



CANINE

Companions and Helpers

by Phyllis McIntosh

The enduring loyalty of dogs is the stuff of legend. Consider the case of Bobbie, a collie and English shepherd mix that got lost on a family trip in 1923. In just six months, Bobbie traveled at least 2,800 miles from Indiana to Oregon to find his way back home. Or imagine the steadfastness of Shep, a border collie so devoted to his owner that he followed the man's coffin to the train station in Fort Benton, Montana. For the next six years, Shep hung around the station yard, checking every train, apparently in hopes that his master would return.

While these examples may be extreme, dogs in general are prized for their faithfulness and their eagerness to please. These qualities, along with their playfulness, trainability, and downright lovability, have earned the dog the title of Man's Best Friend. In fact, no other bond between species is as widespread as that between people and dogs.

According to the latest National Pet Owners Survey, Americans own 83 million dogs. Over 46 percent of U.S. households have at least one dog. With some 400 breeds to choose from, there is a dog with the size, temperament, appearance, and hard-wired skills to suit almost any owner.

The traits that make dogs excellent pets also qualify them as valuable service animals for the disabled and "therapists" for hospital patients, autistic children, and traumatized veterans. While some dogs perform serious tasks, others excel at demonstrating their obedience, agility, and good looks at dog shows and competitions.

The Ultimate Pets

All dogs are descended from wolves that were domesticated some 15,000 years ago. For thousands of years, dogs were bred for certain skills, such as flushing out and retrieving game for hunters or killing rodents. But in the late 1800s, people began breeding dogs primarily for appearance and, over a relatively few generations, developed completely new breeds. Thanks to human tinkering with canine DNA, dogs now exhibit the greatest variation in size and appearance of any animal. Breeds today range from the two-pound Chihuahua to the English mastiff, which can tip the scales at 350 pounds.



A Chihuahua sits on the head of a mastiff, accentuating the difference in the size of these two breeds.

Coats vary from none at all in the Mexican hairless to the long silky tresses of the Pekingese; faces range from the smashed-in look of the bulldog to the long, pointy snouts of collies and German shepherds.

For 21 years, the Labrador retriever has remained top dog in the United States, although the beagle, bulldog, and Rottweiler have moved up in popularity. While some small breeds, such as Yorkshire terriers and dachshunds, are perennial favorites, Americans generally prefer larger dogs. According to American Kennel Club registrations in 2013, the 10 most popular breeds were:

1. Labrador retriever
2. German shepherd
3. golden retriever
4. beagle
5. bulldog
6. Yorkshire terrier
7. boxer
8. poodle
9. Rottweiler
10. dachshund



(clockwise from top left) Labrador retriever; labradoodle; beagle; German shepherd

In addition to these standard breeds, designer dog breeds, or hybrid dogs, are a trend in the United States. New breed combinations such as labradoodles (Labrador retriever and poodle), cockapoos (cocker spaniel and poodle), and puggles (pug and beagle) are in high demand.

While such fancy dogs are usually purchased from breeders or pet shops, the majority of dog owners acquire theirs from family members or acquaintances. More than 20 percent of dogs are adopted from the 5,000 animal shelters that take in strays and pets given up by owners. Despite their humble beginnings, most shelter dogs make excellent pets and working dogs. Even some famous acting dogs, such as the star of the film *Benji* and several of the

pups that appeared as Marley in the movie *Marley and Me*, were adopted from animal shelters.

Regardless of where they come from, most American dogs are pampered. Even in recessionary times, Americans are spending more than ever on their pets—over \$50 million per year in the past three years. While the bulk of that goes for food and veterinary care, owners spend a tidy sum on grooming, boarding, treats, toys, and even dog clothes and perfumes.

The pet care business is booming, with many dog owners opting for doggie day care to keep their pooches amused while they are at work. Also thriving are gourmet bakeries that feature dog cookies made with healthy, human-grade ingredients; dog salons that offer grooming, facials, and birthday parties;



A woman takes her dog for a walk, a good form of exercise.

and pet travel agencies that direct people to dog-friendly cities, hotels, and restaurants.

Dogs Are Good for You

Coddled canines are not the only beneficiaries of pet ownership. A growing body of research indicates that having a dog nearby is good for people's health. Simply petting or playing with a dog lowers blood pressure, slows the heart rate, and releases hormones that promote feelings of pleasure and calm. Walking a dog provides beneficial exercise and opportunities for social contacts. Not surprisingly, pet owners are less anxious and less likely to become depressed than people who don't have pets.

The health benefits don't stop there. Studies show that pet owners have lower levels of cholesterol and triglycerides and make 30 percent fewer visits to the doctor than people without pets. Heart attack patients who have pets survive longer than those who don't. Children raised in homes with animals are less prone to allergies and asthma, suggesting that exposure to pets promotes a stronger immune system.

Dogs provide emotional benefits as well. People with animal companions tend to be less lonely and to have higher self-esteem. Some psychologists maintain that the benefits people gain from interactions with pets can be equal to those from friendship with another person.

