

## The Nature of Dogs

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

*Denise Flaim*

The group of dog trainers was gathered for dinner at a Japanese restaurant in Manhattan when someone suggested they play a canine version of Jeopardy!: Describe a certain dog breed by how it acts in obedience class, and see how many of the canine professionals at the table can identify it.

"Circles a lot and tends to compulsively bark," offered one diner as her California roll arrived.

"What is a Westie?" shouted her chop-stick-wielding peers in unison.

True, such descriptions are generalizations, but like most stereotypes, they have more than a toehold in reality. It would be silly to say there's no truth to them because we've bred these dogs to do specific jobs, says dog trainer Andrea Arden of New York City, owner of a West Highland White Terrier mix.

#### Bred to Work

Long before humans valued dogs as simply companions, they were our four-legged co-workers. Order-obsessed herding dogs kept livestock from straying; wary guarding breeds eyed the suspicious stranger; and spunky terriers, such as the Westie, followed vermin underground, barking profusely all the while.

"Many of the traits that make dogs useful — such as herding, pointing, digging and running — are indeed hard-wired," says Susan Crockford, a professor of anthropology at the University of Victoria in British Columbia. In other words, it wasn't enough to nurture the pointing reflex in a pointer or the protective instinct in a mastiff: Early breeders bred very selectively to isolate and reinforce those traits so they would be passed to subsequent generations.

So, even though today many breeds have retired from their original roles, those ancient instincts still surface with regularity.

Owners complain about Australian Shepherds that herd cocktail-party guests by patrolling the perimeter of the living room, or Greyhounds that chase a piece of paper blowing in the wind, or Golden Retrievers that incessantly retrieve and deposit tennis balls at their owners' feet. These programmed behaviors are as much the essence of a breed as the spots on a Dalmatian or the mahogany coat of an Irish Setter — and just as non-negotiable.

"The instinctive tendencies that reflect a breed's original purpose are an integral part of a dog's character, and need to be carefully considered by prospective new owners," warns Claudia Orlandi, a long-time breeder of Basset Hounds. "For people who think they can break their new dog of these tendencies, the result may be tragic."