

Picking Puppies

This article was written as part of a series on puppy raising for the Pet Vet Corner (Facebook group) #pvcpuppychronicles, and modified slightly for use on my website. I get a ton of questions about how I pick puppies and hopefully this will answer that for interested parties. Please feel free to ask me if you have additional questions after reading!

Characteristics I care about as a performance competitor:

Environmentally stable, confident without being independent (no one needs a self employed dog), relaxed, happy but not goofy, moderately serious (my preference is not to the extreme of Malinois or Border Collie intensity, though some people want that), tractable (trainability), handles "pressure" well without shutting down (can be physical eg working livestock and getting kicked by a cow vs ecollar for field work, or can be mental eg large crowds, new locations, loud noises, upper level precision work, etc), resilient (bounces back quickly), not sulky if stressed or corrected, is outgoing, curious, wants to participate in dumb stuff with me (I don't care about food drive or toy drive, I want the puppy that just wants to do stupid stuff all day long because he's with me). Not easily stressed by life, not overly sensitive, learns quickly (I don't want to have to teach the same thing for 3 months), moderate energy, moderate to high drive (these are not the same things), good work ethic, I don't want a vocal dog though some venues (eg search and rescue) encourage it, needs to travel well, be clean in the kennel, good off switch.....

Some of what you pet owners want is training related. The walking on a leash, greeting people, behaving indoors, trimming nails, etc is 100% training related. You own what you condone. Those of us who train and compete almost never think about those behaviors you don't like -- because they aren't a problem for us. I don't put up with bad behavior, and I train the dog from the beginning so it never develops bad habits. Train, don't complain.

Some of what you want is related to picking a pet that is the right fit for you. If you live in an apartment in town, work 60 hours a week, and take a 10 minute walk once a day -- you do not need a Malinois. If you get one, you should not be surprised when it destroys your house, fights with your other neurotic dogs, barks at everyone on your 10 minute walk, and needs drugs every time it visits the vet clinic. If you have small children and a postage-stamp size yard in a big city, and only leash walk your dog, do not get a Border Collie and then complain when it herds and bites your small humans. Don't be stupid about your pet choices. If you want a nice adult dog, get something within your abilities and that fits your lifestyle.

Some of what you pet owners want is GENETIC. The reactivity crap, fear aggression, resource guarding, etc -- that is all genetic. If you want a nice dog, don't buy something from parents that have those problems.

It is really hard to eff up a well bred, stable, sound, low to moderate drive puppy -- even if you don't do the "recommended" socialization or "ideal" training. Stable dogs can handle a lot of mistakes and lack of

exposure. It is also very difficult to cover up the flaws in a poorly bred, sensitive, reactive, sketchy dog. It is possible for a good trainer to make that puppy into a decent animal -- but most pet owners are not that good, and I don't care what YouTube videos you watch or books you read or classes you attend, you are going to struggle with those dogs.

Identifying desirable characteristics.

1) One way to do this is by getting puppies from breeders who compete, esp in performance sports. It is pretty hard to be biased about your dog when you get a numerical score in obedience, or your dog can't qualify in agility, or your dog gets dropped in the first series of a field trial, or your dog is with a professional trainer for a specific sport and they assess your dog's talent or trainability compared to all the other dogs in the program. I have learned a TON about identifying a good dog through competition and through training with people who have far more competition experience than I do (and I've been on the line a couple hundred times with almost a dozen dogs, so I'm not a novice either). Ask how much the breeder has competed. If they've only ever had one dog and only done lower level competition, they probably think it is the best because they have nothing to compare it to. Breeders like me, who have had a lot of dogs, get pretty darned picky about what we own and we don't love just any dog. Ask the breeder to describe the parents, and then listen to what they say -- and what they don't say. Ask the breeder why they bred those two dogs and what their goals are with the litter.

Along those lines, make sure what they are breeding for and what you need are the same. For example: I breed some search and rescue litters, and the USAR people like environmentally stable, athletic, crazy high drive dogs with no common sense, and no self preservation. Go look at pictures and videos on the PennVet Working Dog Center and the National Search Dog Foundation pages for examples. Those dogs do not, ever, belong in pet homes.

