

Popular Dogs: German Shepherds

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What are the most important factors potential owners must consider when choosing a German Shepherd puppy? Choosing a puppy isn't something that can be taught, say experienced puppy selectors, and it can't be learned by reading a magazine article, such as this one. It takes a trained eye. To be really good at selecting pups and matching them with owners takes years of experience observing German Shepherd puppies-and observing dogs in general.

In addition, "Some people are better at looking at puppies," says Nancy Hubbell (Kansten German Shepherds), German Shepherd Dog breeder and exhibitor. Some enthusiasts have a knack, a natural gift, for evaluating dogs. "Sometimes it's just a good eye for a dog, to know what is sound structure-sound movement in any breed of dog. Because they all have to have soundness, balance and coordination," Hubbell says.

What if you're new to the process of choosing a German Shepherd pup or don't have that natural eye? Find a mentor. Ask an experienced breeder or GSD enthusiast for help. Otherwise, says Hubbell, "If you don't know yourself, then you get an emotional attachment: 'Oh, I like this one's eyes, isn't he sweet.' That kind of thing. You're not looking at the total dog or the bloodlines or the pedigree. A lot of people need help. I know people that have been in the breed a long time and they still need help seeing what that puppy has to offer."

Experience and a trained eye are essential to puppy selection, but so is commitment, says Gloria F. Birch (Covy-Tucker Hill Kennels), breeder, handler, and AKC judge. Potential owners must be willing to give the puppy the time and attention it deserves. "The most important factor is to ask yourself if you have the time and love to develop a puppy's personality, and teach it to be a manageable good citizen.

"The German Shepherd is one of the most intelligent breeds of dog, and it needs structure, someone to love, companionship and a purpose in life," Birch continues. "An owner needs assurance to develop their pup's natural instincts; for instance, to protect, play, herd and guide. The most important is patience with yourself as you train or teach the many things as your adorable new puppy learns to become the well-adjusted loving, protective adult."

When it comes to choosing pups, the bottom line for Frederick Migliore, breeder, AKC judge and GSD fancier, is temperament. "It's probably the most important factor," he says. "You want a pup that obviously shows good temperament."

In fact, character is a hallmark of the breed, say some enthusiasts. According to the AKC breed standard, the GSD should have a distinct personality marked by direct and fearless, but not hostile expression, self-confidence and an aloofness that does not lend itself to immediate and indiscriminate friendships. A GSD is approachable, quietly standing its ground and showing confidence and willingness to meet overtures without itself making them. A lack of confidence in any surroundings is not typical of good character.

Why is temperament so important to Migliore? It makes a dog compatible, livable, no matter what you plan to do with it. Migliore gives the example of picking a potential champion. The odds are very slim, he says, of the puppy you choose becoming a star. Buying a quality pup from a quality litter from a reputable breeder, with at least one champion parent, helps cut the odds. But it's never a guarantee. There are only so many champions born in a year, if at all. So, says Migliore, "If this puppy doesn't work out, and it's not a show quality puppy, you'll probably fall in love with it and not want to give it back. You better hope it has a nice temperament so it's pleasant to live with."

Tedi Ginsburg (Asgard German Shepherds), breeder, AKC judge and exhibitor, agrees that temperament is important, but adds to the list, "Overall health and soundness. And soundness is temperament as well as structure."

Expectations

What are your expectations or purpose for your German Shepherd puppy? How might those expectations affect your puppy choice, if at all? Do you want a companion? Are you picking a pup to show in conformation? Do you want a dog to

herd or compete in agility?

Following answers to these questions, it's a gray area. Some enthusiasts believe purpose affects choice, others don't, some say it falls somewhere in-between. Ginsburg is one enthusiast who doesn't give a lot of weight to expectations in puppy choice. "A German Shepherd is supposed to be versatile," she says. "It shouldn't really make a great deal of difference. If a dog is sound, it can do all those things."

For Hubbell, whose current main interest is conformation showing, purpose can have its place. "Well, it would affect my choice of pup," she says, noting that if she is evaluating a pup for conformation show qualities, she's looking for specific qualities such as structure, character and motion.

"I think it's best to let the breeder know what your main interest is," says Hubbell. "And, sometimes they will have a dog suited for that purpose, and sometimes they won't. And, if not, hopefully, they can refer you to someone who may have something. I think the breeder needs to be able to evaluate their own dogs, what they have to offer, and I think the pet buyer needs to know what they're looking for. If they can't evaluate the puppy, get the advice of someone who is in the field in which they're interested."

According to the AKC breed standard, the GSD is both fit and willing to serve in its capacity as companion, watchdog, blind leader, herding dog or guardian, whatever the circumstances demand. However, some enthusiasts and trainers say that due to their individual personalities, some German Shepherds activities might be better suited to certain dogs. That's not to say the breed isn't versatile, but a dog with a lackadaisical attitude, for example, may not have the drive and showmanship necessary to shine in the show ring. Nevertheless, it is still a German Shepherd, but perhaps best suited as a companion.

Birch acknowledges these individual differences. "The German Shepherd has instinct, and that sense will guide them into becoming who they are. This sense attracts them into playing ball, loving water, being a devoted protective guardian, a gatherer or the animated, rare top show dog. Whatever the talent, it needs development. Trying to make a dog be or do something it has no interest in, or sense for, can be frustrating to the dog and the owner.

"It is such a part of the breeder's job to have enough knowledge about their dogs and puppies to manifest the perfect match between owner and dog," Birch emphasizes. "All dogs are not show dogs, or working dogs, but every dog has a purpose. It is up to the breeder to help make the new buyer's dream come true, and find the right place for every puppy they produce."