

Cavalier King Charles Spaniel

This super-friendly dog breed will charm your socks off.

Kim Campbell Thornton

When the Cavalier genome is unraveled, scientists will find a gene for lap-sitting. Cavaliers epitomize the term “lap dog” — in a good way. Like furry, heat-seeking missiles, they seek out and establish themselves in any available lap, whether it belongs to their person or to someone they’ve just met. For most Cavaliers, no one is a stranger, simply a new best friend.

Cavaliers possess many attractive qualities, not the least of which is this strong desire to adorn a lap, but the Cavalier is much more than a lap warmer. Cavaliers couple their love for people with a sporting personality that, despite their size, makes them avid birders, hunters and hikers. Just as birdy as larger spaniels, many Cavaliers point and flush instinctively. They’ve been known to squeal with frustration when not allowed to chase pigeons on city streets, and many are superb retrievers. Squirrels, mice, butterflies, bugs — anything moving attracts their attention and activates their prey drive.

Smarty Pants

Like all dogs, Cavaliers display a range of different types of intelligence. The canine Einsteins of the breed learn tricks and cues rapidly, often by watching another dog. More sly Cavs learn to play dumb in a mostly successful ploy to avoid doing anything they don’t want to do. Most, however, are willing to attempt what their people ask, and the breed has a reputation for being easy to train. They’re especially fond of training techniques that involve food.

All Cavaliers are keen observers of the human species, and even subtle hints of food will activate a rapid response that would be the envy of Special Forces teams. My three Cavaliers, upon observing that their people are changing clothes, instantly line up on the sofa in perfect sits, knowing that treats will be doled out on departure. If said departure takes too long, they run back to check on our progress, then race back to the sofa to resume position.

That intelligence and a moderate activity level are gravy on the kibble for most people who fall in love with the breed. They’re first attracted by the breed’s outgoing, people-loving nature. The Cavalier is a Boy Scout among breeds: cheerful, friendly, fearless, happy, trusting, kind and gentle. Shyness and aggression should not exist in the breed, although these traits occasionally surface.

Dogs for Everyone

Cavaliers are suitable for all types of families, says breeder and American Kennel Club Cavalier provisional judge Joanne Nash of Los Altos Hills, Calif. “They can be enthusiastic competitors in conformation; they are steady and willing workers in obedience; and they excel in agility, all the while waving their plumed tails,” Nash says. “Cavaliers often are very intuitive about people and know just how to approach an individual, so they make excellent therapy dogs.” In the show ring, a Cavalier’s natural animation and cheerfulness stands out.

The breed’s temperament, cuteness and personality all factored into Rick and Therese Randazzo’s decision to acquire one. The couple, who live in Long Beach, Calif., says: “We took the time to learn about the Cavalier before we acquired one, and they lived up to all the wonderful things written about them and more. Both Riley and Sherman love everyone, even our cat. They also are inquisitive about new experiences and aren’t afraid to learn something new. They run the spectrum of behavior: wrestling with us, then being cute and snuggly later. It’s the best of both worlds.”

Laura Roth-Shofron of Aliso Viejo, Calif., admits that cuteness played a role in her family's decision to acquire a Cavalier as well as the fact that they get along well with children, even toddlers. Cavaliers are just the right size not to overwhelm a small child and active enough to play fetch or learn tricks with an older child.

Cavaliers can make great companions for senior citizens, too, thanks to their small size, easy-care coat and propensity for lap sitting. The only caveat is to choose a Cavalier with an appropriate temperament. A sweet, placid Cavalier is a better choice for a senior than one who's energetic or hard-headed (yes, stubborn Cavalier King Charles Spaniels do exist).

A senior who's interested in a Cavalier would do well to choose an adult dog whose personality already is established. With a mature dog, what you see is what you get. Cavaliers also tend to be quiet dogs, not prone to excessive barking, so they're a good choice for apartment or condo dwellers.

Cavs and Other Creatures

Cavaliers get along well with other animals, especially if they're exposed to them at an early age. They love other dogs, even big ones, and will confidently walk up to meet them. "The most fun my family has had with Cooper is watching him play with our other dog, Scully," Roth-Shofron says. "Even though Scully is three times Cooper's size, Cooper is constantly trying to grab things out of Scully's mouth. Watching them play is hilarious."

