

American Pit Bull Terriers

Get to know the American Pit Bull Terrier's temperament.

By Susan McCullough

Shana Bobbitt had a great idea for her dog's Halloween costume. She thought Buddy would look great if she dressed him up as a medieval horse. "I made him a costume without a pattern," explains Bobbitt, who lives in College Place, Washington. "And while I had my share of frustrations trying to create it, he was very willing to stand there and let me try things on him 10 times. Finally, it was done and we went to [the pet-supply store] for their costume contest. Everyone was impressed, and we wound up with second place over at least 20 other dogs."

To dog lovers and costume devotees, Buddy's triumph might not seem like a very big deal, until they realize that Buddy's not just any dog. He's an American Pit Bull Terrier. His patience, good humor and ability to just chill when parading around in a costume in front of other dogs doesn't jive with the snarling, man-biting, dog-aggressive stereotype from which the breed suffers. But those who know and love this breed, like Bobbitt, know that a real live APBT can be an animal that differs radically from the breed's not-so-sterling public image. Here are some surprising facts about what it's really like to live with an APBT.

They Love People

The APBT likes nothing better than to please his people. Janice Snyder, an APBT enthusiast from Fallon, Nevada, recalls with pride the day her dog earned a title in the canine sport of weight pulling. "At the end of the trial, the judge made a comment to all that she was so impressed by my dog's willingness to please me," Snyder says.

That willingness to please is no accident. Although the APBT's forebears were bred to fight other animals, they also were bred to willingly go to extremes to please their human owners. Today, this eagerness makes the APBT surprisingly easy to train. "I have found that these dogs are very eager to please and are most happy when they are working their minds as well as their bodies," Bobbitt says.

Moreover, the breed's love of people can extend well beyond his immediate family. "We had a rescue dog with us for a while," recalls Jerianne Brown, a breeder from Windber, Pennsylvania. "We knew enough of this particular dog's background to know that he was not socialized and that he had been neglected and beaten. The first night we had him, a strange child approached us wanting to pet the dog. He got to the dog before we could stop him. We could tell the dog was not sure what to make of this little human, but he quickly warmed up and wagged his tail. This dog was by far the sweetest dog I have ever known. He was a prime example of proper APBT temperament in that he endured such a rotten beginning in life, yet he remained human friendly and mentally stable."

That said, these dogs are not pushovers. Although they love their people and want to please them, they may have their own ideas on how to do so — and sometimes those ideas conflict with those of their humans. "Sometimes they can have a stubborn streak," Bobbitt admits. "But as a whole, they want to do what their master asks."

Carol Gaines, a longtime APBT breeder and judge from Battle Ground, Washington, agrees. "They can be hard-headed and stubborn, but it's because they seem to think all the time," she says. "Labs are trainable, but APBT's are always busy training you. They are very happy when they make you happy; however, they want to do it their own way."

Bribery Gets You Everywhere

APBT enthusiasts have definite opinions about what type of training their breed responds best to. “They need positive reinforcement — and, of course, food,” Gaines says.

In other words, bribery goes a long way with these dogs. A tasty treat provides a powerful incentive for these confident dogs to perform as requested. Of course, treats aren’t the only reinforcement that APBTs respond to. Affectionate petting or stroking and verbal expressions of praise help, too.

Breed devotees may not be completely united on what to do when a dog doesn’t comply with a request. According to Gaines, “you do have to be stern, but you have to do it with love or they shut down. All they want to do is please you.” Brown believes that while positive reinforcement is effective, corrections for misbehavior are necessary, too. She suggests using a slip collar that is made from a metal chain. “Hold the collar so it forms a P and place it over the dog’s head,” Brown says. “The ring should be situated behind the dog’s right ear, and the collar should sit right behind the jaw. A correction is issued by giving a quick, sharp tug on the leash and then releasing. A verbal correction is also helpful (“no,” “out,” “leave it,” etc). The chain type [of collar] works better [than fabric] because the dog is able to hear the ‘click’ of the collar, which acts as a warning. Remember that slip collars should be worn only when training or participating in conformation events.”

Bobbitt also believes that corrections should be used, “but only when necessary.” For her part, she strongly recommends that new puppy owners take their pups to a professional trainer for their initial schooling. These sessions “help the owner to teach their dog, and the dogs learn basic obedience when faced with distractions. It also is helpful, if the owner is having a problem, for the instructor to see what is happening and offer advice based on what they see.”

But taking an APBT to a group obedience class could prove problematic. “Some APBTs are dog aggressive, and training in a group setting could be a challenge,” Bobbitt says. “The important thing is that the dog is always under control of the owner and is not a nuisance, even if he never leaves an owner’s yard.”

Brown agrees. “The fact of the matter is that APBTs are animal aggressive,” she says. “Many terriers are this way. While each individual dog may not be animal aggressive, it’s important to remain cautious.”

Still, some owners find that their APBTs can deal appropriately with other dogs, and even pass tests that require them to be well-behaved around other canines. “I have titled dogs of this breed in conformation, obedience, agility and weight pull in addition to the AKC’s Canine Good Citizen test and the American Temperament Test Society’s temperament test,” Bobbitt says proudly. “I know some people who hunt or herd with their APBTs, although that is not common. Some participate in dock diving, drafting [carting], scent work and protection. Their willingness to work is their greatest asset with the right owner, and their biggest downfall [is when they’re in] the wrong hands.”

They’re Not Bad Dogs, But They May Have Bad Owners

APBT enthusiasts have definite ideas as to what constitutes a good owner and a bad one.

Brown believes that prospective owners should have “time and energy to devote to the dog [and be] willing to give plenty of opportunities for exercise, willing to leave breeding to the experts, and to properly train and socialize the dog.”

Gaines feels a good ambassador is “someone who is a responsible dog owner, someone who has studied the breed or knows someone who can help them understand the breed.”

Snyder likes to see “a home where the people are not afraid to set and enforce rules. All large breeds, including APBTs, should not be allowed to run the show. A dog who knows the rules and knows his place is a much happier dog and is a joy to live with.”

Bobbitt wants to see all those qualities in an owner, but also would like an owner to be “someone who is willing to go to city council to fight breed-specific legislation, write letters, whatever they can do to help keep their right to own the breed of their choice.”

Who should not have an APBT? Bobbitt’s list of bad-owner characteristics includes those who think these dogs are good at guarding people and property. “This is not a guardian breed,” she says. “They were not bred to be man-biters, and in the history of the breed the dogs who did bite were put down right away. If you want a guard dog, choose something else. Many pit bulls will help the robber carry out the goods. They are a people-loving breed.”

Gaines’s bad-owner list includes “anyone who needs something to make them a ‘man’ or an extension of their ego.”

Anyone who is abusive. Anyone who is not a responsible dog owner. Anyone who will do more harm to the reputation of the breed.”

Brown tells a story about the type of individual who she believes should not have an APBT. “A man once approached us in a hotel parking lot, asking about our dogs and admiring them,” she recalls. “He proceeded to bring out a tiny little APBT puppy for us to look at. When I tried to pet the dog and talk to it, the man scolded me. He said he did not want the dog to be friendly with anyone but him. [That is] an accident waiting to happen.”