

Form and Function

Introduction

Dog trainers, breeders, and other fanciers are adamant in their advice:

Do your homework so you select a breed that is compatible with your lifestyle; Avoid pet stores and back yard breeders; Go to a reputable, responsible breeder to get a healthy puppy.

Solid as this advice is, it doesn't cover all the bases for the potential dog owner. Once the breed is selected, the job the dog will be expected to do is a prime consideration for choosing the breeder who can produce the puppy you want.

Every dog owner has some expectations for a relationship with a pet. Whether a dog is company to talk to and cuddle with, a buddy to jog or hike with, a hunting partner, a home watchdog or guardian, a traveling companion, a connection with the natural world, a pet for the children, a potential competitor in a variety of sports, or a future breeding prospect, every dog owner selects a dog with some expectations in mind. Those expectations are more likely to be met if the buyer's homework includes a study of his breed's original purpose and looks for a puppy that has been bred to do that job.

Canine careers

Dogs were developed to work with and for man. The idea of companionship was secondary in a world where people hunted and farmed to feed their families and depended on dogs to guard home and hearth, rid the premises of pests, and provide draft power. Sporting dogs, scent hounds, sighthounds, herding dogs, cart dogs, terriers, sled dogs, rescue dogs were created to work. Even toy dog had a function; bred down from larger breeds in many cases, they became bedwarmers and flea magnets in palaces and estates around the globe.

Obviously, many canine careers no longer exist and some have been relegated to sport rather than work. Few Golden Retrievers accompany hunters in the field, but more and more compete in hunting tests and trials. Collies and Corgis don't see much action on farms, Borzoi don't hunt wolves, Akitas don't hunt bears, most Siberian Huskies never see a sled, and few Dalmatians ever see a horse or a coach. Some breed clubs have revived training for the breed's original purpose with instinct tests and achievement trials, but many breeds have no organized jobs or sports and most dogs are bred to be pets.

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Although dog jobs have changed or disappeared and modern humans value dogs more as companions than partners, form and function remain critical to the selection of a healthy puppy that is physically able to meet buyer expectations. For example, a Golden Retriever or English Springer Spaniel with poor shoulder structure may not only lack the stamina to hunt all day, he is unlikely to be able to jog, hike, jump, romp with the kids, or chase a ball for any length of time, particularly as he gets older. An Australian Shepherd or Pembroke Welsh Corgi that will never herd cattle still needs proper structure to compete in agility and obedience events; a Saluki or Greyhound that will never course after antelope or hare still must have the proper front and rear angulation to gallop after the plastic bag on a lure-coursing field. Beyond the need to maintain the original purpose of a chosen breed, we are often in awe of the incredible way that dogs are far more than a sum of their parts. This appreciation of the dog as an animal, an athlete, a protector, an alarm, or simply a creature of great beauty should figure in the search for a breeder as well as a breed, for a knowledge of form and function are part of this picture, too.

Job Training

Most breeds can be retrained to do modern jobs even while maintaining the form and function that served them well in their traditional careers. Sporting breeds and hounds can compete in tests and trials that simulate hunting everything from upland game birds and waterfowl to small mammals. Breed clubs and the American Kennel Club have devised several competitions to determine whether a dog has the mental and physical talent to maintain the integrity of its breed. Terriers and Dachshunds "go-to-ground" in simulated vermin hunts; retrievers, pointers, setters, spaniels, and Beagles, Bassets, and coonhounds prove their prowess in the field; sighthounds run lickety-split after a plastic bag in lure-coursing events; and herding dogs practice their skills on sheep and ducks.

Some breeds have such specialized talents that their tests and trials are done within their national breed clubs. Here Newfoundlands participate in draft and water tests; Rottweilers, Bernese Mountain Dogs, and Greater Swiss Mountain Dogs demonstrate their carting ability; Samoyeds, Siberian Huskies, and Alaskan Malamutes pull sleds and go back-packing; Portuguese Water Dogs do water tests; and Dalmatians do road work in the tradition of the coach dogs of the past.

Many breeds are so resourceful that they have expanded their resumes. German Shepherd Dogs not only herded and guarded flocks in their early days, they have become the most versatile of all breeds by adding war dog, service dog, search and rescue dog, police dog, tracking dog, movie star, and more to their bags of tricks. But GSDs are not only canines with hidden talents. Rottweilers, Belgian Malinois, Giant Schnauzer, Doberman Pinscher, Boxers, and Bouvier des Flandres are among the breeds that have served man well as police and army dogs; Labrador and Golden Retrievers are among the top breeds used as guide dogs for blind owners; Labs are highly prized as sniffing dogs and trackers; Beagles ferret out contraband at airports; and many other breeds have directed their talents in many directions.

To do these jobs, the dog's form and function must be of a piece so the work gets done with a minimum of effort.

Show Dogs

The Canadian Kennel Club, the American Kennel Club, the United Kennel Club, individual breed clubs, the American Rare Breeds Association, and other groups of breed fanciers sponsor shows where dogs are judged according to breed standards to determine if they meet breed type, a combination of structure, movement, and general appearance that differentiates one breed from another. These shows are sometimes derided as "beauty contests," but when breeders and other exhibitors bring good dogs to be evaluated and judges understand the breed standard and purpose, these shows highlight the dogs that are suitable as breeding stock to produce the next generation of puppies.

Dogs that compete only in the breed ring at all-breed shows and specialties are in danger of losing their breed function. Judges have only two minutes to check a dog by hand and watch it move coming, going, and from the side. That's 120 seconds to make sure the shoulder layback and the angle of the hindquarters are compatible, that length of loin and rib cage are in balance, that the head, ears, tail, coat, depth of chest, spring of ribs, and depth of shoulder are true to breed type and that they all work together to produce a strong, effortless gait in the confines of a show ring that may not offer enough space for the dog to reach his stride.

Conformation-only shows do not prove that a dog has the ability to do the job he was bred to do. Thus many show-giving clubs also provide a variety of other activities; some of them connected with the breed's original job and others that channel the dog's ability into other streams of endeavor. The most common events held in conjunction with conformation shows are all-breed obedience and agility trials; most other skill contests are limited to certain breeds or groups and tend to take place independently.

Many people who take part in these events with their dogs never breed a litter and never enter a conformation ring. They do, however, build wonderful bonds with their pets through training for agility, obedience, or field work and incidentally help maintain the form and function of the breed they love.

The dog that brightens your home should make your heart beat a little faster when you see him race across the back yard, leap into the air to catch a ball, or look at you with intensity. He should make you laugh at his antics, wonder at his thought processes, and bring a lump to your throat when he hurts. If you also treasure a breed for its historical significance and want a purebred dog to romp with the kids, compete in canine events, visit nursing homes, hike in the woods, or join a search and rescue team, add it all to the formula when choosing a breeder and an individual puppy for a good start on a lifelong relationship.