



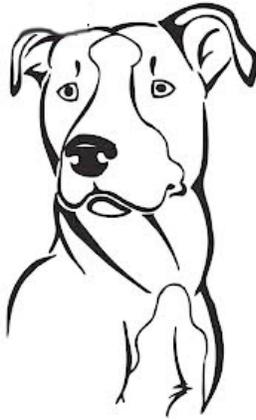
***Pit Bulls and the Media:
Mauling a Reputation***

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PIT BULLS vs. THE MEDIA

ABSTRACT

By Tim Beard, Christine Martin and Brett William Mauser



For 20 years, the city of Denver has banned all pit bulls from the city limits. Violators of the ordinance have their pet seized and destroyed. At times, police have even entered a family's home and pulled the family pet from the arms of children. This Breed Restrictive Legislation has been battled in court after court and is an on-going battle between politicians and dog-owners.

The question remains, is this particular breed more aggressive and violent than all others? Do its genetics make it a fierce fighting machine with dangerous muscle strength and an unpredictable ticking time bomb? There are a swarm of myths surrounding the pit bull, but how many of them are true?

These myths are cause for some very strict legislation. If these myths, believed to be fact by lawmakers are merely myth with no scientific basis, then should these laws and restrictions against one specific breed of dog be lifted?

There is a wide range of myths involving the pit bull, ranging from locking jaws to its crocodile-like locking jaw to aggressiveness attributed to the breed. These myths will be analyzed and either confirmed or debunked before taking a long hard look at why these myths have become so ingrained in the pit bull's legacy and what part the media has in the general reputation of the breed.

<i>INTRODUCTION</i>	A brief introduction to the topic and controversy surrounding the pit bull.
<i>THE MYTHS</i>	We will explore the myths and legends surrounding the pit bull.
<i>THE FACTS</i>	After presenting the myths, we will take each one on, either verifying or debunking each myth.
<i>THE MEDIA</i>	After learning the truth about the pit bull, we will discuss the influence the media has had on the general public and the effects the media's portrayal has had on the breed.
<i>CONCLUSION</i>	The future of the breed, the legislation and the ethical and moral implications of bans and will be explored.

Over several decades of breeding, training and research, dogs have become more to the American family than just a companion or service animal. They have become a part of millions of families across the country. The animals that have been brought into these homes have become like children to their owners and employees to the businesses and government organizations that utilize them. Highly regarded researchers are learning more about the complexities of ‘man’s best friend,’ including the way they communicate and way they learn. Some dogs have learned more than 1,000 words and others are showing more cognitive comprehension than our own closest genetic ancestors, chimpanzees and apes (Wage, 2011 & Viegas, 2012). With such a dynamic relationship with the canine species, it is no wonder that these animals are winning over our hearts, and now, our minds.

However, despite such progress made in the scientific community regarding the intelligence and work ethic instilled in these animals, one specific breed is seeing a type of discrimination that has the potential to slowly and systematically eliminate the breed all together. Through the media, gossip, or even warnings given to us by our parents, several cultures around the globe are clinging to a negative stereotype surrounding the breed known as “the pit bull.”

To use the word ‘breed’ is a mischaracterization in itself. While the pit bull name has become recognized as one specific type of dog, it actually encompasses several breeds, including the American Pit Bull Terrier, the American Staffordshire Terrier, and the Staffordshire Bull Terrier. These dogs were originally bred for working and stamina, but also for companionship and devotion to family. Yet, in recent decades, the breed has started to become less known for its work ethic and more known for its aggressiveness.

Are these stereotypes and assumptions about this breed in fact legitimate and cause for concern regarding these breeds, or are these stereotypes just that, stereotypes? Do the myths surrounding these animals hold merit, or are they simply myths with no factual basis? If these well-known and well-regarded myths are false, where do the myths come from and how have these myths become so ingrained in the fabric of not only America, causing several cities to institute Breed Specific Legislation (BSL), but also entire countries, like that of Australia and Canada.

