

Labels: What's in a Name?

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What's in a name? Well, lots if your name is "bait dog" or "fighting dog". And these labels often determine the fates of the dogs that wear them.

Bait dogs are typically thought of as 'victims' and 'non aggressive' but fighting dogs are all too often viewed as 'vicious, trained killers' instead of the abuse victims that they truly are. There are many mistaken beliefs about fighting dogs, and the supposed use of bait dogs to 'train' fighting dogs. This article attempts to address some common concerns and misconceptions about fighting dogs, and the 'bait dog myth'.

What's a 'bait dog'? In a nutshell, according to popular Pit Bull culture (which often includes elements of myth), a 'bait dog' is a young, weak, or inexperienced dog (Pit Bull or otherwise) that is used to teach fighting dogs how to fight. The objective is to use a dog that does not fight back and injure the fighting dog, and to help the fighting dog 'learn' how to fight, 'get a taste for blood' and so on.

What's a 'fighting dog'? For the sake of this article, a fighting dog is one that has been used in the illegal 'sport' of dog fighting and has been fought in organized fight conventions or used in informal street fights; any dog that has been purposefully conditioned to fight and then allowed to fight another dog, or dogs confiscated from 'fight busts', whether or not they have actually been fought. It is important to note here that dogs coming out of fight busts have not necessarily been fought or even conditioned to fight. Don't assume! Judge the dog's behavior and not his unknown history.

Let's look at some common questions & incorrect assumptions about fighting & so-called bait dogs:

1) Will allowing a Pit Bull to kill/maim a weaker 'bait dog' make him a good fighting dog? Let's get this straight – allowing a Pit Bull to fight another weaker dog will NOT make him into a prize winning pit dog. Dogs when placed into certain situations will indeed fight – this is true of all dogs. A dog when repeatedly placed into certain situations and encouraged to fight through goading, tormenting or other means of environmental pressure will likely have increased fighting behavior in the future under similar circumstances. This does not mean the dog is a good fighting dog, however. There is a big difference between fighting a weaker opponent that does not fight back, and fighting a well-matching opponent in the pit. When it comes time for a real match, the shock of being up against an opponent that fights back could very well send a dog running for the hills - even if that dog had been 'trained' on 'bait dogs'.

Another important point to consider is that aggression or the willingness to start a fight does not equal gameness; gameness is the trait that dog fighters value above all others – the willingness and ability to keep fighting regardless of threat of physical harm or death. This is not something that can be 'trained' – it is 'heart' that the dog is born with.

Considering the above perspective, using 'bait dogs' to train fighting Pit Bulls would be pointless – and maybe even counter-productive.

2) Don't dog fighters use 'bait dogs' to train fighting dogs? Historically, dog fighters never used 'bait dogs'. Fighting dogs were not traditionally "trained" to fight, but rather physically and environmentally conditioned to do so. First, they were exercised, running and walking mostly, to build up stamina. Second, they were consistently placed in threatening situations with other dogs that encouraged defensiveness and kicked fight drive into gear, resulting in dog-directed aggression. Remember – fighting behavior is something that ALL dogs can potentially perform. Fighting is defensive behavior, conditioned in the dog through environmental processes. With Pit Bulls, in part this conditioning would occur by means such as: chaining in close range of other dogs, lack of socialization & training, 'rolling' (practice matches....see below for more on rolling), etc.

So where'd this idea of using bait dogs come from? Most likely from misinterpretation of old time fighting dog magazines and books that talked about 'cat mills' and treadmills, on which some dogs were encouraged to run by use of a small animal in a cage held in front of the dog. Another possibility was a misunderstanding of the process of **'rolling'** during which a new, young fighting dog would be placed in the pit with an older, seasoned dog in order to teach the young one 'the ropes'. It's ironic that the true method for conditioning a fighting dog actually involved putting him up against a more experienced dog, not a weaker or non-aggressive dog unlikely to fight back. Rolling was all about allowing the new dog to gain experience and learn to maneuver in the pit against a strong, experienced fighter. Rolls were typically stopped before either dog could get seriously hurt.

Physical exercise does not equal 'fight dog training'! Treadmills and spring poles are NOT 'dog fighting equipment'. Many individuals who own Pit Bulls, as well as owners of other breeds, use treadmills and spring poles as means of exercising their dogs. These are humane tools for keeping your dog healthy and happy.

3) "So are you saying bait dogs are a myth? But I knew/worked with/heard about a rescue that saved a bait dog!" Lots of rescue organizations seem to be quick to label – if it's cute, beat up, and sweet, the Pit Bull must have been a bait dog.....right? These are all assumptions made carelessly and not based on fact. The histories of many dogs coming into rescue are only known in part or not at all. Just because a rescue places a label on a dog does not mean that label is accurate. Ask for details – often you will find that the details are sorely lacking.

Same goes for labeling dogs of unknown history 'fighting dogs' when they happen to have a scar or two. Bottom line, if an organization does not know for a fact the dog's history, they should not label the dog!

The term 'bait dog' in our opinion should never be used, as it sends the wrong message about Pit Bulls in general, and propagates mythology.

4) Aren't fighting dogs vicious towards people; once they get a taste of blood, aren't they completely untrustworthy around other dogs and people? The "taste of blood" myth goes something like this: once a dog has fought another dog or killed another animal or otherwise had the opportunity to 'taste blood', the 'taste for blood' will drive him to viciousness towards other dogs and people. Let's get this straight - 'tasting' blood won't make your dog vicious, or a good fighter. And no, a dog who fights will not automatically be 'vicious' towards people, since dog-directed aggression is completely different than human-directed aggression. The two behavioral issues are NOT related.

ALL dogs can and will fight another dog given the right set of circumstances. In the case of fighting Pit Bulls, you have dogs that were repeatedly put into situations that encouraged and demanded dog-directed aggression. Given a whole other set of circumstances, you might never see dog-directed aggression in a particular dog. This is one reason why ex-fighting Pit Bulls can and DO make wonderful pets and YES can even get along with other dogs when supervised properly – change the circumstances and you change the behavior of the dog!

We must drive this point home: dog-directed aggression does NOT equal human-directed aggression: a dog that fights other dogs will NOT necessarily be vicious towards humans.

There is another important reason why ex-fighting Pit Bulls can make great pets. Pit Bulls as a breed have NEVER been meant to be aggressive towards people! Pit Bulls were bred to excel in the pit, BUT also be extremely deferential towards humans, and safe to handle EVEN under duress.

4) Are 'bait dogs' safe to place in new homes, while fighting dogs are not? The bottom line is, each dog should be evaluated on his or her own merits – labels mean nothing, and a label does not determine behavior! Careful evaluation of all dogs entering an adoption program is a must; fighting dog, 'bait dog', or just dog – good dogs come from all walks of life, and their future should not be determined based on a label they've been saddled with.

As the recent extremely successful rescue and placement of some high profile fighting dogs has shown, ex-pit dogs can and do flourish in kind, knowledgeable, and responsible homes. These dogs are proving that the baggage they come with needn't be carried around for the rest of their lives. In fact, these dogs are showing just how resilient the Pit Bull breed is and how very quickly they bounce back from bad beginnings.

"Bait dogs" and Dog Fighting are Animal Abuse Issues, NOT "Pit Bull Issues"!

The atrocities committed against dogs in the name of 'dog fighting' are horrendous. These dogs are victims in the purest sense of the word. Breed is irrelevant in these cases. The dogs are exploited, their innate talents misused to the highest degree imaginable, their true value stifled and ignored.