

Rottweilers

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Virginia Parker Guidry

Strong, handsome and powerful, the adult Rottweiler stands out in a crowd. Its distinct, self-assured presence is evident to onlookers, regardless of their familiarity with the breed. As puppies, however, this awesome breed is round, fuzzy and reminiscent of a little bear. This look, combined with their puppyish antics, make them incredibly endearing—perhaps to a fault, for who can resist a cute, bear-like creature?

Choosing a Rottweiler pup, however, is a much more involved process than simply giving into temptation. It's a process that requires critical thinking and careful evaluation. Following are a few thoughts and ideas from breed enthusiasts to help you do just that.

Know the Breed

Before ever choosing a pup from a litter, think carefully about the breed. "First read as much as [you] can about the breed," says Mary Ann Schneider, breeder and enthusiast. "I don't think the Rottweiler is for everyone."

Most important to consider is its temperament. Rottweilers have been described by those who have built strong ties with the breed as loving, comical, bright and loyal. In addition, the breed is strong-willed and determined.

A Rottweiler requires an owner who can successfully win its heart and establish a position as pack leader.

Another important consideration is the size of the typical adult Rottweiler, says Catherine Thompson, Rottweiler breeder and American Kennel Club judge. "Decide if you have time for a dog of this size and stature, and can take on the responsibility for a dog of this size and stature," Thompson says, warning that the Rottweiler is not simply a big black and tan Labrador Retriever. "This is something that's going to live with your family for 10 years and has the potential for being able to eat the neighbor's kids," she says.

"Put in as much time picking out a puppy and learning about the breed as buying a television set," Thompson emphasizes. "This is essential for all breeds but especially true for ours because they're big and they're scary, and they scare the neighbors. And [those unfamiliar with Rottweilers] really need to know as much as possible about what they're getting into so there aren't any big surprises."

While learning about the breed, you must decide whether you like it well enough to take on the responsibility of caring for a Rottweiler in your own home. An essential part of that responsibility, says breeder Jane Justice, is ongoing obedience training beginning at about 12 weeks of age. "I believe, being a working dog, they need a job," Justice says. "They need to work for you."

Continued obedience training, in conjunction with clearly established house rules, remind the Rottweiler that the owner is the leader. "If a person doesn't have that type of commitment in mind, I think they should go get another breed," Justice says.

Obedience training is especially important because of the Rottweiler's large size, willful personality and damaged reputation. Left to its own devices, the strong-minded Rottweiler is likely to find trouble, often without even looking for it.

Temperament

When choosing a pup, it's essential to consider temperament and behavior, which are generally influenced by genetics, socialization, training and lifelong discipline. "Temperament probably is the most important because that's what makes a dog livable," Thompson says. "And then it's nice if they're healthy enough to give you 10 years of happiness and service."

The ideal Rottweiler temperament, according to the AKC breed standard, is a calm, confident, courageous dog that is self-assured and somewhat aloof. The Rottweiler does not make immediate and indiscriminate friendships; it waits quietly and takes a wait-and-see attitude toward influences in its environment. It is naturally protective of home and family and wary of those other than family members.

Unfortunately, the increased popularity of the breed has given rise to problems such as bad breeding practices, lack of socialization and inexperienced owners, all of which can lead to behavior problems or bad temperament. "Mental and physical soundness kind of go hand in hand," Thompson says. "People can fall in love with homely dogs as well as they can with beautiful dogs. But if they can't be lived with, it's not going to do the people any good."

How do you know which pups will grow up mentally sound, with a temperament compatible with the AKC standard? Many breeders such as Justice find tests helpful in determining a pup's general character; its level of dominance; its acceptance of training; its willingness to retrieve; whether it is outgoing or introverted; or if it is people-oriented. "You can tell a lot about the puppy's general personality at 7 weeks," Justice says. "It's not 100 percent, but I like it as a tool."

Testing methods vary among canine professionals, and there's no standard test, no standard name and no consensus about what temperament testing is or should be, whether it's accurate and useful, or who should administer the testing. Many breeders use temperament, or puppy aptitude, tests, which were first used by early guide dog trainers to predict the pups most suitable for service. Others eschew tests in favor of their long-time experience in raising and handling litters. After daily interactions and observations, a breeder can tell which pup is dominant and which is shy.

Prospective owners should ask the breeder about each pup's temperament and ask to see the parents. If present, both should appear approachable, sane and friendly. Be wary of big male Rottweilers chained to trees, Thompson says. "If he's kind of a jerk, maybe his kids are going to be jerks," she says. "Is that what you want to take home?"