

How Popular Is 'Just Popular Enough?'

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These days, I'm relieved I don't breed Portuguese Water Dogs.

Now don't get me wrong. I love the breed. PWDs are athletic, fun-loving, and thoroughly charming dogs. It's just that with the Obamas considering a PWD to join their household, a day hasn't passed in many months that the breed hasn't been mentioned in a news item online or in the press.

The result is that hundreds of thousands of people who'd never heard of the breed before it became a candidate for White House pet stardom have now grown curious, investigated it, and just might decide this is the breed that's right for them, too. If that is the decision they come to, conscientious dog breeders hope it's because the PWD is truly the right breed for them ... not because they think it's cool to own the same breed that the first family is considering.

Visibility is a double-edged sword. It used to be that the only dog show that aired on TV was Westminster, every February. Well, thanks to burgeoning cable stations, we now can view dog shows from the comfort of our living rooms every week of the year. And there are viewers who will catch a glimpse of a newly recognized or uncommon breed and decide that's the dog for them.

In the ideal world, we dog fanciers can be protective of a breed, keep tabs on newcomers who express an interest, and make sure that everyone in the breed has the dog's best interests at heart. We appreciate the visibility that a star turn on a televised dog show can give our breed, but we never want the breed to become so popular that it attracts those with commercial interests who would exploit it.

Guess what? Monitoring a breed is a tough job. And when conscientious breeders turn away a potential buyer who seems commercially driven, that individual can get on the Internet and find himself a dog or two of our breed, intact, no questions asked.

Registration papers don't appear to make much difference. If good breeders charge \$2,000 for a puppy after careful screening, bad breeders are perfectly happy charging \$750 a puppy and selling it to anyone. They're confident they'll make up in quantity what their dogs are missing in quality, and they know there are plenty of gullible buyers who couldn't care less about AKC paperwork and genetic screening of their puppy's parents they're so excited about taking their dog home. By the time health issues rear their ugly head, the owner's check has cleared and the breeder may have flown the coop.

It's fun to watch the parade of show dogs strut their stuff on television. But to make sure that you get all the benefits out of televised dog shows and none of the heartache, think of these shows as educational opportunities rather than window shopping.

If a particular breed catches your eye, listen carefully to the description provided by the color commentators. Then go to your computer and visit the breed's parent club website where you will find sound, unbiased advice on the pros and cons of owning the breed; regional clubs where you can locate breeders in your area and meet dogs in a home setting; and upcoming dog shows where you can see dogs in the flesh.

Remember that no dog is perfect for everyone. Seize the opportunity to find responsible dog fanciers who will happily share information about their breed and give you straight talk to help find the right dog for you.

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