

A funny thought struck me as I was out for my daily walk with my five Labrador retrievers this morning. As I looked at them I thought about how perfect they are for my lifestyle. The Labs that I own are referred to as the English type. Their bloodlines contain many confirmation or “bench” champions and a few junior hunting titles. Temperamentally the English dog is much more relaxed and easy going than the Labradors that are bred for field trials and are often referred to as the American Field Lab.

I choose to own dogs with English bloodlines because they do not require the level of physical activity that the field Lab does to lead a happy and content life. The typical English Lab is just as comfortable sitting down next to you while you read a book as they are playing fetch in the yard. Since my life includes some time when I want to be exercising but a greater amount of time where I can just be a “couch potato” I knew that the English bred dog would make a better companion. In fact, my compatibility with the breed leads me to spend much of my discretionary time engaged in activity with them and has allowed them to develop into well behaved dogs. Their behavior and the enjoyment I receive from working to improve it enhances the human canine bond that we share.

Our best friends become those people who we enjoy being around. If you think about the most rewarding personal friendships you will probably find that you share common lifestyles, interests or ideals with these people. These preferences served as a foundation on which you built something special. Your friendship flourished because you were comfortable communicating with one another and you could spend time sharing things that both of you enjoyed.

I love to spend time with my dogs because they participate in my lifestyle. For example, they love to get out for a walk with me. Their presence on that walk makes it more enjoyable for me. Their willingness to please me makes our training sessions more productive. Their desire to be with me makes me feel good emotionally and petting them provides the physical benefit of reducing my heart rate and stress level. I feel blessed to have found the perfect breed to share my life with because they bring joy and purpose to it.

Unfortunately the same cannot be said for many dog owners throughout the United States. Why do I say this? The National Council on Pet Population conducted a study on the number of dogs that enter a shelter annually. The study ran from 1994 – 1997. During these years approximately 8.9 million dogs were relinquished to a shelter with more than half (56%) eventually becoming the victim of euthanasia. The study only included shelters that housed one hundred dogs or more. Therefore, these figures, as disturbing as they are, only represent a portion of the dogs which shared a similar fate during those years. Guess who pays the cost for the maintenance of these often overcrowded shelters? You do with your tax dollars. Therefore we have a vested interested in making sure people acquire the right breed from a reputable breeder

Rather than a backyard breeder, puppy mill or pet store which acquire the pups they sell through such avenues.

Equally as troubling as the shelter statistics are the statistics regarding dog bites that occur in the United States each year. An excellent resource for information related to dog bites is www.dogbitelaw.com. The numbers are appalling. For example, in 1996 the Center for Disease Control estimated that there were 4.7 million dog bites. Unfortunately, the news media's focus on the sensational, in this case canine homicide, deaths caused by dog bites, leads people to believe that the problem is restricted to breeds like the Pit Bull and Rottweiler. While these two breeds are responsible for a large percentage of the canine homicides, the problem of dog bites is much more widespread. In fact, over seventy percent of victims were bitten by a dog that belonged to a relative or friend.

The combined economic, social and emotional costs of these two problems, dogs entering a shelter and the number of dog bites, are exorbitant. The financial costs to dog bite victims are estimated to be \$1 billion annually in recent years. Nearly one out of three homeowner insurance claims is related to a dog bite. These claims result in insurance premium increases. Thousands of lawsuits are filed in relation to these claims with many ending up being played out in the court system at the expense of taxpayers. Worse yet more than half of all dog bites involve a child with a very high percentage of bites occurring to the face. Many times these incidents cause a physical scar that leads to the emotional pain often associated with disfigurement. Guess who pays the cost? You do through restrictions on the breed of dog insurance company will allow you to own as well as higher medical and homeowner insurance premiums. Therefore you also have a vested interest in making sure that dog owners seek out the help of a professional in the training and socialization of their puppy.

It is the owner that is most often responsible for making the dog into something dangerous. For example, an owner may reinforce a dog's fear of certain sounds or sights by "babying" him when he is exposed to such stimuli. An owner may have purchased a dog for protection and think it necessary to reinforce a dog's barking and aggressive nature in order to make him an effective watch dog. Owners may tie their dog out in the yard without considering the consequences. Others may hire a trainer with no formal education who utilizes inhumane methods that cause the dog more harm than good. In the end, by the time a qualified trainer gets called in the dog is in a difficult if not impossible state to reform. The result is another dog being placed in a shelter because of behavioral problems with euthanasia being the likely outcome.

Lack of compatibility between breed selection and family lifestyle also contributes heavily to the number of dogs that enter a shelter. To try to put some perspective around the way most people choose the breed of dog that they acquire consider this ridiculous scenario:

As you're walking through the mall one day you stop to do some window shopping at a popular clothing store. Inside you see a person wearing a beautiful outfit that is particularly appealing to you. In fact, you have seen it worn by many

models in the latest fashion magazines. This individual is also sporting a hairstyle that is the latest fashion rave. You love everything about the outward appearance of this person but do not know anything about her hobbies, lifestyle, family, education or personal values. You approach and say “Hey I love the clothes you are wearing and the style and color of your hair. Given that we like some of the same things I think we would get along just great. I need a roommate would you like to come and live with me? I’ll take care of the rent, food and provide you with great health insurance.”

