

## **1 – Pit Bull Guru Position Statement on inherited dog directed aggression in “Pit Bull” Dogs**

### **Are you sure the dog really is an *actual* Pit Bull Terrier?**

Do you even know what a pit bull dog is? This question is not posed based on looks or phenotypes, but also the behavior of a dog that would be equipped to work in a “pit”.

***Most likely you are not even be witnessing the behavior of an actual pit bull dog. Unless you can verify in an irrefutable way that the dog is of bulldog and terrier stock and nothing else; if you cannot; then that dog you are evaluating may be a look alike. Not to worry, it’s about sound behavior and sound health not what the breed or mix of the dog might be.***

### **The Reality of Genetics**

It is suggested by all legitimate dog behaviorists and genetic scientists that breed and genetics is not the focus for dog concerns it’s; ***behavior***. How humans deal with the behavior is the issue. ALL dogs are capable of fear and aggression towards other dogs or perhaps people. It’s in all of us both dogs and humans.

It is a common myth among some in the pro camp and assuredly imbedded in the anti pit bull camp that all or a vast majority of “Pit Bull type” dogs are *inherently* more dog aggressive than other types of dog breeds due to genetics. As behaviorist Dr. Patricia McConnell PhD. reminds us ***“genes are written in pencil”***.

Furthermore renowned behaviorist B.F. Skinner posits,

***“ We have no reason to say that an organism attacks because it possesses an aggressive instinct”.***

The research of *John Paul Scott and John L. Fuller* was detailed in their book *Genetics and the Social Behavior of the Dog* they concluded, ***“The physical phenotype yielded no clues to the results of behavioral tests”***.

They go on to state ***“Therefore, attempts to characterize a breed biologically and psychologically with respects to type embodied in a particular individual are unsound”***.

It is easy to understand and see proof of this genetic variance in dogs as well as humans. Simply put, **Genes are not carbon copies** and even when selecting for certain behavior traits or desired physical traits the outcome is extremely varied due to many individual factors related to genetics and *environment*.

As B.F. Skinner discovered:

***“Analysis of behavior goes directly to the antecedent causes in the environment.”***

### **Social Deference**

Dogs have also been found to be great practitioners of *social deference*, meaning they have play signals, appeasement gestures, body postures, vocalizations and role reversal to avoid full - blown fights. Dog play is actually called *ritualized aggression*. In dog play and during greetings and social interactions social deference and ritualized aggression allows them to settle disputes without killing each other, or hurting each other.

Aggression is expensive behavior for dogs/animals, meaning it takes quite a bit of mental, physical & emotional energy/stress and many times the *pay off* is to stop fearful stimuli from approaching or continuing. The consequences of aggression

are usually negative/harsh/lethal/stressful. Dogs are more vulnerable when fearful and or aggressive; it is a behavior and an emotion they would rather avoid if possible.

### **Working Dogs**

The Prominent and respected behaviorist Dr. Karen Overall states ***“90% of all working dogs fail the tests in order to be working dogs”***.

This low pass rate is attributed to the many variables within the genetics of the dog, the variables of human interactions, the daily routines and testing environments of the dog. And of course the ***motivation*** to complete the tasks required. Along with the tasks are a variety of soundness factors the dogs must have exhibited in their overall behavior during testing in order to pass.

Scott & Fuller ***“maintenance of uniform rearing and training conditions is very critical in the breeding of working dogs. Otherwise, variation between individuals may depend as much or more upon the early development of the animal as upon heredity”***.

**Motivation** is a large part of any beings willingness to complete a task, and dogs are no different.

Most aggression is rooted in fear, and fear is an essential component to the survival of any living creature. Without fear a dog or a human or for that matter anything else that is capable of fear, would not survive for very long. Aggression is also part of life as well. Aggression is also a survival skill.

Again we can point to B. F. Skinner for confirmation of this.

***“ Survival may depend almost wholly on “competing with” the physical environment, when intelligent behavior is clearly favored. “***

It is possible we could find a dog that is not *too fearful*, and does well at fighting other dogs, sure but those dogs are extremely rare. Furthermore to say the dog “enjoys” it or was “born to do it” is patently wrong.

The vast majority of dogs bred to fight are not interested in “fighting to the death”, as detractors would have some try and believe, as aggression is rooted in fear, and fear is something dogs are only choosing if their survival depends on it, otherwise they *usually* do not willingly choose fear/aggression/fighting dogs for “sport” to the extent of maiming or killing another dog its own size or larger. This is why dogs have ritualized aggression in the form of play and social deference signals, so they don’t fight to the death.

### **Human Interpretations vs. the actual reality of how behavior works.**

Let’s reference B.F. Skinner yet again to see how human interpretations about dog’s behavior are not always what is actually happening.