The Dog-Human Bond at Work

With their superior sense of smell and hearing and their eagerness to please, dogs are well-suited to a variety of important tasks, such as sniffing out drugs, bombs, or land mines and locating victims of natural or man-made disasters. A group called Working Dogs for Conservation trains dogs to follow the scents of elusive wildlife, locate endangered species, and identify rare or invasive plants. In the area of medical research, dogs have shown an uncanny ability to detect prostate, lung, and breast cancer and the skin cancer melanoma simply by sniffing a patient's breath or body odor.

But it is their remarkable ability to bond with people that makes dogs especially valuable allies to those with special needs.

Service Dogs

Although so-called *seeing-eye dogs* trained to guide the visually impaired are the best-known service animals, dogs also provide various other kinds of assistance.

- **Hearing dogs** alert people who are deaf or hearing impaired to important sounds such as doorbells, smoke alarms, telephones, and alarm clocks.



The orange vest of this hearing dog identifies it as a service animal.



A man in a nursing home enjoys a visit from a therapy dog.

- **Mobility assistance dogs** aid the physically disabled by picking up objects, opening doors, and operating light switches. Large breeds can pull wheelchairs and steady people with Parkinson's disease and other movement disorders.
- **Medical response dogs** can carry life-support equipment, such as an oxygen tank, and warn people about certain medical situations before they occur. Some dogs, for example, can detect changes in blood sugar levels in diabetics or an imminent seizure in a person with epilepsy. Seizure dogs are specially trained to remove dangerous objects, rouse an unconscious victim, and summon help when their handler experiences a seizure.
- **Autism service dogs** can accompany autistic children to school, where they provide a calming influence and a focus for the child that promotes better interaction with classmates.
- **Psychiatric service dogs** aid people with conditions such as schizophrenia or post-traumatic stress disorder. The dog can guide a person who becomes disoriented, retrieve medication, interrupt repetitive obsessive behaviors, or

search a location to reassure someone experiencing paranoia or hallucinations.

All types of assistance dogs typically wear vests identifying them as service animals. Under the Americans with Disabilities Act, service animals are allowed to go anywhere the public goes, including businesses, restaurants, theaters, and transit systems.

Therapy dogs

A growing trend is training dogs, often household pets, to provide comfort and companionship to people in a variety of trying circumstances. Currently, about 24,000 dogs are registered with Therapy Dogs International, an organization dedicated to testing and registering therapy dogs and their volunteer owners for visits wherever they are needed. Such places include:

- **Medical settings.** Visits from affectionate dogs help hospitalized children and adults cope with the pain and fear of serious illness. In waiting rooms, dogs calm patients who are about to see the doctor or undergo a medical procedure. In hospices, dogs provide comfort to dying patients and their families.
- Some dogs live where they work. At the Children's Inn of the National Institutes of Health, where families stay while their children undergo treatment for serious illnesses, a resident Labrador retriever named Vi (short for Viola) provides a warm welcome and helps create a homelike atmosphere.
- **Homes of the elderly.** Regular visits from dogs lift the spirits and ease loneliness of elderly people living in nursing homes or confined to their own homes. Touching and playing with a dog encourages physical movement, as well as more interaction with other people.
- **Libraries and classrooms.** Through programs such as Therapy Dogs International's Tail Waggin' Tutors, children overcome reading difficulties by practicing reading aloud to non-judgmental four-legged friends that sit quietly by their sides.

- **Disaster relief sites.** The opportunity to hug and pet a friendly dog has given comfort and emotional support to victims, refugees, and rescue workers at scenes of disasters such as Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans and recent tornadoes and wildfires in several U.S. states.

Increasingly, dogs are visiting courtrooms, where they help ease the anxiety of crime victims about to testify; college campuses, where they relieve the stress of students coping with final exams; and community shelters, where they comfort victims of abuse. A Virginia Commonwealth University study found that dogs in the workplace reduced stress and made the job more enjoyable, not just for the dog owners but also for their coworkers.



The “best in show” winner of the 2014 Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show—a wire fox terrier from California named Sky—poses with the silver trophy she won.

In some situations, dogs and people provide therapy for one another. Such is the case with Project POOCH (Positive Opportunities Obvious Change with Hounds) at a youth correctional facility in Oregon, where shelter dogs with behavioral problems are paired with young men convicted of serious crimes. These youths train and rehabilitate the dogs so that they can be adopted into permanent homes. During the training process, the youths gain the personal skills, responsibility, and compassion that will help them succeed when they are released from prison.

Show-Off Dogs

Some dogs and their owners enjoy showing off canine skills and versatility in dog shows and sporting competitions. Dog shows range from large televised events to charity fundraisers with prizes for fun categories like smallest dog, best costume, and dog-and-owner lookalikes. Some competitions test dogs’ traditional skills in sheepherding and hunting or their athletic ability in catching a Frisbee or leaping into a pool. Generally, though, dog shows fall into three broad categories.

- **Conformation shows** feature individual judging of purebred dogs to determine how well they conform to the breed standard. Large shows group competitors by type, such as sporting dogs, terriers, and hounds. Because appearance is critical, competing dogs, especially long-haired breeds, are carefully groomed and coiffed.

