

Boston Terriers

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

By Joan Hustace Walker

The loving, affectionate Boston Terrier is famous for its unabashed adoration of people of all shapes, colors, sizes and ages. However, the Boston Terrier's temperament (and sometimes quirky antics) can not only 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. So, what really 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 profile 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, Oregon, and owner of Sunglo Bostons. But 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 also 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 did reduce the size of the breed, it didn't necessarily reduce certain character traits. "A Boston may only weigh 12 pounds but it thinks it's much bigger," chuckles Sunday, and very often may 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 their temperament. The combination (Bulldog-and-terrier cross) used to create the American Pit Bull Terrier and other fighting breeds, is the same combination that was originally used to develop the Boston Terrier. Does this mean your Boston might be a fightin' machine? Not likely. After all, they've been bred to be parlor dogs for more than 60 years. However, as Hunter notes, Boston Terriers display the entire range of temperaments from mellower or more stubborn Bulldog temperaments to the feistier, more-likely-to-be-dog-aggressive terrier attitude, with most Bostons falling somewhere in the lovable middle. Bostons, as a breed, can have a little more tendency to be snippy, says Hunter, so if you've got young children, she advises to stay as far away as possible from this trait by taking a close look at the temperaments of a puppy's parents.

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

In addition to having a bit of 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 it will keep bringing it back until it drops," says Stoyanov. A hearty round of tug is also a game that Boston Terriers are notorious for trying to entice their owners into. (Have you seen photos of people swinging their Boston Terriers around by a towel that the dog had its teeth clamped onto? Not a great idea for the dog's health or safety, but it gives you an idea of the tenacity with which the Boston wants to play.) Pet owners, therefore, who don't like to be bothered with a dog that wants to play — a lot — would likely be overwhelmed by the Boston Terrier's insistence on interaction.

Because the Boston Terrier adores its people so much, it can also be a difficult dog to kennel or separate from its family for any great period of time. "The Boston Terrier is thrilled to do just about anything [with its owners] except be left home alone," says Susan Hunter, rescue coordinator for the Boston Terrier Club of America (BTCA) in Morgantown, West Virginia. "This is not a good kennel dog. They are not 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 of the family members, adding that 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.

A dog with a high activity level, 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 pet owner 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. It will destroy your home," she laughs. "Your glasses, ink pens, walls — if it can fit into its mouth, it will chew it." And a Boston puppy is quite agile, too, so if it wants something to chew, it will most likely find a way to climb or jump up to get it. "About the time the puppy reaches 2 or 3 years old, it's over that," she says, but in the meantime, it's important to keep a well-stocked inventory of chew toys.