

Popular Dogs: West Highland White Terriers

This little dog lives life to the max and at full throttle!

By Deb Duncan

Many breeds are known for their attitude. Westies are known for their indomitable Westitude! For years, Westies were introduced at the Westminster Kennel Club dog show with a perfect description: "The Westie is possessed of no small amount of self-esteem, and the Westie will not tolerate being ignored."

Once you have been owned by a Westie, there is no other breed that can touch you in quite the way a Westie does. For all the reasons that Westies are not right for everyone, these are precisely the reasons they are the breed of my heart.

In the last two decades, I have lived with and loved a German Shepherd Dog, a Golden Retriever, a Chow-Keeshond rescue mix and three Westies. As much as I love all dogs of all different breeds, Westies are different. I suppose this is because my personality more closely associates with the terrier persona. There is a reason for the age-old saying "tenacious like a terrier."

I wasn't prepared to be a Westie owner when I got Beowulf, but he has taught me more about dogs and life than any other dog I have owned. Beowulf has opened my life to competing with dogs by earning 10 titles and awards. My other Westie, Treasure, has earned 23 American Kennel Club titles, four non-AKC titles and numerous awards.

Anne Sanders, president of the West Highland White Terrier Club of America, has bred, shown and trained her Westies in all areas of competition for more than 30 years. "Many people are attracted to the Westie because of his cute, stuffed-toy appearance in pictures or at dog shows," Sanders says. "This appearance is not the way he looks in everyday life and belies the Westie's strong and independent nature."

Disarmingly Cute

The Westie is a big dog in a small package with exceptional intelligence and energy. You must provide outlets for your Westie's physical and mental energies, or he will find his own. Whether it is going for a walk or throwing a ball, do something to expend your Westie's energies. If you don't engage him in some activity, your Westie will try to get interaction from you.

Westies will not tolerate being ignored. If your dog appears to have given up, be very concerned. This means he has found some alternative activity to engage in that allows him to use his mind and body. This might be interacting with your expensive tennis shoes or your Persian rug.

Westies have a built-in cute button with volume control. They will shamelessly turn up the cute volume until you are totally at their mercy. Just try eating a meal, reading a book or talking on the phone when you have not given your Westie his quota of attention. You'll quickly learn your Westie's variety of pleading intonations exceed anything you ever imagined.

Westies also have refined a poor-pitiful mode, which includes heavy sighs, little whines, down-trodden posturing and pleading stares. Believe me; you will quickly be rendered helpless to resist their desires.

Beth Widdows of Troy, Mich., knows firsthand how Westies can work their wiles. "I have an agility teeter-totter in my living room so we can practice during the winter months," she says. "My dogs, Molly and Glennie, know that training on their teeter gets them treats, and they use this to their advantage."

Lapdogs ... Not!

Sitting still does not compute for Westies. Their mental and physical energies require them to do something. Westies have a high-please mode and will try to accommodate your wishes by giving you their version of a lapdog. If you're lucky, your Westie might manage to lie patiently in your lap for five minutes. Then, he will jump down and demand some activity. After all, he played lapdog, and you should reward him by doing something with him!

Occasionally, your Westie will take possession of your lap on his own accord when it serves a higher purpose. Some examples are when you are eating a snack, when he wants to display ownership of your lap to another dog, or if you are trying to read or work on the computer and are ignoring him. Like I said, Westies are shameless! Unfortunately, their antics almost always work.

Macho Westies

Don't let a Westie's small size and cute appearance fool you. Westies are physically stronger than their size indicates, including their jaws. This, coupled with their big-dog persona and high self-esteem, makes the Westie more formidable than most people expect. Westies prefer to play with large dog toys that are worthy of their Westitude.

As a dog behaviorist, I often am contacted by Westie owners, and it is just as likely to be the husband as the wife. The husband will relate that he really didn't want to get a Westie, but his wife was taken with the cute, little white dog. Now the Westie is the husband's dog! Many wives contact me asking how to get their Westies to relate and bond with them like they have with their husbands.

I Am Westie, Hear Me Roar

Some owners are unprepared for the Westie's big-dog vocalizations. Terriers have large and intimidating voices, which are designed to convince larger dogs, animals and predators that they are fierce and a force to be reckoned with. Even their puppy play growls can sound fierce to the untrained ear.

Inexperienced Westie owners frequently contact me in despair, because their 10- to 12-week-old puppies make growling sounds that are fierce and vicious-sounding. I have to explain about the Westie's big-dog sounds so they are able to understand that their Westie puppy's scary play sounds are quite normal.

Last year, one of my friends (who has owned and competed with large-breed dogs for many years) called me after seeing a litter of 5-week-old terrier pups. She was quite concerned because she had never seen a litter of pups so aggressive and fierce. I asked if this was the first litter of terrier pups she had ever seen. We often are alarmed when what we see (a little white dog) doesn't match what we hear (fierce-sounding growls), yet this is the nature of life with a Westie.

In addition to their scary play sounds, Westies are talkers with highly developed vocabularies. Expect your Westie to talk — often to distraction. You might be in the middle of an important phone call when your Westie decides your time would be better spent interacting with him. Westies will not tolerate being ignored.

Who's the Boss?

Dominant by nature, Westies expect to be in charge. This is true in both your relationship with your Westie and his relationships with other dogs. When you see a group of roaming dogs, most often it includes several large dogs and one small dog, who is usually a terrier or terrier mix. The small dog is almost always the pack leader, and when you have a Westie in a multiple-dog house, the Westie will rule.