The Myths

In order to understand the fear or misunderstandings of a specific breed (or breeds) of dogs, it is best to first outline the stories, myths and facts that are often accepted as fact. Some of these assumed facts are so scientifically impossible, it is amazing that they are believed by anyone, yet they remain not only popular, but are so often taken as irrefutable fact that they are the basis for legislation outlawing the breed.

Of course, not every story or myth is an outright falsehood. Some myths start from slivers of truth, and some are even facts. While pit bull breeds have several myths surrounding them, the most serious and detrimental to the breed's reputation are the ones that deserve the most study and scrutiny. If these myths are indeed fact, then perhaps legislation and bans are understandable and within reason. However, what should the recourse be if the myths that created these bans are false? If they are proven to be false, would legislators then begin to repeal this Breed Specific Legislations?

Of all the popular myths involving pit bull breeds, perhaps the most popular is the jaw strength of the animals. In several interviews conducted on the Texas A&M University - Corpus Christi campus, this was one of the most common. Even veterinarians have often presented the jaw strength of pit bull breeds to be comparable to the 2,500 pounds of pressure exhibited by an alligator (Coren, 2010). If this were in fact true, the animal would be an extreme danger, even for those the dog is merely playing with, as jaw strength of that power could cause great damage, even accidentally. Parents and child caretakers could easily see the risk in having such an animal around small children.

One of the earliest myths about the pit bull is that due to their breeding and training, they have inherited a locking mechanism in their jaw which allows them to bite onto something and simply not let go. Some anti-dog sites like *Dogsbite.org*, even claim to have tried to break pit bull's grips through the use of baseball bats, hammers and even shotguns, without avail (Lynn, 2013). Of course, one must ask how these tests were conducted and if the shotgun was used in the way it was intended.

Another myth that could explain so many hospital visits and reports is that of how pit bulls can 'lie.' This myth involves the ability of the pit bull to lull its victim into a false sense of security by posing as a friendly animal by panting, acting frisky, or being completely relaxed before it changes its demeanor in an instant and attacks. After all, if a person can see that a dog is frightened, irritated, or aggressive, it would put that person in a more defensive stance, allowing them to take action before the pit bull has the chance to attack.

The most important myth regarding the pit bull is the most unavoidable one. If a pit bull is naturally aggressive, there is no way around the fact that they are a danger. If the pit bull has it

in its blood and DNA to be violent and aggressive, no amount of training will remove that characteristic from the animal and will therefore make any further argument to the contrary invalid. If pit bulls are just 'born that way,' then what could possibly be done to turn this aggressive animal into a family pet?

The most bizarre and unusual myth that was given during a series of interviews with college students was that of the pit bull being the result of crossbreeding with a hyena. While at first, it seemed to be one lone person, perhaps being sarcastic or making light of the interview, when researched further it was found to be a common myth, finding its way to several websites. After reviewing the interview, it was apparent that the person who spoke of the pit bull's relationship to the hyena was not only a full believer in the myth, but was also willing to fight for the belief and categorically deny that it was false.

The most undeniable myth is that of the statistics. Report after report, study after study, pit bulls keep racking up the tally of victims. From hospital room visits to fatalities, pit bulls have the highest numbers of victims out of any other dog. The number of pit bull attacks has even led way to a national 'dog bite epidemic,' with hospital visits and even deaths increasing in numbers unseen before now.

While the list of myths regarding pit bulls could go on, these are the most common and most damaging to the reputation of the breeds. How many of these myths are true? Are any of them true? Do they all have at least a basis in fact? Some of the myths may seem unbelievable at first, others may seem completely rational and logical. Whether or not any of these myths are true, the frightening truth is that these myths have all been presented to legislation and committees as fact in order to pass Breed Specific Legislation.

