

Popular Dogs: Basset Hounds

Get to know life with a Basset Hound.

Diane Morgan

But He Looks So Sad

The first trick the Basset Hound plays upon its hapless owner is its wrinkled expression, a look variously described as mournful, gloomy, morose, downcast, dispirited, despondent, forlorn, melancholy, dejected, doleful, solemn, tragic, woeful, lugubrious, somber and full of sorrow. The truth is otherwise. The Basset Hound is one of the most cheerful of dogs, that requires little from life but a couch, a kitchen and some kickback time with its owners to make it completely happy.

Although the Basset Hound breed standard (the official, written description of the ideal Basset Hound) says nothing specific about temperament, it doesn't really need to. We Baseteers already know. Melinda Brown, a Basset breeder and president of Basset Rescue of Old Dominion in Virginia says, "A well-bred Basset Hound should be easy going, mild mannered, sociable, comical, clever, soulful, musical, enduring, wily, personable, competitive, independent, intelligent, friendly and outgoing. They are pack animals and are therefore good family dogs they make great owners." Randy Fredericksen, president of the Basset Hound Club of America, adds, "The Basset Hound is a hound like no other. Underneath its clownish looks is an extremely intelligent animal that can be as cunning as a fox," he says. "A correct Basset is good-natured yet sometimes stubborn; affectionate yet aloof; and calm yet excitable at feeding time, playtime and just-glad-to-see-ya time."

Food-Finding Fiend

The key to the Basset temperament is locked in its genes. To understand the nature of the Basset, it's important to understand its history, for it's all tied in together. Bassets are hunting dogs, scenthounds designed to find food.

Originally, food-finding meant following prey to the ground. Like all scent hounds, Bassets were bred to follow a track relentlessly. Although the prey may be minutes or hours ahead, it has left an invisible trail. To a Basset, the scent particles glow like neon. This is still their greatest skill. Food is the object of life for most Basset Hounds. Even their famous drool is merely a precursor to the all-important act of digestion. Contemporary Bassets take pride in being able to obtain food from any source available, including locked containers, inattentive humans and hapless fellow pets. A few stories will illustrate this ability.

Miriam Dalfen of Sountrack Basset Hounds in Ontario, Canada, says, "At the grooming shop where I used to work, we kept a basket of dog biscuits on the main counter. Rainbow's project was to get the biscuits. At first she simply jumped up, grabbed the basket and pulled it off. So we started making sure it was well back from the edge," Dalfen says.

"Then she started getting on the chair, then the desk, then on the counter. So, we made sure the chair was always pushed in. She started pushing the chair back out so we simply moved the chair away from the desk. Her next strategy was to go to the end of the counter and climb up on some crates, the tight-rope across the divider so she could reach the counter and eat the dog biscuits. That's what I get for training her for agility," Dalfen laughs.

This tale revealed the darker truth about the Basset personality. Bassets have an unfair reputation for being lazy. They are not lazy. Those hours of napping are needed to: a. plan for the next food raid; and b. digest the contents of whatever was discovered last time. A good Basset will never give up the food trail. In the field, we call this quality perseverance and determination. Little wonder then that modern Bassets, although largely deprived of the chance to hunt wild prey, have adapted supremely well to the conditions of contemporary life.

Novice Baseteers may label perseverance as stubbornness. (Basset Hounds have suffered invidious comparisons to retrievers to this point.) Again, we need to look into the history of the breed. In the field, the scenthound leads us, the blind ones. The hound is supposed to be the leader. After all, it knows where the rabbit is; we don't. The qualities of self



direction, perseverance and independence are absolutely necessary for a successful hunt. These are natural, bred-in-the-bone characteristics, not suppressed. The independent Basset Hound is not a push-button dog, and is not suited for an owner who wants a robo-dog. A Basset Hound requires an owner who is flexible and tolerant, someone with the ability to laugh at himself and smile at the dog.