

Boston Terriers

Are you ready for life with an affectionate, people-loving Boston companion?

By Joan Hustace Walker

Bergamot and Bosco are 4 years old; Emrys is 2. According to Kathy Esposito and her fiancé, Todd Dzicek, of Meriden, Conn.: "They are the dogs our parents made us wait 30 years for!" Dzicek admits to wanting a Boston Terrier since he was a young child and grew up admiring the neighbor's Boston. His enthusiasm for the little dogs was contagious, admits Esposito, and it didn't take much to convert her into a Boston Terrier fan.

"They are focused, attentive and sensitive dogs," Esposito says. To own any other breed of dog might just be, well, unthinkable. Owning a small dog is a definite plus for Esposito and Dzicek; however, it is the Boston Terrier's temperament that truly sold them on the breed.

"They are so focused on people that it's almost to the point of not acknowledging other dogs," Esposito says. "We took Bergamot to his first obedience class when he was 16 weeks old. The treat for the class was that all the puppies got to play together." When playtime came, however, Bergamot took off, but he didn't dash for the puppy pile. As the other puppies gleefully tumbled over each other, Bergamot made a beeline to the other puppy parents. "He had no interest in playing with the other dogs. He just wanted to be with all the people," Esposito says.

The loving and affectionate Boston Terrier is famous for his unabashed adoration of people of all shapes, colors, sizes and ages. However, the Boston Terrier's temperament (and sometimes quirky antics) not only can be the "glue that binds" when it comes to the canine-human bond but also the straw that breaks the camel's back, as the saying goes. What is going on between those perky ears and big, brown eyes? A lot more than many people anticipate. Here's a peek into the personality of a Boston Terrier and a look into whether this breed is all (or more) than you're hoping for.

A Bigger Background

"You have to understand that these dogs have no concept of their size," says Ann Sunday, a third-generation breeder of Boston Terriers in Grant's Pass, Ore., and owner of Sunglo Bostons. Maybe that's because these dogs really were much bigger at one time. "Until the 1940s when they started breeding down in size, the dogs used to easily weigh 25 to 35 pounds," Sunday says. She points out that these larger Boston Terriers were fearless. She recounts that her grandmother's dogs were outstanding mousers and, on at least one occasion, took on a badger.

Though breeding for a smaller and more manageable pet reduced the size of the breed, it didn't necessarily reduce certain character traits. "A Boston might only weigh about 12 pounds, but he thinks he's much bigger," Sunday says, and very often a Boston will have the saucy attitude to go with that bolstered body image.

In addition, Sunday says, a Boston owner needs to take into account the dog's heritage when sizing up his temperament. The combination (Bulldog-and-terrier cross), used to create the American Pit Bull Terrier and other fighting breeds, is the same combination that originally was used to develop the Boston Terrier.

Does this mean your Boston might be a fightin' machine? Not likely. After all, Bostons were bred to be parlor dogs. However, as Hunter notes, Boston Terriers display the entire range of temperaments, from the mellower or more stubborn Bulldog personality to the feistier, more-likely-to-be-dog-aggressive terrier attitude, with most Bostons falling somewhere in the middle. Bostons, as a breed, can have a little more tendency to be snippy, Hunter says. If you have young children,

she advises staying as far away as possible from this trait by looking closely at the temperaments of a puppy's parents.

Unlike his Bulldog ancestors, however, the Boston definitely can move well. To be more exact, there are times when a Boston Terrier (particularly a young representative of the breed) might be likened to a canine version of a perpetual motion machine. Yes, the breed is active — not hyper, just busy, stresses Rachel Stoyanov, owner of Rivermist Boston Terriers in Preston, Md. Sunday prefers to use the term “lively.” (She points out that the breed standard describes the Boston Terrier to be lively.) “If you want a couch potato, this isn't what you're going to get,” Sunday says. “The Boston Terrier is mellow at times but is not mellow all the time.”

In addition to having some energy, Boston Terriers like their people to take part in their activities. In their minds, it's simply not as fun playing alone. “You can throw a ball and your Boston will keep bringing it back until he drops,” Stoyanov says. A hearty round of tug-of-war is also a game that Boston Terriers are notorious for trying to entice their owners into. Pet owners who don't like to be bothered with a dog who wants to play likely would be overwhelmed by the Boston Terrier's insistence on interaction.

The Boston Terrier adores his people so much that he can be a difficult dog to kennel or separate from his family for any period of time. “The Boston Terrier is thrilled to do just about anything with his owners — except be left home alone,” says Susan Hunter, rescue coordinator for the Boston Terrier Club of America. “This is not a good kennel dog. He isn't content to be in a crate or dog-run for hours at a time.”

Stoyanov believes that of the two sexes, male Bostons tend to be the most dependent. Though they will love an entire family, she says, the male dogs tend to form a special attachment with one family member. If that dog's special person goes off for a long time, say to a summer camp, the dog tends to pine away, mope and not eat well.