*“...Confusion may be seen in the contention that operant and respondent conditioning represent a single process, a contention said to be opposed to the view that the two kinds of conditioning affect different systems of behavior, respondent conditioning being appropriate to the autonomic nervous system and operant conditioning to the skeletal musculature. It is true that much of the activity of the autonomic nervous system does not have natural consequences which could easily have become part of operant contingencies, but such consequences can be arranged....*

*the **environmental arrangements** which produce a conditioned reflex are quite different from those which produce operant behavior, regardless of the respective systems.”*

What is interesting to note is that the autonomic nervous system is also connected to the *somatic nervous system*. The **somatic nervous system (SNS)** is the part of the peripheral nervous system associated with the voluntary control of body movements via skeletal muscles, and with sensory reception of external stimuli (e.g., touch, hearing, and sight). The SNS consists of efferent nerves responsible for stimulating muscle contraction, including all the neurons connected with skeletal muscles, skin, and sense organs.

### **What does this mean?**

Humans have been *interpreting* dog behavior in a fight pit based on **their motives and desired outcomes, which are the dogs are not to lose the fight.**

That has nothing to do with the dogs liking it or wanting to do it. The environment is *arranged* and the set and setting is relatively similar each time.

Sooner or later a dog will by chance, conditioning, survival skills, or strength, not lose. The dog will make it through whatever cruel human endeavors it has hoisted upon it.

However until dogs can speak a language us humans can *fully and without question* understand; anyone claiming that dogs “enjoy it” or “fight for sport” is basically making that part up, because that is what *they* want to believe.

A more accurate way to describe the context of dog fighting is this - ***The dog is fighting for its life because it is fearful and unable to flee. The dogs that do well are simply as Darwin would say more "fit", but there is not way to prove that the dogs enjoy it. In reality there is more scientific and biological data on record to prove that they are not enjoying fighting other dogs. That assertion "they are enjoying it" is purely 100% human interpretation.***

**Example of dogs choosing fear willingly and having positive reinforcement** - A dog may be fearful of a large boar, but the large scary animal is also food, so the dog is motivated by hunger to be aggressive to obtain food to survive. Dog's that are being **forced** to fight are not doing it for "rank", or Sport or "fun", they are doing it to survive. Their fear is being **arranged** for them.

With dogs in homes or shelters that display aggression towards other dogs we must not simply factor the supposed "genetics". The reality is most of the time we have no clue what the genetics/line/mix of a dog actually is; it is more accurate to factor in human influence, multiple dogs in a group, competition over resources, past behavior history and the effects of what ever experiences the dog may have had in the context the aggression is occurring.

*" The expression **genetic endowment** is itself dangerous. Like reflexes and instincts, it tends to acquire properties not warranted by the evidence and begin to serve as a cause rather than as representing the current effects of natural selection, from which attention is then deflected" B.F. Skinner*

It is a tall order in many instances to gather proper information where dog on dog aggression is witnessed. It is hectic and stressful for the humans and the dogs. However when we view the dog's behavior on a whole and related to specific contexts we can see there are many variables and potential causes to the outcome of why a dog is being aggressive due to fear related experiences or natural survival skills being triggered in brain chemistry by the *environment*.

### **The reality of fight dogs**

Past the emotional and physical toll it takes to be a fight dog, the dog has to be extremely well suited to travel and deal well with all walks of life both human and canine. The dog that is equipped to be handled by strangers, and maneuver the covert life style that accompanies a fight dog and the people that fight them, plus deal with the rigors and inhumane treatment to be a "Fight dog" is extremely rare.

### **Addressing the myth/belief of "training" a dog to become aggressive for fighting dogs**

One other myth/belief that surrounds the pit bull culture is that someone can "train" a dog to be aggressive towards other dogs in order to make them a "fight" dog. The only thing the human achieves by abusing a dog to be aggressive is the creation of an unsound dog.

This myth is often the reason so many dogs bred by dog fighters are often beaten/hurt/ abused and then euthanized, or killed by the breeders or fighters. Perhaps given away, maybe left for dead, sold as pets, or may end up in shelters and rescues.

### **Fear inhibits learning**

Dogs that are fearful while being “trained” are not learning all that well, they are shutting down or defending in some manner from the human or dog that is using these fear and pain methods to “train” them; essentially the dog is attempting to get away from or fight back the dog that is biting at them. The dog may become so aggressive that it is not sound and no one can handle the dog.

Or many dogs may shut down altogether. When the environment keeps ramping up the fear and the pain many dogs will just shut down in some manner or all together and suffer from some level of *learned helplessness*.

How well does one learn while in a state of fear? Not well.

Scott & Fuller discovered this about emotions and motivation in dogs.

***“Emotional reactions have important effects upon performance, so that selection ability to learn particular tasks is likely to affect emotions first and true cognitive abilities later. It is very difficult to separate the two in a practical situation.***

**When the limbic system is compromised and the dog is in a fearful state they are not learning so much as they are *surviving*.**

### **How dogs process information**

The dog takes in millions of scents at a time and all the information passes through their *amygdale*, which is located in the fear center in the dog’s brain. Dogs base emotions & motivation on if they are safe or unsafe, or a neutral well-known context.

When dogs are subjected to stimuli that are harsh, fearful, painful or inhumane they will develop fearful behavioral **fallouts** towards people, dogs, places, scents, sounds, movements and sudden environmental contrast. These fallouts are as follows.