Cats and Cavaliers often live together amiably — or at least respectfully. Once the Cavalier knows the cat is in charge, they often will play chase with each other, then curl up on the same sofa. Cavaliers who aren't familiar with cats as housemates might chase them unless corrected by their owner or the cat, and two or more Cavaliers might gang up on a cat, especially if they come across one outdoors. Take the same precautions you would with any other dog when introducing cats and Cavaliers.

Cavaliers have been known to live peacefully with pet birds, although it takes some training to teach them that the indoor bird is not fair game. Our black-and-tan Cavalier, Twyla, has learned her lesson so well that she rattles on the bird whenever he decides to jump off his cage and walk around. She barks furiously at him, then runs to me with a "someone's doing something wrong" bark until the problem is solved to her satisfaction.

What's best about living with a Cavalier? "Ben and Nellie are loving and great company," says Dario DellaMaggiore of Irvine, Calif. "They add a lot of joy to our house. They like to sit on my lap and be cuddled, something my children have outgrown. They're good company on a walk, too."

Stuck on You

Do all of these kudos mean the Cavalier is the perfect breed for everyone? Not at all! Like any breed, Cavaliers have drawbacks, and what's attractive to one person is a turnoff to another.

Take the breed's desire to be with people all the time. Cavaliers follow their people from room to room, back and forth, upstairs and downstairs. It's like having ladies or gentlemen in waiting and is perhaps a behavioral echo from the toy spaniels who accompanied their royal masters and mistresses long ago. "Cooper lets you know how much he loves you all the time by sitting on your lap, following you everywhere and spooning with you at night," Roth-Shofron says.

A Cavalier owner who's ill or hurt soon discovers why the original toy spaniels were known as comfort dogs. "When my husband had bilateral knee surgery, he had to stay in bed for six weeks, and the dogs stuck completely by his side," says Tamela Klisura of Mission Viejo, Calif. "They were used to going out every day and getting a chance to run in the park, but that seemed to be the least of their worries. They wanted to be there with him."

Nash, once sick with the flu, spent a whole day just sleeping, vaguely aware that her Cavalier, Penny, was on the bed with her. "When I finally awoke, not only was Penny with me, but she had made forays while I was asleep, bringing every dog toy in the house up onto the bed. I guess I wasn't very entertaining, so she made her own fun."

Cavs Need Company

Having a canine shadow doesn't bother everyone, but some people can find it annoying. It also can create a problem if the dog must be left alone frequently. Cavaliers can develop separation anxiety if they don't get the human interaction and attention they crave. Destructive behavior and excessive barking often stem from separation anxiety. Occasionally, the addition of a second dog to the household can help a Cavalier King Charles overcome this problem, but in most instances, only human companionship will do.

Fortunately, Cavaliers are resilient and will almost always continue to love people, even if they haven't had as much human contact as they need. Bentley is living proof of that. His first owners kept him in the garage from the time he was a puppy, rarely spending time with him. Finally they gave him up to a Cavalier rescue group, and he was adopted by Pam Becker of Lake Forest, Calif.

Despite his early lack of socialization, Bentley responded enthusiastically to his new family. "I think many other dogs would never have recovered from those first three years of neglect, but he just wanted to be with us and be petted and loved," Becker says. Bentley adjusted so well that he's now a therapy dog. He still has things to learn, but he settled in quickly to his new home and career.

Cavalier Quirks

Cavaliers like to chase things. This is great if you want a dog who will retrieve tennis balls or flying discs, but it also means that Cavaliers will run right in front of a car in pursuit of a bird or squirrel, and many have done so. Even the best-trained Cavalier never should be let off-leash in an unsecured area. Once they're focused on that object in motion, only the promise of something better — like a steak — will draw them to your side. To lure them with that better option, you have to regain their attention, which isn't easily done.

Cavaliers lick. If you're familiar with canine body language, you know that licking has a variety of meanings. In puppies, it can be a plea for food from their mother, actually stimulating her to regurgitate food for them. Later, it signals friendliness or submission, sending the message, "I'm not a threat."

