

## **Sunday Column – Pit Bull – An American Icon**

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Bronwen Dickey's new book, "Pit Bull: The Battle over an American Icon" begins with a quote from British philosopher, political activist and Nobel laureate Bertrand Russell:

"Neither a man, nor a crowd, nor a nation can be trusted to act humanely or to think sanely under the influence of a great fear."

It is a fitting sentiment in light of the mass hysteria that has developed over the past three decades around the several breeds of dog categorized as "Pit Bulls". These dogs are maligned, marginalized, and even outright banned in over 800 cities across the country. They are summarily euthanized just because of how they look.

Yes, there are bad, even dangerous pit bulls but there are also bad golden retrievers. Any dog can become a public safety problem. Yet, a whole mythology has been created around muscular dogs with blocky heads.

The media has played a pivotal role in cultivating this fear with its focus on, and repetition of, negative stories involving these breeds. Studies have shown that dog bite stories involving pit bull type dogs are published significantly more often and in more newspapers than say, bite stories involving Collies.

There are a number of misconceptions surrounding Pit Bull dogs such as the locking jaw. In fact, there is no anatomical difference between the jaws of Pit Bulls or any other breed. Stories regarding the pounds per square inch of a pit bull's biting power began as an estimate of a couple of hundred psi to more recent accounts of 3,000 psi. Yet there is no reliable way to measure the psi of a bite from any dog.

The designation Pit Bull is used to refer to the American Pit Bull Terrier and American Staffordshire Terrier, among others. One local ordinance in Ferguson, MO includes, "any dog which has the appearance and characteristics of being predominately" one of those breeds. Theoretically, this could describe a Labrador retriever crossed with an Australian cattle dog.

These days there are several movements afoot to correct our society's image of pit bull dogs. The American Bully Kennel Club was created in 2004. A few days ago I met a woman who is active in a local kennel club and shows her obedience trained American Staffordshire Terrier. The Animal Farm Foundation provides posters, flyers, and other information to help people see these dogs in a new light.

The Humane Society of the United States is a partner organization of BADRAP, a pit bull advocacy group in Oakland, CA. HSUS has been instrumental in lobbying for new laws to increase criminal penalties for dog fighting rings and providing law enforcement training and funding necessary to break up large dog fighting rings.

On the local level, the Pet Coalition of Muscogee and Harris Counties has made it their mission to focus on these dogs in order to break down the walls of fear between them and the people who would otherwise adopt them.

Pit Bull type dogs are no different than any other type of dog when it comes to their loyalty to their human family members. Dogs, just like kids, need love and attention and they need to be taught how to behave around others. That is the foundation needed to raise both good dogs and good kids.

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