communicate with each other and notice what resources are valuable to the individuals (e.g. chew toys, food items, attention, etc.). This helps minimize the potential for a squabble among their dogs. Ensuring that each dog has special alone time with their owners strengthens the bond between family members and helps to keep each dog engaged and attentive to their human leaders.

***Pit Bulls have a long history of positive relationships with children.***

Properly socialized, well-trained American Pit Bull Terriers have a long history as reliable companions for children, despite the myths people hear and read about in the mainstream media. Temperamentally sound Pit Bulls demonstrate

extraordinary tolerance toward rude, yet typical child behavior such as accidentally stepping on a tail or tugging on an ear. Sometimes, due to strength, exuberance, and overwhelming affection a Pit Bull may not be the best addition to a household with young children, especially if that dog is lacking obedience training and good manners. At HSSV we require all family members to meet a Pit Bull prior to adoption to ensure he is a good match for the entire family. (*right: television’s Lil’ Rascals with Petey*).



Children should ALWAYS be closely supervised with ANY breed of dog. The best way to prevent a child from being harmed by a dog is to supervise the child whenever a dog is present, teach that child how to safely interact with dogs and never approach a dog that (s)he doesn’t know!

***Pit Bulls thrive on attention! Training your Pit Bull will help form a strong bond between you and your pet.***

Your Pit Bull needs to learn how to act properly at home, with your friends and relatives, and in your community. Having an un-trained Pit Bull reinforces the breed’s negative reputation and jeopardizes everyone’s right to have these fabulous dogs as companions! Obedience classes provide a controlled environment where you and your Pit Bull can learn how to communicate with each other and how to be a successful team in the real world! Humane Society Silicon Valley recommends signing up for a humane training program that uses a positive reinforcement model. Positive reinforcement training builds trust, clear communication and helps cement the bond between you and your dog.

As part of a new owner’s commitment to adopting an Exceptional Pit Bull from HSSV, a \$125 training deposit is required and refundable after completing a course from a positive reinforcement trainer on our referral list.

Training your Pit Bull should be a lifelong endeavor and will help maintain the bond you have with your dog. Ongoing training with your

Pit Bull includes asking your dog to perform commands before getting things he wants, giving your dog opportunities to solve problems and earn rewards, and playing games that stimulate his mind while providing outlets for natural drives. All dogs thrive on guidance, structure, routine and the opportunity to learn.

***Responsible Pit Bull owners understand the benefits and challenges of the breed, are prepared for prejudice, and ensure their dog remains an ambassador for life.*** For most of the 20th century, Americans celebrated the Pit Bull because of his brave and loyal nature. However, in the past 25 years, the American Pit Bull Terrier has become a fad breed, a foe in the media, and a popular symbol for macho-aggression.

A frequent complaint of Pit Bull owners is that it can be difficult to find a company that will provide homeowner's insurance for a regular premium. Likewise, Pit Bull owners who are moving may sometimes have to give themselves extra time to find pit-friendly accommodations. Finding friendly rentals and homeowners insurance is not exclusive to those who care for Pit Bulls. Owners of Siberian Huskies, Rottweilers, Akitas, Alaskan Malamutes, and Chow Chows are also known to have similar challenges. Owners of these types of breeds sometimes find that if their dog has been certified as an AKC Canine Good Citizen® rental managers and insurance companies may be more willing to provide their services.

In recent years, efforts toward reducing dog bites have led to the enactment of Breed Specific Legislation (BSL) in cities and counties across our country. Although BSL's purpose is to increase public safety, it is solely focused on preventing the ownership of a "dangerous breed" instead of judging the temperament and actions of individual animals. For example, the law in Denver, Colorado prohibits any person from owning, possessing, keeping, exercising control over, maintaining, harboring, or selling a pit bull. This is most certainly important information for a traveling pit bull owner to know! In 2005 the California legislature made it illegal for cities and counties to pass dangerous dog laws based on a dog's breed. California's Dangerous Dog law is focused on the actions of the individual to protect the public from dangerous animals.

Neighbors, parents of your children's friends, and even relatives may share the media's negative opinion and believe that your loyal, well-behaved family Pit Bull is dangerous simply because of his breed. Savvy Pit Bull owners have done a lot of research and, when questioned about their choice of breed, take the opportunity to share both the benefits and challenges of owning a Pit Bull.

Above all, savvy Pit Bull owners know that their actions and the actions of their dog affect the breed as a whole. Responsible Pit Bull owners understand the history of the breed, behavioral characteristics, challenges, and needs so that their dogs remain successful ambassadors for life!

## REFERENCES

For further information on the American Pit Bull Terrier Breed, see the following websites and books, which were used as references for this handout.

### HSSV Rescue & Education Partners

[www.BadRap.org](http://www.BadRap.org)      [www.OurPack.org](http://www.OurPack.org)

### Reliable Information on the Web

[www.pbrc.net](http://www.pbrc.net) (Pit Bull Rescue Central)  
[www.animalfarmfoundation.org](http://www.animalfarmfoundation.org)  
[www.workingpitbull.com](http://www.workingpitbull.com)

### Must Have Books

The Working Pit Bull  
*by Dianne Jessup*

The Pit Bull Placebo  
*by Karen Delise*

The Essential Pit Bull  
*edited by Ian Dunbar*

American Pit Bull Terriers: Fact or Fiction  
*by Dawn Capp*

The Ultimate American Pit Bull Terrier  
*by Jacqueline O'Neil*

Dogs Bite: But Balloons and Slippers are More Dangerous *by Janis Bradley*

Bully Breeds Magazine