Licking also signals respect for the leader of the pack: you. Cavaliers want to make extra certain you get the message that they love and respect you. "We call Cooper 'the licky dog,'" Roth-Shofron says. "My kids want to enter him into the Guinness Book of Records for how long Cooper will actually lick you if you let him."

Cavaliers are not watch dogs. Though they might bark to announce a visitor, they are too friendly and too small to provide any kind of protection.

Lizzie, a 212-year-old Blenheim Cavalier owned by Adrienne Escoe of Tustin, Calif., embodies a number of Cavalier traits, good and bad. "She is extremely affectionate and free with kisses," Escoe says. "She wiggles her butt madly from side to side when she meets someone new, and she licks everyone, especially if they have lotion or sweat on their skin."

"She is a doggie of extremes," Escoe continues. "If she is sad or jealous, it shows all over her face. If she is happy, she giggles audibly.

If she sees bird feathers in the grass, she goes nuts, jerking madly from one to another. She becomes a maniac with cars, although she is getting better." When Lizzie sees something she wants, she pulls hard on her leash and barks loudly and constantly, and no treat or verbal correction can bring her back to reality.

The good news for Escoe is that this behavior usually diminishes with maturity. The bad news is that emotional maturity might not come for another couple of years. Cavaliers retain puppylike behaviors well into adulthood and sometimes never entirely give them up. Even the most sedate 9-year-old Cavalier will burst into play suddenly, chasing younger dogs around the dining room table, down the hall and onto the sofa.

Who, Me? Naughty?

The Cavalier's ability to wrap people around his little paw is another issue. Although easy to train, Cavaliers get away with a lot because they're so adorable. It's important to set boundaries and provide consistent obedience training.

"Cavaliers are smart and will use their good looks to manipulate their owners," says Mary-Frances Makichen of Bellingham, Wash., a breeder and dog exhibitor who owns six Cavalier King Charles Spaniels. That's especially true at

mealtime. “Many Cavaliers are overweight because owners find it hard to say ‘no’ to them,” Makichen says, “but when it comes to health, you need to look past those brown eyes and do what’s best for them.”

Cavaliers can be mischievous, and when it comes to food, they have memories like elephants. Our Blenheim Cavalier, Bella, visiting her breeder’s home after a year or so of being away, led the other dogs in a raid into the garage where she knew the treats were kept.

Makichen tells the story of Frankie, whose crate didn’t latch all the way one day. “Frankie got out of her crate, opened the closet door where we keep treats and food, and went in and took just one treat. She took the plastic wrap off of it and was happily seated on the couch eating her treat when we got home,” Makichen says.

Can’t Have Just One

Because the breed is so people-oriented, Cavs are best suited to a home where someone is around most of the day. If that’s not possible, consider acquiring a pair of Cavaliers so they can keep each other company until their laps arrive home from work or school.

It’s difficult to have just one Cavalier. They are so charming that they are like peanuts or potato chips; you’ll want more than one. Raising two puppies together usually isn’t the best idea, Nash says, because it’s so much work, but having one Cavalier and getting another later when the first is past puppyhood frequently occurs.

Cavaliers love children, and unlike most toy breeds, they’re sturdy enough to roughhouse with them. Still, interactions with younger children should be strictly supervised. A Cavalier, like any other dog, needs protection from being dropped, stepped on or teased.

If you choose to acquire a Cavalier, you’ll soon learn that your dog serves as an ambassador for his species. Even people who are fearful of dogs can come to love a Cavalier. Escoe had been fearful of dogs her entire life, but after her divorce, she decided she wanted something warm and fuzzy to snuggle with and to walk with her for exercise.

Escoe researched dog breeds, hoping to find one that wouldn’t dominate an inexperienced, fearful owner. She chose a Cavalier. Now, Escoe says, when she meets people who are afraid of dogs, her Cavaliers, Lizzie and Tinkerbelle, help them overcome their fears.

Loyal, outgoing, sweet and sometimes silly, the best thing about Cavaliers is that it’s easy for them to fulfill their purpose in life. “What I love about living with a Cavalier is that through the centuries they’ve been bred to be companion dogs,” Makichen says. “When Cavaliers are hanging out with their owners, they’re doing what they were bred for, and they’re happy.”