

## The Nature of Dogs

### How a jumble of impulses and instincts influence your dog's personality.

*Denise Flaim*

Consider the Basset Hound, developed as a canine bulldozer that charged through underbrush in pursuit of rabbits and other game. Bred to follow a scent without heeding his handler, a Basset on the trail will ignore anything — even an oncoming car. His nose simply takes precedence over everything else, Orlandi explains.

#### Dogs Are Individuals

There is a danger, however, in investing too deeply in the gravitational pull of genetics. "I hear owners say, 'Well, all Airedales are stubborn,' so they don't even try to train their dogs," Arden says. It does a great disservice to the dog, and ensures that breed stereotypes become self-fulfilling prophecies.

A more constructive approach, Arden says, is to work with a breed's instinctive urges, not against them. Discover what motivates the dog, such as a game of fetch with a Labrador Retriever or chasing a laser-light for a high-energy German Shepherd Dog.

Reflexive behaviors cannot be erased, but they can often be replaced. "My dog is a good example — she has that Westie circle down pat," Arden says. "I taught her to do a sit instead. The circling will always be there, but it's controlled dramatically." Similarly, a herding-obsessed Border Collie who impatiently nips at the heels of his humans (the way it would an errant sheep) can be taught to pick up an object, such as a toy or ball, instead.

"The bottom line is a breed's original function will determine its form, instincts and behavior," Orlandi says. Listen carefully to reputable breeders and follow their recommendations. These are usually based on years of experience.

Such breeders will also recognize that every puppy exists on a continuum in the breed, with some displaying more of these hardwired behaviors than others. One example, Crockford says, is the Border Collies' use of giving eye, or staring down livestock in order to move them. "They say that a Border Collie who doesn't display the eye before six months or so is worthless as a herding dog," she says. "But it might be a good fit in a household seeking an interactive, but not totally intense, family pet."

#### What About a Mutt?

Awareness of innate behavior doesn't just apply to those looking for a purebred puppy. Mixed breeds can also inherit the natures of one or both parents: A Lab-Rottweiler mix might grow up to be a water-loving goofball with a protective streak. Know the tendencies of both breeds, and look to see if they surface in an individual puppy.

In the end, the most important thing to remember is regardless of how attractive a dog appears on the outside, beauty is as beauty does, Arden says. "We all want our dogs to fulfill an aesthetic component, whether they're classically beautiful or so ugly they're cute," she says. "But you need to think carefully about what specific behaviors may make you happy or unhappy. For the next 15 years, do you like a dog that just hangs out, or one that's go-go-go?"

Looking beyond the packaging, to the jumble of impulses and instincts and historical purpose within, will give you the answer.