

## *Is this breed dumb?*

**By Karen Peak**

### **West Wind Dog Training**

"What is the smartest breed and what is the dumbest?" A question I hear frequently. And what a loaded one it is! With hundreds of breeds recognized in various kennel clubs worldwide and even more crosses, volumes could be written on this subject alone! A book that came out a few years ago gauged the intelligence of various breeds.

Personally, I feel the book is biased towards those breeds seen most often in Obedience trials. My opinion is that no breed is dumb – they were all bred for various things. Since there are so many breeds and crosses, I will concentrate on the main groups seen in the US: Sporting, Non-Sporting, Terriers, Toys, Working, Herding and Hounds. I will then discuss crosses.

"My dog is a total moron!" How many times does this get repeated? Well, I feel that NO dog is a total moron. When I hear wails of this the first thing I think is that the owner is not working properly with the dog. The second thing I think is that the match between owner and breed is not the best. Any dog can be trained. Much of training is based on the consistency and effort the owner puts into the dog. A single series of obedience classes does not a trained dog make by any means. Also, training should begin when the dog is a puppy, if possible. Allowing a pup to get away with mischief can make training tougher down the road. Socializing is also very important in working with dogs. And finally, the proper breed or cross for you. Dogs were bred for many purposes. The groupings you see at dog shows take dogs with similar purposes and place them under that heading.

Now, before I continue, I just want to note that when you research breeds in books and such, what you will be getting is a general overview of the breed. This is what you can expect from the breed as a whole: high energy; laid back; needs to work; couch potato; etc. However, individual dogs within the breed may vary greatly in temperament and attitude. For example, I know a person who will never own an Old English Sheepdog since the only one she ever knew was nasty. This is NOT true of the breed. They need an experienced owner, but are not nasty dogs. I know of one Lab that is a total couch potato and hates to work. This is far from normal for the breed, yet the dog's owner insists Labradors are a quiet, laid back breed since this is all she knows. Generally, Labs have quite a bit of energy and love activity. Also, one book may say nothing but high praise about the breed while another may give a totally different opinion. It is important to research from a variety of sources and talk to people very involved with the breed (not just your neighbor who happens to own the breed you are looking for) to help you form an opinion. Now, let's look at the various groups of dogs.

**Sporting dogs** (pointers, retrievers, setters, spaniels) were bred for hunting. They work both with humans and also independently at times when finding game to flush. Often these breeds were bred for bird work. They tend to have high energy and a need for adequate exercise. They learn fast but some may have a bit of an independent streak.

Some breeds in this group like Golden Retrievers and Labrador Retrievers take very well to fair and fun obedience training while others like some of the setters may want more to be out hunting. You have to convince them in a fun yet firm and even-tempered way that what the humans wants to do can be just as fun as flushing game. Being often high-energy dogs, they can get misnamed hyper. More often than not, hyper behavior is caused by too much energy and the need to release it.

**Hound breeds** (from the smaller Dachshund to the great Irish Wolfhound) are divided into two groups: scent hounds that hunt by smell such as Beagles and Bloodhounds and sight hounds that hunt by sight like Greyhounds and Afghan Hounds. Often I hear that hounds are stupid or hard to train and only want to chase a scent or moving object. Well, this is what they were bred for centuries to do. Again, you have to convince your dog that working with you is as fun as that quarry. Many hounds cannot be trusted off lead, however, because of their instincts. They are not stupid but their heredity can override the desire to work with you. Hounds excel in sports designed for them such as tracking and lure coursing. Not stupid, just designed for different purposes. In the hands of people who know hounds, they can compete in Obedience and Agility as well as sports they were bred for. I know of one Afghan that was doing advanced Obedience and a Rhodesian Ridgeback that was up and coming in Agility.

**Terriers** – another group of dogs primarily designed for hunting. Smaller terriers like the Scottish Terrier and the popular Jack Russell were bred to hunt smaller game while larger terriers like Airedales and Kerry Blues were bred for larger game and also to be all around farm dogs. Some terriers ran with larger Fox Hounds to flush quarry from holes (the two fox terrier breeds). Terriers tend to be tenacious and in the wrong hands can be trouble. Terriers are tough dogs and tend to be quite self-willed. Think seriously, terriers go into a hole by themselves and have to tackle critters sometimes quite larger than they are without a human helping. (Note: Dachshunds are in the Hound group but were bred for hunting badgers, similar to terriers hunting vermin). These dogs have to be tough and able to think for themselves. Terriers often require an owner who has had prior dog experience and certain terriers (like Jack Russells) should have owners ideally who have had previous experience with other terrier breeds. Terriers may have their own agenda with life and may require a firmer but still fair and fun hand with training. Proper socialization is a must or that terrier can become a terror!