2) Temperament testing. There are a ton of different brand-name testing programs out there. Regardless of what the breeder does or does not use, the basic concepts of puppy testing are: new location, +/- new person, how does the puppy handle the situation. Will the puppy explore? how much does he explore? Will the puppy come to the person? will he engage in play or is he too shy/nervous/insecure? How badly does he want to play if blocked by a barrier (pup is inside a crate, on the other side of a small obstacle, etc)? How does the puppy react to being startled? does he recover quickly? does he run away? Will he check out the object that startled him? Clipboards, umbrellas, plastic cones, etc are all great examples of objects to "startle" a puppy with -- because they can interact with all those objects. Will the puppy chase a toy or balled up paper? will the puppy tug? How aggressively will he tug? Picking puppies for competition, I like the pup that bites, tugs, moves up and bites again -- I actually don't care if they bite my hand and draw blood. It shows drive, focus, passion, intensity. For pet homes, you don't want that level of drive.

3) Ask the breeder to help you pick. The breeder has spent lots of time with puppies. They should (key word being "should") know what each puppy is like. Realize that if the breeder doesn't DO anything with their dogs, or is on their first litter, or hasn't raised a bunch of puppies and competed with them, then they probably don't know how to interpret what they see in a puppy and what that will translate to in an

adult dog. I know I've learned lots along the way, and sometimes I like what I kept and sometimes I didn't like it. I am much better about picking puppies in 2021 than I was in 2015. Reputable, experienced breeders will pick for pet homes.

4) Get help from someone with more experience than you. If you're buying from a backyard breeder who knows nothing (you shouldn't, but lots of people do), take someone along who can help identify the characteristics you need in a puppy.

I'll describe what I saw in a specific litter of pups at 7 weeks and how I placed them.

Orange - social, stable, confident, occasionally a little independent (he'll do his own thing away from the "pack" of puppies, sometimes has a "party of one" with a toy), and figured out how to sit for food really quickly. I think he's going to be moderate drive. He's confident in new places and easily/quickly interacts with new people. *This one went to an experienced upper level obedience and agility competition home -- they were on the fence between Orange and Purple but in the end wanted a male. Confidence and tractability are incredibly important in obedience competition dogs. They will be asked to work in a quiet environment, on the other side of the ring from the handler, and problem solve for themselves with no encouragement during individual exercises (obviously praise in between exercises). It is stressful for some dogs. You have to be a stable, secure, motivated dog to excel in that world.*

Yellow - social, much more likely to be in the pack of puppies with me than exploring on his own, better drive than Orange (though I'm not sure how much of that is just due to Orange being a bigger/heavier pup and Yellow is lighter framed), and better than most of the litter, but not as confident. He would hang back in the whelping box while all the other pups got picked up, and that is still something I see occasionally, eg last one out of the dog box on the truck. If he gets nervous he tends to freeze and not make eye contact. I do like his drive and he has moments where he looks great, plays tug, but then I don't like not handling mental stress/pressure well. *This one went to an active pet home who is very motivated to "do something" with their dog, whether agility or hunt tests or therapy dog work; they wanted to give the pup a purpose. The owner has had several adult Labs as rescues in the past but never a puppy. I think the pup will do well with one on one attention, and he has good drive -- you can overcome a lot of confidence issues with enough drive -- and the owner is flexible on the pup's eventual purpose.*

Purple - is a really nice pup with good drive but not over the top, social, confident, stable, seems to be pretty resilient with the exception of not liking my old Aussie (he growled at her once and now she won't come to me if I'm brushing him) although that shows some intelligence, lol. She's middle of the group, doesn't stand out in a bad way, doesn't stand out as incredible either, but she will play, tug, and bark when frustrated. She doesn't stick with tug for long, but you can build drive. *This one went to an active pet and maybe competition home (they're at least going to classes that could morph into competition). They have several young children and the most important thing on the list was a stable, resilient dog that would not have reactivity problems (a previous rescue dog bit one of their kids in the face several years ago) and would be a good ambassador for the canine world. Orange or Pink would have fit in this home also. My upper level home took Orange, and while this home wanted a male, they*

were flexible on sex (important!). Yellow was the other available male, but I didn't think he was the right fit for this home, so I decided on Purple. When they showed up and Purple ran up to the shrieking small humans to greet them, and chased them in circles around the vehicle without an ounce of fear -- I knew I'd made the right choice.