- Aggressive with a proven bite history with dogs or humans or both.
- Anxiousness in dogs that develops in the form of separation anxiety and other nervous behaviors. These may result in a difficulty dealing with frustration, panic, pacing, obsessive licking, whining, whimpering and other vocalizations.
- Become over stimulated, easily aroused, and frustrated by sudden movements and environmental contrast.
- Shut down i.e. ***learned helplessness***. Considered wrongly by some as “Calm and submissive”. Dogs offer little or no behavior. Often extreme lethargy and sleeping, excessive yawning, stress shedding, looking away from people or dogs, excessive drooling and panting from stress.

These ***experiences*** that lead the dog to being unsound and or shut down can also be from starvation, social isolation from dogs and humans, physically beaten/shocked/choked, emotionally scarred by yelling/noise/sounds, chained or housed for extremely long periods, roaming and starving as well as a myriad of other experiences can lead a dog to having fears that trigger aggression towards dogs.

Furthermore dogs subjected to cruel and harsh treatment will have a greater chance of developing a strong *generalized* sense of fear. When you factor in any cruel treatments/stress you more likely have a dog that is fearful and will use aggression as a survival tool, this is the logical conclusion based on how behavior actually manifests itself due to the environment.

## **Dogs are great discriminators of information and contexts**

The dog may be great in all contexts with dogs except when the dog is woken up by being touched by another dog.

The dog may be great with dogs except for when the dog has a high valued resource such as a bone and the other dog approaches or takes the bone.

The dog may only be fearful of male dogs, or females, or dogs in general, but not people.

The dog may be trained to 100% reliability in the back yard, but everywhere else presents a challenge.

These are examples of discrimination.

Many times there are specific triggers and contextual information that can help avoid future rehearsals of fear and aggression. If possible make notes about aggressive events.

## **Medical Causes**

One other cause for onsets of aggression may be medical. More and more information is being found through legitimate research that health and behavior are inextricably linked. Have your dog checked by the vet right away if there is a sudden onset of aggression.

## **What does all this mean?**

Dogs are individuals and each context will have its own set of circumstances that can be attributed to a dogs fear and or aggression/anxiety/excitability and then that behavior being *directed at another dog*.

As Skinner noted:

***“ Territory and Aggression do not refer to specific forms of behavior...Aggressive behavior may be innate and released***

*by specific circumstances in which survival value is plausible...behavior may be reinforced by consequences not explicitly related to aggression. Food and sexual contact, reinforcing for other reasons, may reinforce an attack on a competitor for food or a sexual partner is thus obtained.*

Are **some** dogs, pit bull dogs as well as other breeds and mixes overly aggressive to other dogs? Yes.

Are all dogs of a pit bull type / mix born with more inherent aggression towards other dogs? No.

Just because your “Pit Bull” type dog has displayed aggression towards another dog it does not mean they are *more inherently* aggressive towards dogs.

Factors such as *environment, early socialization, frustration and anxiety, uninterrupted rough play or a long history of rehearsing fighting/aggression*, are all major factors in the dog’s level of the aggressive behavior and the associations towards dogs, humans or certain circumstances/contexts, surrounding those aggressive events.

***The humans*** in the dog’s life understanding what stimuli and situations cause the fear which triggers aggression; thus not allowing the dog to rehearse it will make a dramatic impact on the dogs behavioral development being sound.

Amazingly many dogs are able to hold onto their soundness and make it through to a better life from a harsh past.

Many dogs that go through harsh situations come through relatively well and may not have even been bred by dog fighters, or even have a remote lineage to a fight line.

For one reason or other the dog is just not in a home and finds it self in a shelter or rescue. The question then is who are the

humans in the dogs care? Are they legitimately evaluating, understanding and addressing the dog's behavior and socializing needs in order for the dog to be adopted out properly? Are all considerations for the dog to be sound and stay sound being properly decided upon based on uniform protocols and adjusting the training as needed to track development?

**If you think you have a dog aggressive dog or you know you do consider the following information**

*Once dog on dog aggression is witnessed it is highly advised to seek out credentialed, legitimate behavior specialists, board certified if possible... and begin reducing the fear and aggression. See your veterinarian immediately and get a thorough exam of the dog's internal organs with an ultra sound along with a comprehensive blood test.*

*All protocols for behavior modification should be done in conjunction with a certified humane dog trainer and behavior counselor that issues written protocols and offers email and phone support along with multiple sessions over months of time. DO NOT attempt to reduce dog aggression using fear, force, pain, shock, intimidation, social isolation and or any form of abuse. Furthermore you cannot simply love away aggression. Yes love, kindness and compassion are the foundations of our bond with dogs, however legitimate and humane proactive behavior modification and training **must** be part of an aggressive dogs daily life in order for the aggression to be reduced.*

*With proper education for humans in legitimate dog behavior and training protocols for behavior modification many aggressive situations could be avoided, reduced and or resolved. Some dogs may be too aggressive after being evaluated and sadly this is the reality of over population, the fact that some*

*behavior is too far - gone, and the space available in shelters is not available. The goal is to give dogs accurate behavior tests to observe their level of soundness the challenge is educating those that are evaluating the dogs so the dogs are given a fair evaluation based on criterion.*