

Dog Fancy Breed Profile Great Dane

Great Dane in Brief

Country of origin: Germany.

Group: Working (AKC), Guardian Dogs (UKC).

Life span: 6 to 9 years.

Color: Fawn (tan with black mask), brindle (tan with black stripes), solid black, blue, harlequin (white with black patches), and mantle (black head and body; white muzzle, collar, chest, feet, legs, and tail tip).

Coat: Short, thick, and glossy.

Grooming: Brush coat and clean ears daily.

Height/weight: Males, 33 to 36 inches, 140 to 175 pounds; females, 31 to 33 inches, 110 to 140 pounds.

Trainability: Moderate.

Activity level: High as puppies, then moderate to low.

Known health problems: Gastric torsion (bloat), osteosarcoma (bone cancer), cardiomyopathy (heart disease), hypothyroidism, and bone and joint problems such as hip dysplasia and Wobbler syndrome, a serious condition that affects the vertebra in the neck and can result in a wobbling gait.

Best home: Inside with the family.

Good with children: Yes, although they can accidentally knock over a child.

Good with other pets: Yes, although they may chase small animals. Some Great Danes can be dog-aggressive.

National breed club: Great Dane Club of America, (630) 587-5633;

gdcainfo@sbcglobal.net; www.gdca.org

Rescue: Visit www.gdca.org/rescue.htm to search rescue contacts by state

Great Dane

Reprinted from DOG FANCY July 2005

Great Dane: Oh, sweet Hercules!

The colossal Great Dane has a divine capacity for affection.

By Eve Adamson

Towering, dignified, regal, and elegant, Katie, a fawn Great Dane, has a sculptured head, powerful muscles, and an intimidating presence ... until you notice the big stuffed frog in her mouth. "She carries that toy everywhere she goes, so pleased with herself," says Georgia Hymmen, Katie's owner and a Great Dane breeder in Ferndale, Wash. "She'll even try to bark without dropping it."

Powerful and imposing, yet sensitive and able to bond closely with humans, the Great Dane is a study in contradictions. "Great Danes are often referred to as gentle giants, and that is an apt description," says Jane Chopson of Port Coast, Calif., president of the Great Dane Club of America. The very presence of a Great Dane will deter intruders, but these Herculean canines are the ultimate people dogs. "They constantly lean on you," says Pookie Kostuk of Cheshire, Conn., national rescue chairman for the GDCA. "If you are watching TV, they are on you. Even if they are lying next to you, some part of them is touching you, to make sure you're still there."

From guard to pal

Images of Dane-like dogs appear on Egyptian tombs as far back as 3000 B.C. These ancestors to many modern guardian breeds, such as Mastiffs and Rottweilers, probably also spawned the Great Dane. Used as boarhounds in 19th-century Europe, early Great Danes were fierce, powerful "super dogs," who also guarded wealthy landowners' estates.

Germany declared the "Deutsche Dogge," or German Mastiff, its national breed in 1876. In England and America, the dog is called Great Dane, but nobody knows why: The breed's history has nothing to do with Denmark.

For over a century, Great Danes have been companions rather than hunters and guardians. Breeders have softened the Great Dane's prey drive, although many Great Danes will still play-fight with each other, grabbing necks and hocks as if taking down a wild boar. Some retain a strong prey drive and will chase small animals, including cats or even small dogs, but Great Danes are no longer designed for outdoor living.

On a recent rainy day, Hymmen's litter of 10 Great Dane puppies went barreling toward the back door, but when the first few puppies saw the rain, they stopped short, causing a 10-puppy pile-up. "They were not going out there!" Hymmen

says. "It can be virtually impossible to get a Great Dane to go outside in wet or cold weather. This is definitely a house dog." Today's Great Dane prefers a cushion in a spot of sun or a couch by a roaring fire to a day of hunting pigs.

Managing a giant

While the Great Dane may prefer lounging on a loveseat to pestering people for a game of fetch, owning a giant breed isn't easy. You have to recognize that this is a big responsibility, Hymmen says. "You have to be committed to a high level of training and socialization, and you have to respect that some people are truly afraid of large dogs."

Exposing puppies to a wide variety of people, other dogs, and experiences at a young age is crucial for developing the Great Dane's natural good sense. Rather than dulling his guardian instinct, socialization only refines it, helping the Great Dane distinguish between friend and foe.