Teal - has to go to a really savvy home. She is the most outgoing, tons of sass and attitude, growls when petted the wrong way (cat in a dog body, apparently), plays tug without losing focus for minutes on end, demands attention, etc. I don't think her attitude is a problem, but it could absolutely become one if she learns to intimidate her owner. *This one went to an experienced home who had fostered working dogs for the PennVet Working Dog Center and done an internship there -- eg a good working dog background and excellent resources if the pup needed additional help to be a good dog.*

Pink - is another middle of the road pup, good drive, stable, resilient, reasonable confidence, wants to participate, figured out the treats really quickly, I like this pup. *This one went to an experienced home who wanted a companion and hunt test dog. The owner has 2 other dogs from me, one of which is on a pro truck and has his master hunter title. She'd waited over a year for this breeding. The pup will not have nearly as much drive as her other dog, but she was OK with that.*

Black - is very social, wants to do stuff with you, moderate drive, likes to chase and play tug. She figured out sitting for treats really quickly and loves eye contact. She isn't as confident as Pink and I don't think quite as resilient at 7 weeks. *This one went to an experienced obedience/agility competition home who wanted nice structure, participation, and wanted *that puppy*. I kept the pup until 9 weeks and she looked good (confident, outgoing, social) at that point -- I took her to an agility trial to hang out and didn't see anything that bothered me -- age helps a lot of puppies.*

Blue - is super social/really likes people, but tends to hang back if nervous. I think he'll be fine with a little more time. Yellow and Blue were always the last ones out of the whelping box. He is also a smart pup who sits and waits for treats like he's getting them from a Pez dispenser (and he usually does, because he's sitting still....). The lower drive pups seem to have more self control and figure out the treats quicker. *This one is going to an active pet home that may or may not compete with him (I hope they do). He's staying with me until 11.5 weeks because his owners were moving and couldn't take him earlier. He's moderate drive, stable, social, I like him. I took him to a hunt test about 9 weeks of age and he ran up to meet everyone, said hi to a few socially appropriate young dogs, and behaved himself wonderfully.*

Green - is a nice, confident, outgoing, social pup with no drive (presumably that will improve with age, because based on the pedigree he should have drive). *This one went to an active pet home -- a young couple who grew up with dogs but had never had one of their own as adults. He'll do really nicely there. Stable, social, low drive dogs do great in novice pet homes.*

Three of the pups went to veterinarians, but that did not factor into puppy placement decisions. I try really hard to get the right temperament in the right home because I don't want puppies returned. I would always take one of my pups back, but the goal is that they stay in their new home for the rest of their life.

Notice that some pups were appropriate for multiple homes (the one that took Orange could have taken Teal or Purple) but not every home could have taken just any pup (the home that took Green would have a disaster with Teal; the home that took Orange would not have enjoyed Green, etc). I let the home that took Orange make a choice about what she wanted. I took half a dozen dorky YouTube videos of myself interacting with puppies to help her decide. I picked 100% for Yellow, Blue, and Green. The other placements had varying levels of input from their new owners. Not every litter has that much variation. My straight conformation-bred stuff usually has a narrower range of personality types and are easier to uniformly put into pet homes.

As far as evaluating puppies -- this is really important --

1) It is very hard to evaluate an insecure puppy. If they are nervous, you cannot tell how much drive they have, how they react to being startled, etc. Confident puppies explore. They bite your hands and feet. They untie your shoelaces. They say hi to everyone. They bounce back immediately if startled. I was asked to evaluate a litter of puppies for a local breeder a year ago. Out of 8 or 9 pups, only one would come to me and engage in play. The others hid under a desk in the new environment and would not come out for me or the breeder. I could not evaluate the litter because they were too insecure. (Ugh - you don't want those type of puppies).

2) Dogs that lack confidence look good to novices early on -- because they snuggle in your lap, are nice and quiet and "calm", and they stay with you rather than running off -- but that can turn into fear aggression with age and lack of socialization/exposure. That said, you do have to distinguish between lack of confidence, and the low drive, social pup that really is just happy in your lap.

