

Meet the Breed: The Rottweiler

Calm, confident and courageous, this German classic is a special dog for special people.

Jan Mahood

"Gee! Haw! Whoa!"

The commands ring out at the carting competition. But it's not a Percheron, Clydesdale, Belgian, or any draft horse. It's a powerfully built dog of noble bearing leaning into his task, inching the heavy cart forward, with muscles bunching and rippling under a sleek, black-and-rust coat. The Rottweiler is doing what his ancestors did in the 1st century, when Augustus Caesar's Roman legions marched across the Alps to clash with and subdue the armies of southern Germany. The large, powerful dogs that traveled beside the Roman chariots pulled carts full of imedimenta (equipment), and herded and guarded the cattle that provided meat for the troops.

"Wheresoever the Roman conquers, he inhabits," observed Roman philosopher Seneca -- and his dogs inhabit with him. Thus Molossian-Mastiff-type genes spread across Europe in the vast territorial expansion orchestrated by Augustus and gave rise to a variety of sturdy working breeds.

In 74 A.D. on the site of one of their camps in southern Germany, the Roman conquerors built a town, later named Rottweil (which means "because red" in German) after the red roof tiles on its buildings. Their dogs apparently interbred with local and regional shepherd dogs, fighting dogs, and perhaps bulldogs, which many have given the Rottweiler its courage.

The breed was developed to perform work required by the butchers, dairymen, brewers, and merchants. The Rottweiler Metzgerhund (butcher dog), drove cattle to market and is said to have returned to his master with payment safely tucked into a little sack tied around his neck. The Rottweiler was not a dog to be trifled with, and the earnings were safe from thieves.

The advent of the railroad in the 1800s all but put the Rottweiler out of business as the carrier of choice, and the breed declined almost to extinction.

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