THE FACTS

The list of myths surrounding the pit bull seem to be endless. Most of those we interviewed, even those who believed pit bulls were not aggressive and would consider owning or currently owned a pit bull, believed at least one of the myths.

As with most myths, those regarding the pit bull have some footing in reality, though are usually exaggerated, sometimes to the point of absurdity. While pit bulls have massive jaw muscles and a large head that can cause their bite to be more powerful than other breeds, their jaw strength is far from 2,500 pounds per inch, that of a crocodile or alligator. Studies have shown that the pressure per square inch of a pit bull's bite is lower than two other dog breeds, the Rottweiler, and German shepherd. With a tested jaw strength of only 235 pounds per inch of pressure, compared to a German shepherd's 238 and a Rottweiler's 328, the pit bull ranked lowest on the pressure test conducted by Dr. Brady Barr of *National Geographic*. This is a far cry from the 2,500 pounds per inch bite of a crocodile.

The myth of a locking jaw has become one of the most commonly accepted (and most refuted) myths regarding the breed. As a result of both training and breeding, pit bulls, like other terrier breeds, tend to hold and shake its victim in a dogfight and during hunting and bull baiting. They will hold their bite longer and with more determination than other breeds. This is not to be confused with locking jaws. There is no structural feature of the breed's skeleton that creates a locking mechanism that makes it near impossible to free the dog's bite. It is merely a matter of muscle strength.

Many media reports regarding injuries and fatalities caused by pit bulls will produce stories regarding attacks that were unprovoked and came out of nowhere. Any breeder will agree that a pit bull does not have a natural instinct to kill or harm a human; they become aggressive and may attack when the owner forsakes their own responsibilities to the dog. All dogs, especially the pit bull breed, need a 'pack structure' and without that structure, the rank issue becomes important and danger can arise from the dog. According to Leerburg Kennel, a pit bull that has unprovoked attacks is a result of irresponsible owners. A dangerous pit bull does not have a guardian/owner that has established the pack structure or a guardian has not trained their dog or they do not have control over the area or environment in which their dog has access to, or they do not socialize their dog.

While discussing pit bulls and the unprovoked attacks it is also important to mention that media has also indicated that pit bulls do not feel pain and therefore are able to withstand a dogfight without flinching from pain associated with injury. In an interview with Scott Robinson of *For the Love of Strays*, a local animal non-profit rescue organization, he explained that pit bulls have the same nervous system as all other dog breeds; however, because they have a "high level of gameness" and are so eager to please their owners, they do not allow for their pain to get the best of them.

The most persuasive and generally well-accepted myth regarding pit bulls is their natural aggressiveness brought on by genetics or a 'fighting gene.' Evidence has shown, though, that there is no such thing as a 'fighting gene.' The pit bull is like any other canine breed and is naturally not aggressive toward humans and they can live peacefully among other animals, which is evidenced by a rescued pit bull cared for by Scott Robinson. He rescued Hippiie, a pit bull,

that was possibly used as a bait dog (for training dogs to fight) and was then introduced to his pack of dogs, and with the proper introduction of all dogs and correct handling, they all live in harmony. It is, however, recognized that the pit bull can tend to have more intra-dog aggression, but they do not "automatically attack" another living creature any more than another dog breed would unless provoked or lacking proper socialization or training (ASPCA).

The most unusual myth involves the belief that pit bulls were created by the breeding of hyena into the dog's bloodline. However, the hyena is not the same species as the pit bull and therefore the two species cannot crossbreed. The hyena is of a species family of Hyaenidae and is more closely related to a Mongoose or a ferret than a dog. The pit bull is a Canidae.

