

History of the Bulldog

Although the breed has undergone dramatic changes over its history, the Bulldog remains a favored pet dog.

By Michael Dickerson

During any extended period of time, it is quite common to see a breed of dog evolve into a totally different specimen than what it may have been hundreds or even thousands of years ago. It would be considered very unusual for a breed to remain fairly consistent in type and temperament throughout its development. This is certainly true when studying the history and growth of the Bulldog.

The Bulldog, better known as the English Bulldog, has changed tremendously since its inception. Although there are some old attributes that can still be found in the breed today, specimens that existed in the 13th century looked and behaved nothing like the “type” of dog we see represented in today’s homes and show ring. Historians are fairly confident that the breed derived from ancient war dogs, or other types of old Mastiff-like breeds.

These war dogs were used by the British in times of battle and were excellent protectors of their master’s property and flock. Still others believe that the true origin of the breed is not entirely clear, and are quick to point out the many loopholes that exist in some of the more favorably recognized theories.

HOW THE “BULL” CAME TO BE IN THE BULLDOG

One safe theory is that the Bulldog was first developed in the British Isles, and was originally bred for the sole purpose of bull-baiting, an extremely barbaric pastime that became very popular in England. Its popularity was so great that it became the national sport of England from around the 13th to the 18th century.

HISTORICAL WEIGHT

The Bulldog was slightly smaller in ancient times, and the average dog weighed approximately 40 pounds.

Today, they are a bit more robust.

Males usually weigh 55 to 60 pounds and bitches 50 to 55 pounds. Bull-baiting was an event that was usually held in conjunction with a series of boxing matches, and took place behind rope enclosures in an indoor arena. To keep the fight on more equal terms, the bull was helplessly tied to a rope that was attached to a large hook in the ground. The sport involved the use of one dog, or a group of dogs, which were set loose to pin and hold a bull by the ears and nose in front of thousands of screaming spectators. The nose was considered to be the bull’s most delicate body part and where it was most vulnerable to injury. The dogs were specifically trained to attack this area. Despite its popularity, the event was a horrifying spectacle to watch. It was not uncommon for a group of dogs to be viciously killed or severely injured during a fight. Spectators often wagered on this tasteless event.

The early Bulldog was bred to be a fierce and aggressive animal with enormous strength and courage. Beauty and conformation were of little importance to the Bulldog breeders of this early era. The breed’s temperament of yesteryear was a far cry from the loving, loyal companion that’s now cherished by fanciers worldwide.

A LEGENDARY, DIVERSIFIED FIGHTING DOG

It wasn’t until 1778 that an outcry against the barbaric nature of bull-baiting was finally acknowledged and acted upon by the Duke of Devonshire in Staffordshire, who officially abolished the harrowing sport. Unfortunately, this was not the end of the Bulldog’s use as a fighting machine. Although bulls were no longer used, the fighting continued with rats, lions, monkeys, bears, other Bulldogs and any other animal the English people could get their hands on. It wasn’t long before dog-fighting and bear-baiting had taken the place of bull-baiting. In fact, these “sports” became just as popular— if not more so. Bear-baiting quickly developed into one of the most widespread baiting sports. Eventually, because of the high cost associated with importing bears, the sport gradually came to a halt in the 18th century.

BULL-BAITING

Despite its savage characteristics, bull-baiting was a widely accepted social activity in England during the 18th and 19th centuries. The sport required the breed to be much more mobile and agile than a majority of the dogs seen today. The sport dictated form and function of the dogs, and that has ultimately helped it to develop into what it is at the present time. After bull-baiting and bearbaiting came to an end, many believed that the breed as a whole would disappear. Fortunately, there were many individuals who were still interested in keeping the breed alive and were concerned with transforming it into a worthy pure-bred dog. These dedicated breeders set their sights on developing a breed that would

be suitable for the family environment, as opposed to one that was a combative fighting dog. It wasn't too long before breeders switched from breeding for fighting and combat to breeding for showing and exhibiting.

By the late 18th and early 19th centuries, early breed specimens were of poor quality compared to today's standards. Many fighting-dog qualities were still evident in their physical appearance. They had small skulls, long noses and no wrinkle covering their head. They were extremely crippled, and for the most part considered very unhealthy.

From Fighting Dog to Show Dog and Family Companion
The Bulldog in the US

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