Don't think that getting another Boston Terrier to keep your first Boston Terrier company will get you out of being a playmate. “When we wanted a second Boston, my breeder said, ‘Don't think that getting two Bostons means they'll go off together to play and everything will be perfect. What you'll have is two Bostons vying for attention,’” Esposito says, adding that her breeder's advice was correct. Though they do interact and seem to enjoy each other's company, they each want her attention 100 percent of the time.

A dog who is very active, coupled with a penchant for play and a need for interaction, could spell disaster for many dog owners — and a large amount of household destruction for others. At first glance, a dog owner possibly wouldn't imagine that a dog of this size could wreak such havoc in the home, but Hunter says otherwise. “The Boston Terrier puppy is an incredibly aggressive chewer. He will destroy your home,” she says. “Your glasses, ink pens, walls — if it can fit into his mouth, he will chew it.”

A Boston puppy is quite agile, too. If he wants something to chew, he most likely will find a way to climb or jump up to get it. “About the time your puppy reaches 2 or 3 years old, he's over that chewing stage,” Hunter says. In the meantime, keep a well-stocked inventory of chew toys.

Do a little research into what toys can withstand your Boston's oral attention, Esposito advises. “It's kind of a joke among owners: ‘How long did it take your dog to shred this? Five minutes? Thirty seconds?’” she says. “They're very destructive with their toys. I've heard of Boxers and Labrador Retrievers who have a special stuffed toy they'll keep for years. Not the Boston. There would be stuffing everywhere.”

In addition, Bostons easily become fixated on a particular toy, such as a Frisbee or a tennis ball — so much so, Esposito says, that there are many tales of owners who are forced to hide these items in closed drawers or closets so their dogs finally will give the owners some peace and quiet.

The Good News

Of course, it is this same play drive that makes Boston Terriers a delight in many ways. “They're toy-driven and

food-oriented,” Sunday says. These same traits make the Boston Terrier an eager training pupil. One of Sunday’s dogs, Top Brass Bonanza, was a double for the star in the television show *Wagon Train* (1957-1965) as well as a double in the movie *If a Man Answers* (1962). (At the time, Sunday says she “was just a kid” who got interested in training.) “Boston Terriers are very intelligent,” Sunday says. “I think they’re easy to train.”

Stoyanov concurs, warning, however, that to be successful, you must take the right approach. “Bostons do not do well on slip-chain training collars. They’ll just shut down and won’t want to work,” she says. An owner who takes a positive approach — rewarding good behaviors with food, praise and toys — will get good results and rarely will see the purported stubborn side of the Boston. “They’re happy to do anything for you,” Stoyanov says. The key is keeping things fun and exciting.

The Boston Terrier is also an alert dog who is quick to sound a warning with a rapid series of barks. “They make great watchdogs; they are interested in everything that goes on around them,” Stoyanov says. However, be forewarned that if you actually want strangers to stop at your front door, the Boston Terrier isn’t the dog for you.

It is much more typical for a Boston Terrier to bark until the person crosses the threshold of your home, then show him or her where the jewels are for a cookie and a pat. (OK, there was one story of a Boston Terrier attack. But she was very old and had no teeth, so when she flung herself at visitors, she sort of slid to the floor. The owners laughingly chalked it up to senility.) In fact, this breed might have the corner on the friendly dog market. “The Boston really doesn’t have a bad bone in him,” Stoyanov says. “He does well with children and is patient and tolerant.”

Boston Terriers also are intuitive. “They really seem to know what you are thinking,” Sunday says. “If you’re sad, they will come up to you and give you a soft kiss. If you’re joyful, they’re bouncing around your feet. They’re extremely tuned in to the person.”

Bostons also adapt to virtually any lifestyle, making them a good breed for many owners, whether they’re single and young, married with children, or retired. “They are ideal in any situation,” Stoyanov says. “They can adapt well to the country, an apartment, a large yard, or leashed and walked in the city.”

Finding Goodness

Is the Boston Terrier the dog for you? If you find the breed’s temperament traits appealing and the breed’s challenges few and trivial, there’s a good chance you might have found a match. As with any breed of dog, it is important to remember that within a breed, an individual dog can fall within a much broader range of temperament characteristics. Much of a dog’s temperament is inherited from his parents — perhaps as much as 50 to 60 percent, according to some theories. If you are looking for the classic Boston Terrier temperament — the good-natured, spunky little fireball — find an experienced, reputable breeder or breed rescue that you can trust to help you find that perfect Boston.

Oh, and there’s one more thing. Be sure to ask about that “undercover” thing Bostons do at night. Bostons evidently think that beds were made for them and the only proper place to sleep is under the covers, head on the pillow. On second thought, if you’re planning on getting a Boston, you’ll find out about that one soon enough.