Perhaps the most irrefutable myth is that of the statistics presented regarding the injuries and fatalities caused by the pit bull. According to statistics gathered by The Humane Society of Greenwood in South Carolina there are an estimated 4.7 million dog bites in the United States reported on each year. At least 25 various breeds caused 238 bite related fatalities in the U.S. (Humane Society South Carolina). Further research through the Center for Disease Control categorizes what breeds of dogs were involved in the fatalities and how the deaths were counted. Rottweiler's held the highest statistics regarding fatalities, followed by the pit bull, Great Dane crossbreeds and Akita's; however, it was reported that the study of the deaths were not all primary bite related but rather secondary infections from bites, head injuries from being knocked down, or cardio infractions from being chased. Interesting enough many of the bites were usually unaltered males, dogs that were not secured in a yard, and many from attacks by more than one dog that were off the owners property (CDC). What the media is failing to mention is that many attacks occur because of human error in not socializing the pit bull, but this also

pertains to any breed. Lack of training, chained dog syndrome, or ‘backyard prisoner’ all precipitate in aggressiveness with any breed of dog.

Studies have shown that when it comes to dog bites and attacks media reports on them differently. Within a one month time frame, three dog attacks were looked at regarding their media coverage. A Labrador Retriever and a mix breed attack were each reported in one article in the local paper where the incident occurred; a fatal attack on a child by a mix breed was reported on by the media twice in the local paper; and a non-fatal pit bull attack on an owner was reported in over 230 articles, including major television networks (*Denver Post*). With the media hype surrounding pit bulls there leaves very little room for society to judge this breed fairly and without stereotyping.

SPINNING THE MYTH

These myths have become a part of our belief system. The myths have even influenced politicians into legislating these breeds by placing restrictions on them, requiring expensive insurance, or even outright banning them. Just about all the myths are false, and can be proven so, yet society continues to believe these myths. Where did the myths come from? Perhaps the largest influence on popular opinion regarding pit bulls is the media, including the press, television shows and films.

The media continues to fuel the myths associated with pit bulls. Over the years, this breed has been deemed by credible newspapers to be “The Most Dangerous Dog in America,” and “America’s Baddest Dog.” Other articles have claimed that pit bulls can “chomp through a

chain-link fence” (Twining, Arluke, & Patronek, 2000, p. 2). The media’s depiction of the breed has hit pit bull’s reputation hard.

Many members of the media are well aware of the negative stereotypes that the media has created for Pit Bulls. Media figures, such as Jessica James from KIII-TV, believe there is no doubt that the negative stereotypes and myths about pit bulls have come from the media. When asked in an interview where she felt the pit bull’s stereotype came from, she responded, “The media. For sure.” She discussed the attention news stations give to pit bulls over other breeds by stating, “When the word pit bull is mentioned, I think that has a tendency to attract our attention more often than something else.”

Reporters from other credible news outlets, such as *The Denver Post*, have also written articles addressing the media’s role in creating pit bull myths. In his article “The Media Takes Its Lumps Over Reporting About Pit Bulls,” John Davidson checked his own paper’s archive by searching for, ‘dog attacks.’ Of the 20 articles that were returned, eight included the word ‘pit bull’ in the title, one included the word, ‘Rottweiler,’ and the others did not include the breed’s name (Davidson, 2010). This is a clear example of media bias.

Many members of the public, who have experience with pit bulls, are frustrated with the media’s portrayal of the breed. A comment made by a member of the public on the issue is as follows:

It annoys me that only pit bulls are shown. I mean, there are a lot of other dogs that attack. When I was young, I was attacked by a collie, you know, a Lassie dog. You never hear about those stories but . . . you always tend to hear the worst about pit bulls.
(Twining, Arluke, & Patronek, 2000, p. 15)

Pit bull advocates also tend to believe that critics have a lack of experience with the breed. The lack of experience with pit bulls, paired with the effect of the media, tends to be where members of the general public believe the problem is rooted (Davidson, 2010).

Still, the stereotypes about Pit Bulls are currently supported in the media beyond news articles. There are numerous television shows that feed off the negative image the media has created for pit bulls. For example, there is currently a popular television show called *Pit Bulls & Parolees* (Animal Planet, n.d.b). Although the television show works to debunk the myths surrounding pit bulls, the show has supported the stereotype of pit bulls being associated with criminals.