The largest and most prestigious of the conformation events is the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show, established in 1877 and held annually in New York City’s Madison Square Garden. The top winner among the more than 3,000 entries receives no prize money but is awarded a silver trophy and such honors as ringing the opening bell at the New York Stock Exchange.

- **Agility trials** are sporting events in which a handler uses a variety of voice and hand signals to direct the dog through an obstacle course,



An Irish setter entered in a conformation show is judged against the breed standard.



A Pembroke Welsh corgi jumps over a pole as it competes in an agility trial.

which may require the dog to jump over poles, run through tunnels, and weave around posts. The dog is judged on speed and accuracy in completing the course.

- **Obedience trials** test a dog's ability to reliably follow certain commands given by a handler. These include simple actions like *sit*, *stay*, *come*, and *heel*, as well as more advanced tasks such as performing jumps, retrieving items, and distinguishing the handler's scent on objects.

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Whether they are aiding people in need, demonstrating their athletic prowess, showing off their good looks and good manners, or simply cuddling on an easy chair in front of the TV, dogs have endeared themselves to people like no other animal. One anonymous dog lover described the special relationship a human has with a dog this way: "He is your friend, your partner, your defender, your dog. You are his life, his love, his leader. He will be yours, faithful and true, to the last beat of his heart. You owe it to him to be worthy of such devotion."

Dog Talk

blaze – a white stripe running up the center of a dog's face

breed standard – a set of descriptions for a particular breed originally drawn up by a breed club and accepted officially by dog-show judges

brindle – coat coloring in which streaks of darker hair over a tawny or grayish base coat create a subtle tiger-striped pattern

canine – dog (n.); related to dogs (adj.)

crop – to cut or trim the external ear flap to encourage the ear to stand erect; routinely done on such breeds as the boxer, Doberman pinscher, Great Dane, and schnauzer

dock – to clip short or cut off the tail to maintain breed standard on about 50 breeds

mongrel (or mutt) – a dog of mixed or undetermined breed

muzzle – the nose and mouth of a dog

pedigree – the written record of a dog's genealogy for three generations or more

stray – a dog that is homeless or lost

whelp – to give birth to puppies

Websites of Interest

American Kennel Club

www.akc.org

Besides maintaining a registry of purebred dogs in the United States, the American Kennel Club sponsors dog shows, competitions, and clubs. This official website provides information on various breeds, dog health, and dog ownership.

ASPCA (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals)

www.aspc.org

As one of the largest animal protection organizations in the United States, the ASPCA fights against irresponsible dog breeding and other abusive practices, promotes adoptions from animal shelters, and advocates spaying and neutering to prevent pet overpopulation. This official site offers tips, articles, and videos on how to adopt and care for dogs as well as other pets.

NOVA – Dogs and More Dogs

www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/dogs

Created in conjunction with a program on the Public Broadcasting Service's NOVA science series, this website explores the history and diversity of dogs, canine intelligence, and the various jobs performed by working dogs.

Therapy Dogs International

www.tdi-dog.org

Official website of an organization that evaluates and registers therapy dogs, this site explains the value of such work, how owners can volunteer their pets, and the various kinds of facilities and situations where therapy dogs provide comfort and support.

DOGS

in Popular Culture

Given the bond between dogs and people, especially children, it is not surprising that canine characters abound in books, movies, and cartoons. Among the favorite cartoon dogs are Disney's Pluto and Goofy, Scooby Doo, Huckleberry Hound, and the beloved Snoopy from the *Peanuts* comic strip. Dogs are the stars of a host of full-length movies, such as *Beethoven*, *Benji*, *Wishbone*, and Disney's *Lady and the Tramp* and *101 Dalmatians*.

Famous dogs in U.S. culture include:

- **Lassie.** The saga of this fictional collie began with the book and film *Lassie Come Home*, about a dog that travels hundreds of miles to reunite with her young owner.

The Lassie character went on to star in additional movies and a television series about the adventures of a boy and his dog. Although Lassie was portrayed as female, all of the film and TV Lassies were played by male dogs. Lassie remains a favorite name for American female dogs of many different breeds.



Uggie, the canine star of the film *The Artist*, shows off on the red carpet at the 2012 Golden Globe Awards ceremony.

- **Rin Tin Tin.** Rescued from a World War I battlefield, this handsome German shepherd starred in more than 20 movies in the 1920s and 30s. His successors performed in later films, radio series, and a 1950s television series about an orphan boy and his dog living on a U.S. cavalry post in the early American West.
- **Toto.** A cairn terrier that accompanied Judy Garland's character, Dorothy, on her adventures in *The Wizard of Oz*, this canine character is immortalized in Dorothy's famous line on finding herself in the Land of Oz: "Toto, I've a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."
- **Uggie.** This lovable Jack Russell terrier, rescued from a trip to the pound by an animal trainer, became a celebrity after appearing in *The Artist*, winner of the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2012. Attired in formal black tie, Uggie also stole the show that year at the Golden Globe Awards and the White House Correspondents' Dinner.