

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 be sure to find a gene for lap-sitting. Cavaliers epitomize the term “lap dog”—in a good way. Like furry, heat-seeking missiles, they search 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 have 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. Members of the breed couple their love of people with a sporting personality that, despite their size, makes them avid birders, hunters and hikers. Many Cavaliers are just as birdy as larger spaniels, and 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 commands rapidly, often just by watching another dog. More sly Cavaliers learn to play dumb in a mostly successful ploy to avoid doing anything they don’t want to do. Most, however, are at least 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 that food will be forthcoming activate a rapid response that would be the envy of Special Forces teams. My three Cavaliers, upon noting 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 is taking too long, they run back to check on its progress, then race back to the sofa to resume position.

That intelligence and a moderate activity level are simply gravy on the kibble, however, 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 are qualities that should be nonexistent in the breed, although these traits are seen occasionally.

Dogs for Everyone

Cavaliers are suitable for families who are novice dog owners or for those with more dog experience, says breeder and American Kennel Club (AKC) Cavalier provisional judge Joanne Nash of Los Altos Hills, California, who has owned Cavaliers for 18 years. “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 are often very intuitive about people and know just how to approach an individual, so they make excellent therapy dogs.” And 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, California, 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 are also 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, California, 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 kids, 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, as well, 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 the one that's energetic or hard-headed (yes, stubborn Cavaliers do exist).

A senior who's interested in a Cavalier would do well to choose an adult dog whose personality is already 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 also 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 will often play chase with each other, then curl up on the same sofa. Cavaliers that aren't familiar with cats as housemates may chase them unless corrected by their owner or the cat, and two or more Cavaliers may 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 even 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 go walking around. She barks furiously at him, then runs to me with a "someone's doing something wrong" bark until the situation is remedied to her satisfaction.

What's best about living with a Cavalier? "Ben and Nellie are loving and great company," says Dario DellaMaggiore of Irvine, California. "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."