Similarly, there is currently another extremely popular television show called *Pit Boss* (Animal Planet, n.d.a). *Pit Boss* also works hard to debunk the negative stereotypes of pit bulls. Unfortunately, the television show also strengthens the stereotype of the pit bulls being associated with criminals through the main character of the show. The main character, Luigi “Shorty” Rossi, has spent over ten years in prison for his involvement in a gang shooting when he was eighteen years old (Animal Planet, n.d.c). Although Luigi works to help pit bulls, Animal Planet connects Luigi’s criminal background to the negative stereotypes of pit bulls to make the show more appealing.

It is not believed that prejudice against pit bulls is prevalent based on any ideological beliefs, nor some kind of conspiracy. Most do not believe journalists inherently do not like pit bulls. Reporters around America have been affected by media bias just as much as the rest of the population, and the majority of reporters genuinely believe the pit bull myths are true. The continuous media bias against pit bulls is due to pack journalism (Cohen & Richardson, 2002).

Pack journalism can be achieved through two methods. It can occur when a reporter looks to a number of respected news sources for stories, and then rewrites the story he or she has read (Cohen & Richardson, 2002, p. 290). When rewriting articles from respected sources, reporters will often take the same stance on the issue. By doing this, reporters often get caught up in reporting opinions as facts. By doing so, the information being reported is often distorted (Cohen & Richardson, 2002).

Pack journalism can also be more deliberate. It will sometimes occur by a number of reporters from different media outlets collaborating on what angle to take on a news story (Matusitz & Breen, 2007, p. 2). Of the two ways pack journalism occurs, this form is the more unethical. Regardless, both forms of pack journalism produce the same outcome.

There are a number of reasons why pack journalism occurs. Just about all of the reasons can be linked to the pressure of the media industry. Reporters are often working with strict deadlines. The amount of work a reporter is expected to produce in a short timeframe leads to pack journalism (Cohen & Richardson, 2002).

Although prevalent in the media industry, pack journalism is commonly known to be undesirable. The practice is considered lazy, and pit bulls have experienced the effects first hand. In just about all cases, pack journalism results in society being deceived in some way (Matusitz & Breen, 2007, p. 4). An example of how pack journalism has deceived society is the result of common legislation banning pit bulls. Such legislation has caused enormous problems and heartache for people all around the world, and has resulted in the euthanizing of devastating amounts of pit bulls (Delise, 2007).

Although a journalist may check for credible sources to verify the information in an article, this does not fully prevent pack journalism. Another repercussion of strict deadlines is a phenomenon known as “official sources syndrome”. Official source syndrome is where reporters rely on credible sources for facts that they can take at face value (Cohen & Richardson, 2002, p. 290). The media also contributes to the problem by often only using a limited amount of credible sources to provide information (Cohen & Richardson, 2002, p. 290).

Due to increasingly tighter deadlines, journalists often do not have the time to investigate thoroughly the accuracy of the information provided by the credible sources. A credible source is one that “is established through institutionalized forms of authority and knowledge” (Cohen & Richardson, 2002, p. 290). This does not guarantee that all information will be accurate, and that the source does not have a special interest in the subject. The time needed to investigate both sides of a story can also encourage pack journalism.

There have been three sources commonly used by the media that have been blamed for supplying inaccurate information about pit bulls. The three sources that are commonly used as credible sources, but benefit from the negative stereotypes of pit bulls, are the police, the Humane Society, and local animal shelters (Cohen & Richardson, 2002, p. 290-291). The police benefit from the societal fear of pit bulls as any story that involves the police and an aggressive pit bull makes the police look like they are protecting society. Oftentimes, police departments are also aware of journalists interest in pit bull stories so they are more likely to send information regarding a pit bull attack rather than another type of dog breed. The Humane Society benefits from negative stereotypes of pit bulls as they use the prevention of dog fighting as a way to gain

donations. Some local animal shelters will attempt to raise money and enhance their reputation in a similar manner (Cohen & Richardson, 2002, p. 291).

