

Rat Terrier

Wanted: small to medium-sized dog that loves to think big. Like to chase vermin is considered a plus!

By Susan McCullough

Some breeds' resumes convey misleading information about the dogs they denote. For example, although the Boston Terrier was indeed developed in Boston, it is not a terrier. And while the Australian Shepherd certainly is a herding breed, its roots are not in Australia, but in the Pyrenees Mountains that lie on the border between France and Spain. But as Monte Wolverton of Westlake Village, California, discovered, the Rat Terrier's name suits this breed perfectly.

"A number of years ago the Rat Terrier Club of America held a play day at a farm in Northern California, but the night before was the real highlight of the event," recalls Wolverton, who is now the club president. "Well after sundown, several club members took their RTs to a barn, turned on the lights and let the dogs go. Bedlam ensued. Horses freaked. Rats and dogs ran helter-skelter, through hay lofts, tack rooms and stalls. Within minutes, nearly every rat in the barn had been exterminated."

But there's much more to the Rat Terrier than his ability to eliminate unwanted rodents. RT devotees don't hesitate to wax eloquent on the many joys and occasional frustrations of living with this breed.

References Upon Request

Eve Adamson of Iowa City, Iowa, says that her Rat Terrier, Sally, is "the most obedient, sensitive, intuitive dog I have ever known. She really seems to understand what I say to her."

Adamson recalls an incident in which Sally's sensitivity helped the dog to alleviate her separation anxiety. "I travel for business, and my mother would come over and stay at my house. But Sally wouldn't eat and was clearly unhappy. Finally, the night before I left on a trip, I told Sally that she needed to take care of my mom and the house. Sally cocked her head as though she was really listening, then walked away to lie down. Later, when I got back from the trip, my mom told me that Sally ate well and was fine the whole time I was gone."

Another time, Adamson asked for Sally's help in caring for her other dog, Jack, an RT/Pomeranian mix. Sally had been jumping over the fence in Adamson's yard and moseying on down to the end of the cul-de-sac where Adamson and her family live. But when Jack contracted glaucoma and began to lose his vision, he became dependent on Sally to guide him through the house. "I told Sally that 'Jack needs you to take care of him, so you can't jump the fence anymore,'" Adamson recalls. "She hasn't since."

Employment Strategies

Many RT devotees also testify to the breed's ability to strategize. "Our youngest RT, Meg, is a clever dog who employs chicanery and manipulation to get her way," Wolverton explains. "If Kirby [Wolverton's other RT] is chewing on a toy she wants, we have seen her run outside and create a distraction by barking. When Kirby goes outside to investigate, Meg runs back in and snatches the toy. The first time we saw this, we thought it was a coincidence. By the 10th time, we had to admit that Meg could hold her own [with politicians] in Washington, D.C."

Career Accomplishments

The Rat Terrier also is known for his courage, although at times that courage takes some interesting forms. Melinda Sowash, an RT owner from Pahump, Nevada, cites her very first Rat Terrier, a fearless dog named Tipper. "I also had a male Australian Shepherd with a long tail named Jesse," Sowash says. "When Tipper was a puppy she would grab Jesse's tail, and as he would spin to see what the heck was on his tail, Tipper would be sailing around, hanging on like a twirlybird."

In any case, "Rat Terriers are like a big dog in a small-dog body," says breeder Valerie Luchsinger of Johnstown, Ohio. "Once mature, they will sometimes forget they are a small dog and may try to ward off a large-breed dog without concern for their own well-being. Depending on the nature of the large dog, this trait can prove dangerous to the Rat Terrier."

Amazingly, though, this courageous breed is relatively mellow. "Rat Terriers have many of the fine aptitudes of Jack

Russells but with a calmer temperament," Wolverton says.

Adamson agrees: "People assume that Rat Terriers are JRTs, but they couldn't be more different. They're much less stubborn and hyperactive."

Unhirable Offenses?

Alas, no breed is perfect, not even the Rat Terrier. The breed's most passionate fans acknowledge that living with an RT can be challenging.

Among the biggest challenges facing some Rat Terrier owners is their dogs' amazing jumping abilities. "The one thing I could do without is that they love to jump up and down like pogo sticks," Sowash admits.

Before Adamson's Sally retired from jumping, the Rattie demonstrated a noteworthy talent for lifting herself off the ground. "She could leap over a 4-foot-high chain-link fence."

Fences, in fact, seem to be obstacles that many self-respecting RT's feel compelled to conquer - either over the top or underneath. "Rat Terriers have a tendency to dig," Luchsinger says. "Some will dig their way under a fence to go rodent hunting if left unsupervised."

The Rat Terrier's ability to be independent of human supervision manifests itself beyond conquering human-erected fences - the breed can be stubborn.

Finally, the Rat Terrier's coat makes this breed a bit of a liability for any person who likes to wear light-colored clothing or place pale slipcovers on her furniture. That's because "they shed a lot of little spiky hair, like little needle hairs," Adamson says. "And the only way to get the hairs up is to pick them off individually."

Despite those minor flaws, there's clearly much to love about the Rat Terrier. If you want a small dog with a big personality, considerable courage, awesome ingenuity, almost eerie sensitivity and a loving heart, look no further than your nearest RT.