**Working breeds** were designed for just that: working. Some breeds worked closely with humans like Dobermans while others worked alone like Great Pyrenees. Some worked with humans as well as independently if needed. Some breeds did more than one job like Rottweilers who not only guarded the farm but also would drive cattle to market, haul carts of goods and do general farm work. Others were bred for more specific work, like Newfoundlands who would help sailors haul ropes from ship to shore and water rescue. Others were bred to haul sleds for long distances. Many working breeds will take very fast and well to working closely with humans. Others may have a bit of their own minds and take some coaxing to convince that this work is good as well. Some working breeds are very laid back like Mastiffs while others are quite dynamic and energetic like Siberian Huskies.

**Herding Breeds** tend to abound in Obedience and Agility trials. Many of these breeds are considered the smartest of all dogs. But are they really smarter or were they bred to work closer with humans than many breeds? Look at the bond between shepherd and his dogs. Herding breeds work as a team with people and other dogs. Dogs that exhibited a work drive plus great desire to please were bred increasing the chance that offspring would carry on these traits. You cannot have a Border Collie who ignores humans while trying to round up a thousand head of sheep! That would be disaster. However, many of these breeds also think for themselves and may get into trouble if not given a job and enough activity! A Puli may not excel in lure coursing, but give it a flock of sheep and the right training... Shetland Sheepdogs may not be the best duck retrievers, but they excel in Agility. A bored herding breed may get into mischief since it needs to exercise its mind as well as body. Many of these breeds are also termed hyper. Again, this is more often due to a high-energy breed not getting adequate exercise.

**Toy dogs** were bred for mainly for companionship – though some toy breeds were originally working animals like Yorkshire Terriers, and may retain many of their past instincts. Toy dogs are good dogs for those who may be new to dogs. Some have quite high-energy drives but it is tempered by a smaller size. Many toy breeds were bred to be by the side of nobles and the companions of ladies in the court. Being with humans is the goal of many toy breeds. Though small, Toys can be found competing – often very successfully – in Obedience and Agility. There is even at least one Papillon that does tracking. Many years ago I read an article on weight pulling, a Pekingese was featured as one of the tops in its weight class. Though these breeds may be small, many do not know that!

**Non-sporting** is a catchall group. When dog showing was in its infancy in this country, there were two groups – Sporting and all others or Non-sporting. As more breeds were developed or imported, more groups were added. However, dogs that may not quite fit into a specific group were kept in Non-sporting. Dogs here may have ancestry in hunting (Standard Poodles), guarding (Keeshonds and Schipperkes), and working (Dalmatians followed coaches and acted as sentries and calmed horses). There are many varied backgrounds to the dogs in this group.

**Crossbreeds**... well, they are a category of their own. These random bred dogs are a blend of two or more purebreds (a purebred dog is a type that has proven its genes produce the same type, colors, etc., over many human generations and therefore breeds pure). A good way to help determine what you may encounter with a cross is to research the breeds that went into the cross as well as you can. For example, it is a good bet that a Border Collie cross will be high energy while a Mastiff cross may not. Terrier crosses may be spunky little guys.

Getting to the original use of the breed you are considering goes a long way in understanding what to expect when training. As illustrated earlier, some breeds will have a greater desire to work closely with and follow the lead of a human. Others may be more independent minded and take more encouragement. However, there are some mistakes humans make that can lead to the belief that some breeds are dumber than others.

First, people tend to get dogs without really fitting the breed or cross to the needs of the person. For example, if the person wants a top notch Agility or Obedience dog, a Basset Hound is not the best choice. Bassets are a great choice for the person who wants to get into tracking – but just are not the best for top Obedience competitions. Similarly, someone who wants to do Lure Coursing would be disappointed in a Collie. A person who wants a good first dog that is easy to manage would be insane to get a dog that requires an experienced owner – Border Collies and Jack Russells are not the best choice for a first time dog owner. Many people see how a breed or cross is portrayed in Hollywood and do not realize that what makes some breeds excel in this work can make them tough pets! Some breeds are more laid back and others are very active. The wrong match can be a disaster waiting to happen. This holds true whether or not you are looking for a potential competition dog or just a pet.

Second, most failures in a dog's training which can lead to the opinion the breed is dumb often are not with the breed or cross but with the creature at the other end of the lead. Failure to properly socialize and delaying training until the puppy is grown are two common mistakes. Not being consistent with what is expected, having reasonable expectations based on age and ability and confusion when other people involved fail to have consistency can be very detrimental to the speed and extent of learning. I have seen breeds labeled as dumb competing successfully in Obedience and Agility. They had dedicated owners who learned what to expect from the breed and how to work with it. I have seen breeds often considered very intelligent being called idiots by owners who failed to put the time and effort into the dog. No breed is born trained – no matter how bright it is supposed to be!

Lastly, not understanding the breed or breeds in the cross. The expectations one would have of a herding breed are different from what one would have of a hound breed. A terrier breed will not be the same as the toy breeds your family had growing up. Researching into various breeds, using a variety of resources from books to knowledgeable people within the breed and NOT what you see in Hollywood, is very important.

No breed is dumb or unable to be trained. Some have their own agenda and some will willingly follow the lead of a human. You get out of a dog or puppy only what you put into it. So when you hear "Dang that breed is dumb!" Look for issues on the other end of the lead... More often than not, the fault lies there.