

Owning Papillon Dogs

Papillon owners share what it's like to live with these spirited, smart dogs.

By Deborah Wood

Janis McLaren will never forget the first day she met a Papillon. "This delicate dog came up to me, reached out and put her paw on my leg. It was like being touched by a butterfly," she remembers. Today, McLaren has a small but successful show-dog kennel in Camas, Washington. She's surrounded by a little pack of butterflies that continue to enchant her every day.

As the breed has catapulted from obscurity to popularity since the mid-1990s, a lot of people are experiencing the magic of being touched by a butterfly dog. It's easy to be charmed. A Papillon in the right home is a joyful, happy little sprite that seems to have almost-human intelligence and even ESP with its owner.

Still, those of us who love the breed will be the first to say that a Papillon isn't the dog for everyone. They can be too busy, energetic and demanding for many people. Their sensitive nature can sometimes lead to shyness. To make it more complicated, there's such a wide array of Papillon personalities, sizes and physical needs. One particular Pap might be your dream dog; another could be a terrible mistake.

Here are some things to think about before you decide to bring a Papillon into your home.

Busy Butterflies

Paps have been some of the top dogs of all time in the physically and mentally demanding sports of agility and obedience. Papillons have been trained as clever service dogs that help their disabled owners make beds, get dressed and retrieve out-of-reach items. Tiny Papillon noses are aces at tracking scents across tough terrain.

Think about what a dog needs to be able to do all those jobs well: energy. Lots of energy. It's not a coincidence that Papillons often have action names, such as Tigger, Bounce, Bungee, Pogo, Turbo, Speedy and Flyer. "We all know that Papillons are smart and we applaud that as one of their best features. But if these dogs don't get mental and physical stimulation from their owners, they will find it for themselves," says Tracy Halverson Burdick of Denver, Colorado, who's bred or owned more than 150 Champion Papillons and some of the top obedience and agility competitors in the breed.

How much exercise can one small dog need? Take, for example, a woman who was enrolled in one of my obedience classes with a 10-month-old rescue Papillon. Every week, she took her dog for a 6-mile hike before coming to class, just to work off enough energy so the dog could concentrate on the lesson.

Although this dog is certainly more energetic than most, there is no typical Papillon energy level. "There is a range of activity levels in the breed," McLaren says. "I've had dogs that need full-time jobs like a Border Collie, to dogs that just want to lie on the couch."

Most Papillons can have their energy needs met by chasing a ball across a room, or going for a brisk walk or two a day. Still, some need an hour or more of daily exercise to be content.

On the other end of the spectrum are fairly low-energy Paps, although they're much more rare than high-energy dogs. If you're looking at the breed because you want an agility competitor or a hiking partner, you'll likely be disappointed if you end up with a dog that prefers to be king or queen of the couch.

Surprisingly for a lap-sized dog, most Papillons don't really want to sit on your lap. They are universally devoted to their owners, following them around from room to room. They'll stare at you adoringly, but most seem to prefer to sit and look at you for hours at a time—without snuggling. If having a cuddler matters to you, the Papillon might not be the dog for you.

Thinking Papillons

Papillons plot and plan to get what they want. If another dog has a toy that a Papillon wants, your Pap may run to the door and bark wildly. The other dog invariably drops the toy to see who's at the door — while the Papillon turns and grabs the prize.

Papillons have been known to fool even their humans. I'm one of them. One day I was visiting a friend who also has Papillons. Our dogs had spent a happy afternoon playing in her huge fenced yard. When it grew dark, we all went inside for dinner. After about 15 minutes, my dog Radar went to the sliding-glass door, scratched it, wiggled and moaned — his signal that it was a potty emergency. He was telling me he had to go out to potty now.

"We were just outside," I said to him.

Radar moaned and scratched.

"Are you sure?" More moaning, scratching and an extra wiggle.

I opened the door to let him out, and Radar responded with a chortle of joy. Right in front of him on the dark porch was my friend's cat, and Radar led the rest of the dogs on a merry chase of the kitty.

Radar had lied.

A Papillon's intelligence can be either an asset or a liability, depending on the household. "There couldn't be a more intelligent — even human-like — companion. People end up with an animal that's almost like a real child, and that isn't an easy thing when you already have three kids. That's what you get — another child with four legs," says Burdick, who has fostered 50 rescue dogs over the years in addition to caring for her own.