



StubbyDog™
Rediscover the pit bull.

The Evolution of a Bad Rap

Author shares her theory on how pit bulls got into their current predicament

By Micaela Myers

“We have always had certain dogs that people like to perpetuate as dangerous,” says Karen Delise, director of research for the National Canine Research Council, “and the more the media, the politicians and the public believe this – the more they perpetuate the myths – the more desirable these dogs become to the exact people you don’t want to own them in the first place.”

The pit bull isn’t the first, or last, breed to get a bad rap. In her book *The Pit Bull Placebo*, Delise chronicles how various breeds throughout history became the fall guy, the bad dog of the era. Back in the mid to late 1800s, it was the bloodhound.

At that time, various bloodhounds were used as guard dogs and for tracking, including tracking escaped slaves. Without the TV or Internet, it was novels and plays that helped form the bloodhound’s negative image, Delise explained. In Harriet Beecher Stowe’s novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* bloodhounds played only a small role, chasing the escaped slave Eliza; but when theatrical versions of the book began popping up all over the country, “ferocious” bloodhound-looking dogs became the highlight, featured on stage, on playbills and in parades.

“So naturally it’s fearful to the people who are law-abiding and the people who are anti-social and want to instill fear into their neighbors and fellow humans go out and get these dogs,” Delise said.

Later, German shepherds and Dobermans both took their turn in the hot seat. Then, starting in the early 1980s, a series of circumstances came together to turn attention on the pit bull.



Prior to that, in the late 1970s, there was indeed a bite problem in the United States. There were almost no leash laws, and cities such as New York were reporting 35,000 bites a year (compared to 3,500 now). But these weren’t from pit bulls. “You started to see a lot of dog bite studies popping up,” Delise said. “If you look at them all in the early 70s to late 70s you do not even see the word pit bull or Rottweiler. They were not even on the radar.”

People began demanding that something be done about the bite problem. “At the same time the Humane Society of the United States was going to crack down on dog fighting, so they started raiding a lot of drug houses and motorcycle gangs, and they started finding all these pit bulls,” Delise explained. “It was a subculture that was using these dogs.”

All photos by Melody McFarland



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The raids on dog fighting operations led to media attention, and soon rumors, quotes and misinformation started flying, creating the myths that pit bulls were “different,” felt no pain, would fight to the death, and possessed ultra-powerful, locking jaws.

“The German shepherd and Doberman fad was kind of winding down,” Delise added. “I remember getting a Doberman in 1979 and talking to a guy at work. He said, ‘Oh, you got a Doberman. They’re so yesterday.’ People were looking for a new dog, and the attraction [to pit bulls] was instant with people who had previously gotten Dobermans because they wanted them to guard their junkyard or intimidate their neighbors or feel like big shots. That was it.”



As pit bulls gained popularity with the wrong people for the wrong reasons, reports of attacks

surfaced. “It’s kind of like a self-fulfilling prophecy. [Certain people] get these dogs because they heard they’re vicious, they heard they’re bad, so that’s what they get them for and that’s what they encourage, and that’s what happens.” This cycle is exactly why ordinances that focus on breed rather than people don’t work. Irresponsible owners simply replace one dog with another who’s been bought or bred for a similar purpose. “Criminals or people looking for an aggressive dog or one to enhance their image aren’t going to go out and get Persian cats because you ban pit bulls,” Delise said.

Since the 1980s, the pit bull has remained in the “bad dog” spotlight. “The hysteria is almost as bad as it was 20 years ago,” Delise said. “In 1987 it was incredible. Every major news magazine ran front cover or huge stories about the pit bull menace. Unless you were living under a rock, everybody saw this. Right after that you see all the ordinances – Cincinnati, Miami, Denver, Toledo – clicking into place with the bans.”

And so pit bulls became the fall guy in the age of information. “You know the bloodhounds got a lot of notoriety just from word of mouth and traveling shows,” Delise recalled. “Think about today – CNN 24/7, news radio, TV, computers, Internet, blogs, chat, cell phones. Once a myth, falsehood, lie, exaggeration or sensational remark goes out, the bell is rung. It gets embedded in people’s consciousness. It gets on the Internet and it stays on the Internet like soot. There’s all this sooty residue of all these things that are not true that people have said, and then they get written down in newspaper articles or in court transcripts, and they go out there forever.”

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