

Popular Dogs: Collies

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Nikki Moustaki

Stuck On You

The Collie has long been lodged in America's psyche as a heroine, a loyal guardian and a steadfast friend. Of course, the character of Lassie had a lot to do with that. While Timmy was eating deadly berries, getting stuck on a cliff, sinking in quicksand, getting trapped in a badger hole and being threatened by a bear, Lassie was always there to help (ironically, Timmy never did fall down a well, though how the mischievous boy avoided that, we'll never know). However, as Collie owners will tell you, their dogs can be roguish, fearful and quite sensitive. Not every Collie is Lassie. Here's what some rough- and smooth-coated Collie owners had to say about the breed they love.

Basic Instinct

The Collie is a bundle of instincts, the most powerful of which is herding. This drives Collies to control just about anything they perceive as theirs. But the herding drive does come in handy sometimes. Richard and Rebecca Eikenburg of Georgetown, Texas, have two rescued Collies who one day took it upon themselves to rescue the family cats, which had escaped the house.

"Somehow, the cats had managed to derail the screen door and about six of them were out on the back porch, trying madly to get away from the relentless Collies that were herding them around in a circle, preventing them from escaping," Rebecca Eikenburg says. "I have heard of herding cats, but this was hilarious. The cats were furious and wet with dog slobber, but there was nothing they could do."

Though herding can definitely be a positive aspect of living with a Collie, it does come with the annoying -- and sometimes frightening -- herding nip.

"Collies may nip when trying to get your attention," says Lynn M. Dunlap of Memphis, Tennessee, owner of three Collies. "It's part of the herding instinct in this breed. I have heard people say that they were bitten, but in actuality it was just a herding nip. If young Collies are taught bite inhibition, this nip will not leave a mark. But if you don't teach bite inhibition correctly, it can leave a bruise," Dunlap says.

"Herding can be the last straw for some families, because a Collie will nip at someone's heel as a last resort to get them to stay [wherever the Collie wants them to be]," says Shannon Wersal of Minneapolis, Minnesota. "All families should be aware of this trait before getting a Collie, because it's much better not to get one than to have to give one up," Wersal says.

"I don't think the nipping is as big a deal with Collies than, say, Border Collies. My Collie, Jacques, has only done it once that I am aware of, and that was when my sister was doing Sweatin' to the Oldies with Richard Simmons. He nipped her in the butt, but she deserved it," Wersal jokes.

Herding and nipping aside, Collies are affectionate, trusting, highly loyal, headstrong and adaptable. Even a badly abused rescued Collie will bounce back in a new loving home. This breed loves people, and sees them as partners. They languish when neglected.

"You cannot put a Collie in the backyard and expect it to flourish," Dunlap says. "People seem to think that because Collies were farm dogs, they do well out in a backyard. But you have to remember that when Collies were used as farm dogs, the people were outside most of the time and had a lot of interaction with their dogs."

Mary Depman-Beuchat of Winchester, Indiana, president of Tri State Collie Rescue, says Collies are Velcro dogs that want to be with their humans at all times. "I personally like this, but some people may not," Depman-Beuchat says. "I call walking in my house 'Wading through the Doglantic Ocean.'"

Collies are so sensitive and attuned to their humans, that they may actually become quite distraught when their family is

troubled. "Because the Collie has such a sensitive personality, it does not thrive in stressful environments," says Cathy Schmidt of Woodland Hills, California, owner of Gina, who is the daughter of Lassie VIII.

"Collies feed off their people's emotions," Schmidt adds. "If you are angry or acting unpredictably, the Collie's immediate health can suffer. It's not unusual to see a Collie exhibit signs of an upset digestive system if it's stressed due to uncomfortable circumstances with its owner."

Catherine Lewis of Wichita, Kansas, owner of two Collies, experienced this extreme sensitivity firsthand with her male, Laddie. "Once, I got mad at him for barking, and for the next few days I wondered if he was sick. He was sick -- at heart -- and I had to coax him back to his fun-loving, carefree self. His sensitivity is evident with his love of everything. He even likes and protects our cats," Lewis says.

Because they are so attuned to humans, they seem to almost read minds, or at least body language. Deandra Pitzer of Tucson, Arizona, believes Collies watch the way their owners greet people. "If you welcome someone into your home, the Collie will keep a watchful eye out, but is easy going. When you begin to act defensively, it does, too. Collies are good judges of character," Pitzer says.