Laura Stafford of Freedom, Wis., has owned Westies since childhood. "I like to tell people that Westies are little

dogs who are big in their own minds," she says. "Keltie, my Westie, has grown up with two Rottweilers. Keltie has no problem keeping my large male Rottie in line. However, Keltie has not managed to convince my female Rottie that he is her boss."

Westies also believe they should rule over you, so if you are not a strong, responsible and consistent leader, your Westie instinctually will assume that role. This means you must control all members of your pack, be it one dog or five.

Westies heartily embrace the sentiment "give me an inch and I will take a mile." If you are not consistent as their leader or if you give in to their cute button, their poor-pitiful mode or their wily ways at the expense of appropriate pack rules, Westies will usurp your alpha status. Their Westitude interprets this as you acknowledging the position they believe to be rightly theirs.

When a Westie assumes the alpha position over his owner, he communicates and reinforces his alpha status in precisely the same Westie speak he uses on other dogs. This can include humping your leg, forceful growling and snarling, and disciplining you for inappropriate pack behavior. To Westies, humans are dogs, albeit really strange-looking and -sounding ones.

Stay One Paw Ahead

An effective pack leader rules with understanding, patience and respect — not by being harsh or overbearing. This means being consistent, firm and stern (within reason) when requiring your Westie to abide by your pack rules. Inconsistency creates confusion and gives mixed pecking-order signals. This can invite your Westie to challenge you for pack leader status.

Westies do not respond well to harsh verbal or physical discipline. They are exceedingly fair-minded and expect and deserve no less from you. If you use force or harsh methods when dealing with a Westie, he might shut down or rebel against this form of treatment.

Westies aren't stubborn or willful; they want to please. However, they are so intelligent that they can determine it's in their best interest to do nothing rather than risk being disciplined for something they obviously don't understand. Their intelligence causes them to bore easily. When bored, Westies might offer new or different behaviors to make things more interesting.

For example, if you play a game with your Westie and he usually sits for you to throw his toy, he suddenly might start lying down instead of sitting. If he places the ball or toy in your hand, he might place it on the ground between you and him. Then, when you reach for the toy, he'll grab it and take off running with it. If he brings the toy to you, he might set it just out of your reach and then stand there and bark at you.

Basically, he is trying to teach you a new game because the old game became boring. Variety is the spice of life, especially for a Westie.

Westies are easy to train when the training is fun and interesting. If you want focus, attentiveness and responsiveness from your Westie, you have to be more intriguing than anything else. Whatever you teach him must be clear and have a purpose. Food rewards provide overriding purpose to almost any activity.

Westies are creative and ingenious in getting their way, and they can train their humans faster and more proficiently than we can train them. Nancy Staab of Gaelforce Westies in Saint Albans, W.V., has owned Westies for 22 years. "One evening, while I was watching a movie, my mother was on the sofa, deeply engrossed in a mystery novel," Staab says. "Trapper, my male Westie and No. 1 trainer of humans, was lying beside her with a toy and knocked it off the couch.

"He looked at his toy, then to my mother and back to his toy," Staab continues. "Trapper gave my mother a paw to get her attention. She noticed his toy was on the floor and retrieved it for Trapper, who was still on the sofa. You could almost hear the gears turning in Trapper's brain and see his sly, cute little Westie grin. Within a moment, the toy was back on the

floor and the previous scenario repeated. Keep in mind that my mother was really into her novel, but Trapper managed to get her to retrieve his toy repeatedly for the next 45 minutes. I finally explained to my mother that Trapper had just successfully trained her to fetch!"

Great White Hunters

Westies have remained strongly connected with their most basic instincts — hunting large and small vermin, despite their diminutive size. In critter mode, Westies are incapable of hearing human words or cues. When Westies don't respond, they are not ignoring you; they just cannot respond to anything but their overwhelming critter instincts. You have to understand, expect and be prepared to live with behaviors that are closely related to their instincts. Westies are instinctually diggers and barkers. They can excavate a yard and bark until they are hoarse.

Your Westie can be lying quietly on the back of your couch, looking out the window, when a squirrel suddenly will appear in the yard. Your Westie instantly will switch to critter mode, emit an ear-splitting screech or shriek, run around and bark frantically. Westie owners know when their Westie is signaling a person, the trash truck or even another dog, versus when they are signaling a critter. The sounds are distinctly different.

It's impossible to predetermine if a particular Westie can handle living with a cat or other animal that he might perceive as prey. No dog should roam off-leash in an unsecured environment, regardless of how obedient or well trained he is. Should a squirrel dart out, your obedient Westie will chase it. If a loose dog communicates a threat or challenge, your Westie will be compelled to respond. It's never worth the risk. You can modify your Westie's instinctual behaviors within reason. The key here is "within reason."

Realize that you cannot totally prevent your Westie's instinctual behaviors, nor should you want to. Even if it were possible to shut down his strong instinctual drive and behaviors, your Westie would be less than he was meant to be. Yelling or reacting in an overexcited manner increases your Westie's highly adrenalized state. You do not want to infuse these behaviors; rather, you need to diffuse your dog's emotional state. If you cannot accept these behaviors and are not willing or capable of a proper behavior-modification program, then a Westie is not for you.

Owning a Westie is not a task to be undertaken lightly. Do your research. Make sure a Westie is right for you and you are right for a Westie. Become informed and knowledgeable, and have your game plan in place. Provide your Westie with appropriate mental and physical stimulation and outlets. Obedience classes are definitely in order. Make certain the training methods are positive and motivational, and do not include harsh corrections. Consider activities, such as agility, earthdog and tracking.

If you are prepared for Westitude, full throttle, your life will be enriched and enlivened in more ways and on a deeper level than mere words can express. Life does not get any better than living with and being loved by a Westie.