The methods used by credible sources to conduct research can be troublesome. The Center for Disease Control conducted a report of all dog bite-related fatalities from 1979 to 1988. Pit bulls were overwhelmingly represented in the report, cementing stereotypes. What was not widely known was that the report was based largely on media reports, with no verification that the dogs reported as pit bulls were indeed pit bulls (Delise, 2007, p. 99). The Center for Disease Control report explains its method of gathering statistics regarding dog bite attacks involved “scanning the text of newspapers and periodicals for certain words and word combinations (CDC, 2013).” On the CDC’s webpage, which links to the report, the organization states, the report, “does not identify specific breeds that are most likely to bite or kill, and thus is not appropriate for policy-making decisions related to the topic (CDC, 2013).

There are good reasons for why the media has specifically targeted pit bulls. In fact, pit bulls are not the first dog breed to fall victim to the media. Before they were the media’s choice for discrimination, rottweilers and dobermans were negatively stereotyped (Cohen & Richardson, 2002, p. 295; Delise, 2007). Negatively stereotyping pit bulls has occurred for specific reasons.

There are three reasons why the myths about pit bulls are so popular. First, the urban legend of pit bulls has great media appeal. The story of a vicious animal versus man has been popular since ancient Rome. Second, the myths are supported by credible sources, such as the Humane Society, and some animal shelters, which benefit from the negative stereotype. Third, the promotion of fear serves a vested interest (Cohen & Richardson, 2002, p. 296).

Even with pit bulls falling into the criteria necessary for negative stereotyping to flourish, this does not explain why the media targeted pit bulls over a different breed. With the evidence provided in this paper that debunk the pit bull myths, it appears that there are a number of dog breeds that could have fallen victim to media stereotyping. The newspaper that has been blamed for originally starting the media bias against pit bulls is the *New York Times*. The paper has had a history of negatively reporting about pit bulls, and many believe this is where pit bulls have received their bad name (Cohen & Richardson, 2002, p. 290).

CONCLUSION

The facts and myths can often be blurred, not only by the media, but by our own mind's eye. When there is a highly controversial topic with two distinct sides, the truth often rests in the middle. While a pit bull is not aggressive due to its breeding, its genetics do make it a stronger animal. A pit bull may not be any more likely to attack than any other dog, but if it does attack it is more likely to do more damage than a smaller, less muscular breed.

Some could argue that since the strength of a pit bull makes it more dangerous, despite its breeding, it should be slowly bred out or at least very highly restricted. However, it is this same strength and short stature that makes it a perfect worker, especially as a service animal, allowing it to not only fit in smaller and more confined areas, but carry more weight for their owner with disabilities.

Many would legislate a specific breed of dog by making it more difficult to own by placing outrageous fees and insurance requirements on them, placing restrictions on who can and

can not own one, or even making it a crime to own one. This study has shown that many of the myths and opinions regarding the breed of dog known as the pit bull are in fact false. Yet, these myths, paraded as facts, are the cause of law after law either highly restricting or outright banning the pit bull breeds.

What is possibly most frightening is that these myths are perpetuated and spread not only by police organization and respectable institutions like the Humane Society, but also by the news media, an organization that is supposed to be interested in reporting the truth and the facts. Yet when the media can focus on one single breed for alienation and legislation, can it not also turn its scorn, concern, or wrath onto a specific breed of another animal or species? Another species that could be categorized, classified and characterized by size, shape, or even color? A species like us? If we can claim that one specific breed of dog is more aggressive or violent than another, based on genetics and DNA and not by the way the animal is raised, then could we not also argue the same about the human race?

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