

Stalwart, loyal companion? Foul-tempered killer? The words “pit bull” invoke a variety of reactions ranging from fearful distrust to admiring acceptance. Many people are uninformed about what a pit bull really is, perpetuating the controversy surrounding the breed. As such, ignorance and misleading information cause thousands of innocent pit bulls to suffer daily from discrimination and cruelty. I have worked specifically with pit bulls during my time as an SPCA volunteer, challenging these stereotypes and re-educating the public about the wonderful companions that these animals can be.

“Pit bull” is not actually an official dog breed, but rather a blanket term for four common “bully breeds”: the American Pit Bull Terrier, Staffordshire Bull Terrier, American Staffordshire Terrier, and American Bully. Pit bulls typically have square-shaped skulls, short coats, and exceptionally powerful musculature, but there are differences in height, weight, facial structure, and ear shape between the breeds (Worrall).

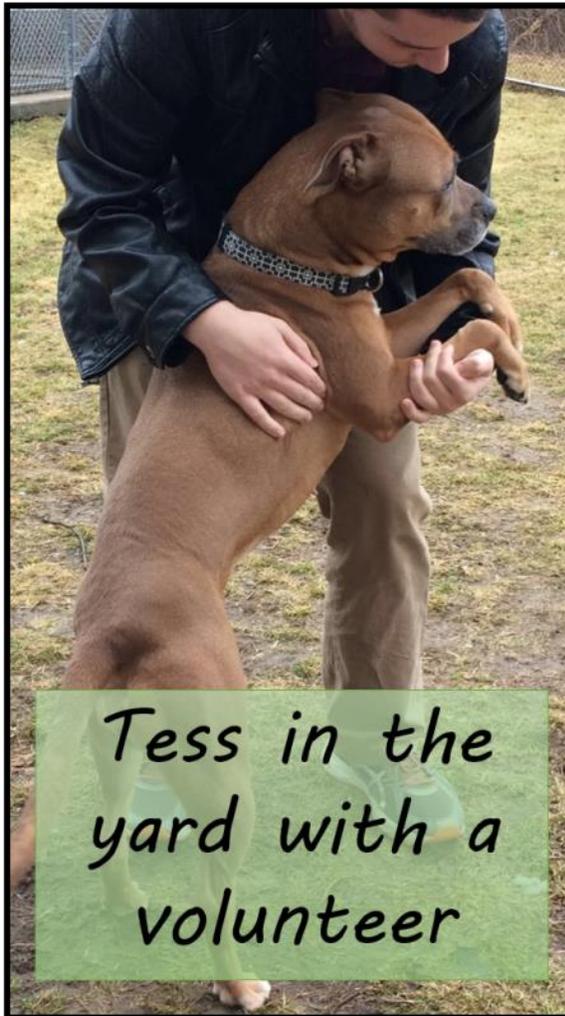


Unfortunately, many dogs of other breeds with similar physical characteristics can be incorrectly categorized as pit bulls, leading to inflated aggression statistics as many dogs who attack humans or other dogs are falsely assumed to be pit bulls (Kray). Because of this, pit bulls are stereotyped as inherently violent and are subjected to cruelties such as dogfighting, media bias, police violence, and breed-specific legislation. These prejudices can also cause people to fear pit bulls and refuse to give them a chance. In fact, Petfinder reports that the majority of dogs in American shelters are pit bulls or pit mixes— approximately 21,242 as of date (Petfinder). Oftentimes, the cages here at the Jefferson County SPCA are filled with pit bulls while other dogs easily find their forever homes.