Great Danes need puppy socialization classes followed by basic obedience classes, and many breeders even require these in their purchase agreements. "A Great Dane puppy is all feet and no brains, and people think it's adorable when he is bouncing all over the place, but it's not adorable anymore when the dog is 150 pounds and you have no control," Kostuk says.

Positive training works best for these responsive, human-centered dogs. "Danes are very sensitive dogs," she says. "It's like living with a large China doll. You can destroy a Great Dane just by yelling at it, and they will literally hang their heads in shame. They will also hang their heads to make you laugh and get themselves out of trouble."

As puppies, Great Danes can be incredibly energetic and destructive. "Teenage Danes need vigorous exercise every day, even if it is just running around in the yard," Hymmen says. Young Great Danes are power-chewers, and almost all Great Danes like to dig, so forget about the perfectly manicured backyard. "Some of them like to bury their toys, then dig them up, bury them, dig them up. That's their whole day," says Hymmen, who remembers searching all over the house for one of her fuzzy bunny slippers. "Finally, I looked out into the yard and saw just the bunny ears sticking out of the ground."

Hymmen suggests constructing a sandbox for Great Dane digging. "Train them as puppies to use it so you don't have big holes all over your yard," she suggests.

That young Great Dane energy is an important consideration for anyone unsteady on their feet, frail, very young, or very old. When Great Danes age, they calm down dramatically, making an adopted adult dog a smart choice for people looking for a more sedentary companion. Exuberant youngsters could accidentally injure a small child. "Great Danes are good with children if raised around them," says Chopson, who learned to walk by clinging to the legs of her family's brindle Great Dane, Midget. Great Danes are tolerant of child play, but both dog and child should be taught how to interact safely and should always be supervised. Some breeders won't sell a Great Dane to anyone with toddlers.

Easy to housetrain, Great Danes benefit from a large crate they can use as a resting spot when not supervised. "Great Danes must learn crate skills," Hymmen says. "Capitalize that, underline it, put it in bold." Crates make housetraining a breeze and keep young Great Danes from destroying the house when their owners aren't around. A crate-trained Great Dane is easier to travel with, take to the vet, or confine in case of an emergency.

Health essentials

Keeping Great Danes healthy can be pricey because vaccinations, medications, and pest control dosages -- not to mention food portions -- are based on weight. Like most large breeds, Great Danes are prone to orthopedic problems, and puppies should grow slowly for maximum bone density and healthy joint development. Many breeders recommend feeding puppies a food specifically designed for giant breeds with moderate protein, fat, and calories. Never give Great Dane puppies calcium supplements, as this can speed bone growth.

Easy to groom, Great Danes need only basic maintenance. Daily brushing and wiping down the sleek, short coat with a damp cloth will keep shedding to a minimum. Accustom young puppies to weekly nail clipping, and brush teeth at least weekly. Wipe out ears daily, whether cropped or natural.

Fewer pet owners are cropping the Great Dane's ears, traditionally trimmed to prevent injury when hunting boar. Folded ears can trap bacteria and may be more prone to infection, but cropped ears can also develop yeast or harbor other irritants.

One of the most crucial health issues in Great Danes is bloat, or gastric torsion. This life-threatening condition requires immediate emergency surgery. Signs include pacing, panting, drooling, and dry-heaving. Because bloat is associated with gulping food, high activity before and after meals, and stress, breeders suggest certain precautions. "Dane owners

should educate themselves about bloat, know the signs, and practice good management tools like keeping the dog quiet before and after meals, feeding at least twice a day, and having an emergency plan in place before a bloat episode ever happens," Hymmen says. "Hopefully, you'll never need to use it."

One of the biggest downsides to Great Danes is their brief life spans. "The average life span of a Dane is probably seven years, although many live longer," Chopson says. This short time together is invariably painful for devoted pet owners. "Again and again, I see people who are so devastated when they lose their Dane that they vow never to get another," Hymmen says. "But when they get a different breed, they tell me, 'Well, it's a nice dog. But it's just a dog. I need another Dane.'"

Eve Adamson is a DOG FANCY contributing editor and lives in Iowa City, Iowa.

Learn about dog breeds every month in DOG FANCY