3) The stable, confident, secure puppy is the best long term bet, but they are going to take a lot of work over the first year or two. The more drive they have, the more work you will need to put into the dog. Couch potatoes don't require a ton of work.

4) Drive and energy are not the same thing. I mentioned this earlier but want to expand on it. Drive is things like chasing, retrieving, tugging, focusing on something for several minutes without losing attention -- self motivation things. Pet homes do well with low to moderate drive dogs. Pet homes don't want dogs that obsessively chase cars and squirrels. Competition and performance homes love drive. Field trial dogs, and search and rescue dogs need an insane amount of drive (at least the USAR stuff does; the local SAR teams sometimes make do with lower drive dogs). Energy is how much exercise that dog needs. Energy is really hard to evaluate in a puppy -- you need to ask about the parents of the litter in order to determine this. Do they pace in a kennel? are they destructive in the house? do they go for runs with their owner every day? do they have a treadmill at home for the dog? do they sleep on the couch all day and have never chewed on anything inappropriate in their life? ask where the parents live and what they do for exercise and how they act.

High energy, high drive dogs are lovely performance dogs. They need a job, and tons of activity. You can work with a high energy, high drive dog, because they WILL chase, they WILL retrieve, they WILL engage with you. They are easy to exercise (but take a lot of exercise). They don't need to be in pet homes though!

Low to moderate energy, high drive dogs are also nice performance dogs, but they're easy to live with as long as they get enough exercise. These guys can go in active pet homes because they are excited to get out and go whenever the owner wants, but they'll relax at home when needed, too.

High energy, low drive dogs are bad. They are busy all the time, and you can't DO anything to mentally or physically exercise these guys because they have no desire to chase, tug, retrieve, or participate in games/adventures with the handler.

Low energy, low drive dogs are great for pet homes. They are not good competition dogs. They are the dogs that want to watch movies with you on the couch at 3 months old and stay there for the next 15 years. These dogs with stable temperaments are wonderful family pets (think the classic Labrador or Golden temperament).

Be honest with yourself about your home.

If you are a sack of potatoes on the end of a leash, you do not need the exuberant, high drive dog or the fearful one. Both of those dogs need structure and boundaries and leadership to be shown how to deal with life appropriately. If you are passive, that fearful dog will start to take care of himself because you aren't -- and it usually manifests as "reactivity." The exuberant, overly friendly dog will become obnoxious and rude and drag you across the street to meet people (you're going to be the person everyone hates).

If you have never owned a dog before, you do not need anything that tends toward fearfulness. Example: Novice pet owners don't understand basic things like how to walk a dog on a leash. If you walk your fearful dog on a tight leash, all that fear gets bundled up tighter and tighter just waiting for an opportunity to explode. If you ride horses you can appreciate this -- because you can feel the nervous horse relax when you give him a little bit of rein and ride him with a light hand. If you get nervous, tense your body, and tighten up the reins, your horse instantly tenses up also and does dumb stuff like bolting. I walk nervous dogs on a very loose leash. It is a 6' leash so I don't allow pulling or distance, but I insist on slack in the lead. If you haven't had dogs or horses before, that is going to be over your abilities.

Things that you should avoid regardless of pet home or competition home:

Puppies that are intensely focused on everything in their environment except the handler. There are a lot of poorly bred GSDs out there that fit this description. They notice everything with hyper intensity (ADHD too, so they don't have good long term focus) and have no interest in engaging with the person on the other end of their leash. Not fun to train, not fun to own, absolutely not fun to take on a casual evening walk around the neighborhood. Don't acquire these dogs.

Puppies that are extremely fearful. If the puppy sits in the corner of the room, crosses their paws and refuses to come or make eye contact with you -- do not take that puppy home. Sure, s/he will get comfortable around you with time, but that fear will carry over to every aspect of life. They don't want to take walks, they are not comfortable with visitors coming over (do you really want your dog growling

and barking or even biting your friends when they come over for dinner?), they aren't good at the vet clinic, etc.

Regardless of whether you get a pup from me or from someone else, please do your research, ask the important questions, and work with a breeder who will do their best to match puppies to the right owners.

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