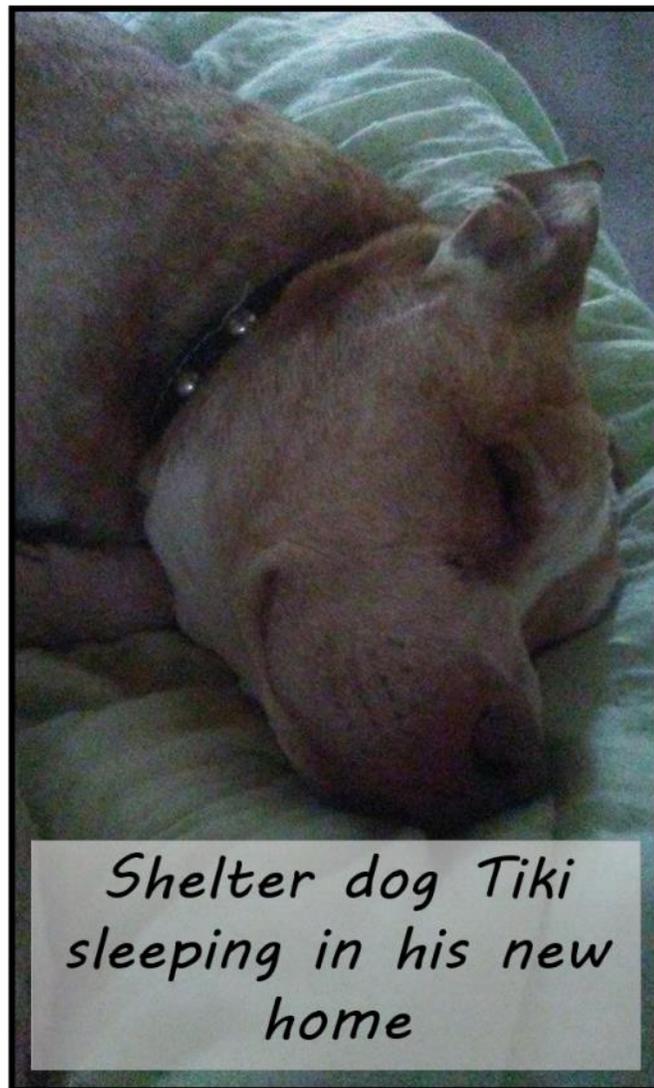


Pictured above are three recent arrivals to our shelter who were expelled from Ontario, Canada due to anti-pit bull legislation. It did not matter if they were friendly, loving, or suited for good homes; Tess, Remington, and Roxy had to evacuate the province or be euthanized simply because of their breed. Even Remington, a weakening senior who cannot sleep without his stuffed teddy bear, was subject to this prejudice! When I first started volunteering at the SPCA, I

might have even agreed with such laws, wondering *Can I trust these pit bulls? Are they really the aggressive killers that I hear they are?* However, I quickly realized my ignorance. These are cheerful, energetic animals who love to play and cuddle. In fact, pit bulls are one of the most gentle dog “breeds” according to the American Temperament Test Society (ATTS), something I would not have believed until I saw it for myself. Now I dedicate myself to clearing the misconceptions of others. As I work as an adoption counselor at the SPCA, I want to show potential adopters that pit bulls can be valuable, cherished members of their families and that the discrimination and fear due to negative stereotypes is unwarranted.



During quiet hours, I feed and water the dogs, clean their cages, and take them outside for play time. I enjoy caring for them, but the best moments are always when families fall in love with a shelter pit bull. I have seen prejudices melt away as a couple watched a pit bull frolic gleefully through the snow, hearts change as parents realized that the “vicious animal” wiggling in front of them was playing with their children, and new families come alive as children cried “I love him! Can we keep him?!” while smothering the dog in a giddy embrace. Pit bulls, like any other dogs, seek a loving forever home where they will be valued and cared for. They don’t judge people, don’t hate or discriminate— so we should do the same for them.



I am sometimes asked “How do you work with those pit bulls? Aren’t you afraid of them?”, and I reply that in the beginning I was. But beyond the stereotype, they are precious, unique individuals who deserve everything that other dogs do, and will respond with loyalty and adoration when treated kindly. For example, I remember being asked by one of the directors to help a pit bull named Joey who was wearing a satellite cone due to injury. He couldn’t reach his food bowl, so I had to feed him by hand. I was nervous about holding my hand so close to a pit bull’s powerful jaws, but the only “harm” Joey did was coating it in stinky dog slobber. In fact, he was gentle and grateful even amidst his ravenous excitement. I was not surprised at all when I heard shortly after that Joey had been adopted.



I also remember comforting Eleanor, a white female pit bull who had just awakened from surgery. Despite me being a complete stranger, she limped to where I was sitting and rested her head on my thigh. We sat there together for a while, surrounded by blood, Eleanor whimpering and crying as I kissed her head and stroked her back. This was not a violent or aggressive dog; rather, this was the perfect example of a loving and trusting companion. I imagine that the intolerance of pit bull haters would quickly fade if they spent any time with her.



Stereotypes and prejudices can be changed through awareness, advocacy, and action. Not everyone has the resources to adopt or foster a pit bull, but many people can volunteer for local animal shelters or pit bull rescue groups. Even the smallest effort helps, such as donations of food, money, toys, or supplies to pit-friendly organizations. In fact, Pit Bull Rescue Central recommends supporting a variety of organizations that provide medical treatment, re-homing, and training for pit bulls as well as public outreach and education. Working together, we can help alleviate the suffering of millions of innocent pit bulls. And through our tenacity, compassion, and fighting spirit, we can shatter stereotypes and show the world exactly what these "bullies" are— precious individuals, ready to love and protect if only given the chance.



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