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TOSA INU, TOSA KEN 土佐犬 (Japanese Mastiff, Tosa Dog, 土佐闘犬 Tosa Touken, Tosa Tôken)

by Catherine Marien-de Luca for Bulldoginformation.com 2003-2008 © All rights reserved.

For the [Tosa breed description](#) and temperament, see: [Tosa inu temperament](#).



Without doubt, the Tosa Inu is one of the most fascinating but at the same time least well understood dog breeds, much like the culture they originate from. The native country of the Tosa Inu breed is Shikoku, the smallest of the four Japanese islands. Their character reflects many attributes of the Japanese culture and mentality.

The dogs were named after the area where they were bred, the old Tosa province, now known as the Kochi prefecture.

At that time, the Tosa province was one of the two most popular dog fighting areas, the other one being the prefecture of Akita, the northernmost area on the island of Honshu. At first, the Akita breed was stronger than the Tosa, but gradually, the situation reversed because of cross-breeding of the Tosa breed with European breeds. The **Akitas** and Tosas were also cross bred, with the resulting off-spring labeled as "Shin Akita".



Octopus-Bacchiri-Yûshû-nâ owner: Octopus Tosa Inu's

Tosa Inu 土佐犬 literally means "Tosa dog", the two first ideograms (*Kanji*) representing the word 'Tosa' and the last one that one of 'dog'. In English the suffix 'Inu' is sometimes left out. A variant of this name is Tosa Ken. Both 'Inu' and 'Ken' mean dog in Japanese. It is not another word but basically the Sino-Japanese pronunciation (*on-reading*) of the same "dog-Kanji" 犬, as KEN, instead of INU (*kun-reading*, indigenous Japanese reading). Both are correct, but the expression Tosa-Ken is more generally used in the spoken language.

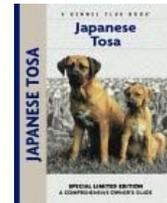
Tosa's are also known as *Japanese Mastiffs* or *Japanese fighting dogs*, after the Japanese 土佐闘犬, *Tosa Touken* or *Tosa Tôken*, which literally means 'Tosa Fighting dog'. 'Tôken' takes a long -o in Japanese and the correct transcription in English therefore is either 'Tôken' or 'Touken'.

When the Japanese politics of isolation ended with the **Meiji Restoration** from 1866 to 1869, more and more foreigners with big-sized dogs entered the country. The Japanese were impressed by the size, strength and endurance of these Western dogs. As a result, they started to crossbreed some of their native breeds with these dogs. To create the Tosa they crossbred the **Shikoku ken** with **Bulldogs** (1872), **Mastiffs** (1874), **German Pointers** (1876) and **Great Danes** (1924), **Bull Terrier** and **St. Bernards** all of which were used to improve the breed by sequential mating.

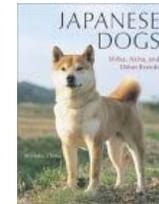


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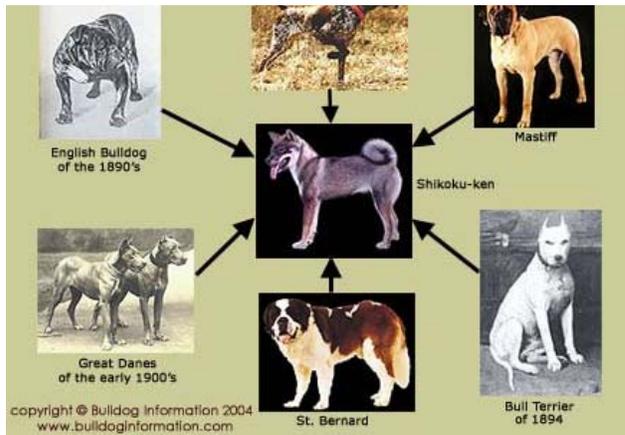
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Note that the Great Dane were not as giant as today's Danes and that the English Bulldog and Bull Terrier looked substantially different from today's exemplars. Within a short periode of time they succeeded in fixing a type that concentrated the characteristics of the Japanese 'Sumo'. In 1925 the breed was already well defined and in 1930 an official association was founded for the preservation and diffusion of the breed.

The original Japanese Tosa Inu is courageous, prudent, well-tempered and docile. It displays an enormous strength and high pain threshold.

They are probably the only dogs in the world which are still used quite legally to this day for dog fights. However, the Japanese developed a type of fight according to their mentality that bears no comparison with the notorious pit dog fights held illegally in other parts of the world.

In Japan dogs are carefully bred and trained and the game is conducted under strict rules and accompanied by holy rituals and processions. The dog fights among Tosa's should never be cruel or bloody and they never end with the death of one of the participants. On the contrary, the fights are designed to last long and, contrary to pit dog fights, a dog that goes for a fast and easy victory, is not considered a good specimen. Similar to Sumo wrestling, the dogs try to bring and hold each other down on the floor. If he dominates for more than 3 min. (or 5 min. if the fight lasted for more than 15 min.) he is declared the winner. A whining or growling dog is declared the loser. The same goes for a dog that turns its hind to the opponent or moves back three steps when attacked. The fight ends in any case after 30 min. In a nil draw if neither of the dogs has proved superior to the other. Unlike most other fighting dog breeds, the original Tosa is conscious of the symbolic value of the fight and it respects the rules of the game and its opponents. Like sumo wrestlers, the dogs are graded into a hierarchy according to the points they have recently earned. The greatest Tosa "wrestlers" receive the title of Yokozuna, like the famous sumo's.

Two times in the twentieth century all the Japanese breeds, including the Tosa, were in imminent danger of extinction. First the food crisis during World War II and the invasion by the allied forces, then a distemper epidemic brought the Tosa to the verge of extinction. The Association for the preservation of the Tosa decided to save 12 Tosa's which by their character and type were the most authentic representatives of the breed and took them to the Aormi prefecture at the north of Japan, an area little involved in the war. From those 12 exemplars descend the majority of the genuine Tosa's today. Read more about the Tosa: [Tosa's appearance](#).

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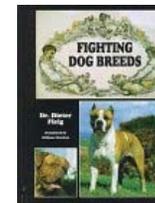


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