Within a couple of weeks you realize that your new friend and roommate is a slob. They shed their clothes all over the house for you to pick up after. Their eating habits have caused your monthly food expenses to triple. While you are a fitness fanatic who goes for a three mile walk each day your new friend is a “couch potato” who watches television all day long. When you are home together you can find nothing in common to talk about. You begin having disagreements that lead to physical confrontation. It has become uncomfortable and potentially dangerous to live with this person. As a result you tell them that they will have to leave. Unbeknownst to you, this person gave up a rent controlled apartment to come and live with you. They also quit their job because you were providing for them. Although you feel terrible about this you can no longer have this person in your house.

While this story is far fetched, symbolically it reflects the way many dog owners go about choosing a friend that will live with them for the next ten to fifteen years. Many potential dog owners will not conduct enough research on the breed they choose to acquire. Too often dogs are chosen for their appearance or because the breed is the latest fad. Basing a decision to bring a dog into your home on these criteria is the first step to disaster for the owner, dog or both. When selecting which breed of dog is right for you one of the most important things to understand is the original use of the dog. This will provide you with information relative to exercise and space requirements as well as temperament and intelligence. However, the best source of information about a breed will come from an ethical and reputable breeder.

Although I am very supportive of animal shelters there are prospective owners that might be better served by acquiring a dog from a reputable breeder. It is often extremely difficult if not nearly impossible to obtain information about the parents of shelter dogs. Canine behavior is the product of nature and nurture. Research indicates that approximately 35-40% of an animal’s temperament and intelligence are attributable to its genetics. Most reputable breeders will not allow a pup that they produced to be placed in a shelter. In fact, many require adoptive families to sign an agreement that states they must return the pup to the breeder in the event they can no longer keep it. Conversely, pet stores, puppy mills and backyard breeders will not take a dog back that it produced. For the pet store and puppy mill this is because their main goal in breeding is profit. For the backyard breeder it can be for this reason too or it can be because they did not have a contingency plan for dogs that they might have to “re-home.” Statistics point to the fact that many dogs find their way into shelters because they were no longer wanted or

because they had behavioral problems. These causes might lead one to infer that the dog's environment lacked the needed training and discipline. If this is the case, the burden of breaking bad habits starts the dog ownership experience off on the wrong foot. The bottom line here is that you should not acquire a shelter dog because you don't want to incur the one time expense of a thoughtfully bred dog. The best reason to adopt a shelter dog is to save a life. If you decide to do so be sure to work with a reputable organization that can provide plenty of information about the animal you will be adopting.

If you decide on a pure bred dog be sure to do your homework. All too often people look in the newspaper for classified advertisements that tout pure bred dogs with AKC (American Kennel Club) registration. They mistakenly believe that any breeder whose dogs are AKC registered have to be high quality. Nothing could be further from the truth. An AKC registration does not mean that you are obtaining a quality dog. In fact, pups sold through pet stores that come from puppy mills are sold with an AKC registration. High quality dogs from a reputable breeder will also come with AKC registration. However, reputable breeders will also be able to tell you important information about the pup's pedigree. They will also have had the parents checked for any deficiencies common to the breed before using them for breeding purposes.

I often hear people say I don't want a show dog. What they really mean is that they do not have any intention of showing the dog. However, if they are truly interested in the characteristics of a specific breed they need to acquire a pup from a sire and dam that were, at a minimum, show quality. The term "show quality" means that an individual is a correct representation of the breed. That doesn't mean a pup that, on the surface, looks like all other pups of the same breed. It is necessary to "check under the hood" as they say in the automobile industry otherwise you may stick yourself with a lemon. Do not waste your money on a pure bred pup whose parents are not a good representation of the breed. Reputable breeders have a vested interest in producing healthy, intelligent, well tempered animal. As a result this is where you should seek to get your pup.

Steer clear of breeders that do not have a purpose for the pups they are breeding or that do not have pedigrees that contain champion bloodlines in the first or second generation, preferably more than one. Experience, as expressed in the number of years somebody has been doing something is only relevant if it has led to more productive results. More than likely this means they are breeding primarily for profit or because they believe their dog has a wonderful temperament and for that reason alone she is a candidate for motherhood. Such "breeders" never give consideration to the dog's conformation relative to the breed standard, possession of genetic markers that could predispose its offspring to common breed deficiencies or what they will do with any puppies that they cannot sell.

In addition to the dog's genetic makeup, the environment to which he is exposed during the first 16 weeks of his life will be critical to his long term behavior. Puppies should be well socialized during this time. Make sure you are well informed about the socialization process that takes place from the fourth week of the pup's life through the time you

intend to pick him up. A reputable breeder will expose their pups to as many people as possible during this time. In addition they will create a mentally stimulating environment for their pups to explore. If you live close enough to the breeder tell them you would like to visit and play with the pups during these weeks. This will allow all of the pups to become familiar with your scent and tone of voice.

Finally, be honest with yourself when determining if you can train your dog without the assistance of a professional. The money you save by trying to train a dog by yourself could lead to the development of inappropriate behavior that results in greater financial and emotional costs in the future. To be effective training must be conducted at the right time and in the right way.

The best training methods today are based on solid scientific research which a qualified trainer will be familiar with and capable of explaining in laymen terms. Your best bet is to seek a certified trainer that is also a member of the APDT (Association of Pet Dog Trainers). Members of the APDT are held to a very high moral and ethical standard and must agree to utilize only safe and humane training methods. The investment you make in training will be well worth the cost when your dog and his exemplary behavior are the envy of your friends and neighbors.

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