

Bully Breeds

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By Sarah Christie

Standards of Strength

If you are having trouble keeping all the bully breeds straight, you aren't alone. Several breeds of dogs are commonly referred to as pit-bull types or bully breeds. Primarily, these are the American Pit Bull Terrier (APBT, also called a Pit Bull), the American Staffordshire Terrier (AmStaff), the Bull Terrier (BT), the Staffordshire Bull Terrier, Miniature Bull Terrier and the American Bulldog. All six share common ancestors and some history. The interwoven breeds share names and characteristics so closely related that the uninitiated can be forgiven if they are a little confused.

For instance, neither the APBT nor the American Bulldog are recognized by the American Kennel Club (AKC). The AKC does recognize dogs that are virtually identical to the APBT under the name of the American Staffordshire Terrier, which it changed from Staffordshire Terrier in 1972, to distinguish it from the Staffordshire Bull Terrier of England. This, of course, is not to be confused with the AKC-accepted Bull Terrier, which has a smaller spin-off, the Miniature Bull Terrier. American Pit Bull Terriers are recognized by the United Kennel Club (UKC), and AKC American Staffordshires can be double registered as UKC APBTs. But American Pit Bulls cannot be registered as AmStaffs. And finally, the American Dog Breeders Association (ADBA), established in 1910, registers only American Pit Bull Terriers under its own standard. ADBA dogs are sometimes dual-registered with the UKC but almost never with the AKC. Whew!

Why all the confusion? The answer is partly practical, partly political, because the development and recognition of pit-bull types have been inextricably bound to changing social norms and volatile public opinion since their inception.

In 1835, the British Parliament put an end to bullbaiting, a sadistic form of entertainment in which dogs were pitted against bulls, usually with a bad end for both. With bullbaiting outlawed, dog fighting in pits took its place. Both sports required tenacious, fearless, muscular, agile dogs with strong jaws, a high pain threshold and a fight-to-the-death attitude -- but also an easygoing and loyal disposition toward humans. Aficionados crossed mastiff-type bulldogs with a variety of working terriers, resulting in a number of different types of dogs, all bred for basically the same purpose: gameness in the fighting pit.

Settlers brought these so-called bull-and-terrier dogs of England and Ireland to the United States in the early 1800s. Despite the breeds emerging popularity, though, the AKC refused to recognize the pit bull or other similar breeds. Frustrated by the club's repeated brush-offs, a breeder named Chauncey Bennett formed the rival United Kennel Club for the specific purpose of recognizing the American Pit Bull Terrier as a working dog in 1898. The UKC now registers more than 300 breeds including a number of working breeds, but the APBT was the first.

It wasn't until 1936 that the AKC finally recognized the APBT under a different name. With the widespread popularity of the movies and television shows *Little Rascals* and *Our Gang*, a UKC-registered American Pit Bull Terrier, Pete the Pup, (Lucenays Peter) won the hearts of viewers across the country. World War I posters used the pit bull's image to stir American patriotism. Unable to ignore the growing demands of fanciers who wanted to legitimize the breed through conformation shows but still unwilling to perpetuate the negative image of pit fighting, the AKC agreed to accept APBTs under the more genteel name of Staffordshire Terrier. In 1972, the breeds name was changed to American Staffordshire Terrier to distinguish between the heavier AmStaff developed in the United States and the Staffordshire Bull Terrier of England. The 1936 Staffordshire Terrier breed standard was written by APBT breeders; all of the original AKC Staffordshire Terriers were UKC-registered APBTs. But fanciers agreed to the name change from pit bull to Staffordshire Terrier as a compromise in order to legitimize the dogs in the show ring.

Because of this common ancestry, some people feel that the two -- APBTs and AmStaffs -- are essentially the same breed with different names. Sara Nugent, president of the American Staffordshire Terrier Club of America and also a UKC American Pit Bull Terrier judge, points out that the AmStaff stud books have been opened to Pit Bulls as recently as 1966. "People try to say one is different from the other, but they all came from the same gene pool, and no other blood had

been added to the mix, so how can you say they are different?" says Nugent. "Genetically, they are the same. The difference is only in what traits people have selected for and what registry they have chosen."

UKC senior judge Carol Gaines Stephens of Vancouver, Washington, respects her colleagues opinion, but could not disagree more. "It's like saying the Sheltie and the Collie are the same dog," says Stephens, who has judged UKC Pit Bulls since 1988. "The dogs have gone in separate directions." Die-hard AKC and Pit Bull breeders believe very strongly that the breeds are different at this point.

Mike Snyder of Seattle, Washington, is president of the UKCs National Pit Bull Terrier Association. He sees both sides -- to a point. He strongly objects to the increasing influence of the AmStaff on the Pit Bull, but he still thinks that AmStaffs differ from Pit Bulls in the way that show dogs differ from working dogs in other breeds. Or at least, they should.

"This is a can of worms that has been argued for decades," says Snyder. "They were debating this back in the 1950s. It's true these dogs all started with the same limited gene pool. But how many years of selective breeding does it take before you have a different dog?"

Snyder says that even though the standards read differently (the APBT standard is much more detailed and has been revised at least twice since it's original form), the biggest difference is that Pit Bulls have been selectively bred over time for working ability while the AmStaffs are bred for the conformation ring. Other than that, says Snyder, there's not a big difference between AKC and UKC dogs.

Stephens agrees that the breed has changed in recent years as more AKC AmStaffs, bred for the conformation ring, have crossed over and dual-registered as UKC Pit Bulls. "We've gone from working, athletic-looking dogs to pretty conformation dogs," says Stephens. "Its a beauty contest, what can I say?"

Fanciers will probably never reach perfect consensus about how best to preserve the historic integrity of the breeds while satisfying the needs of a diverse membership. But all responsible breeders and judges want what is best for the breeds, even though they may differ about what that may be or how best to achieve it. While the controversy ebbs and flows, the official breed standards remain the guiding light for breeders and judges to steer by.