

*"Keeping Up With The Joneses: A Look at Rare Breeds*

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I had to laugh this holiday season. My husband and I moved from New England to Virginia late December of 1997 (three days before Christmas). We were used to typical New England Christmases where many people decorated their houses – often quite tastefully. Lights and wreaths, candles in the windows, often it was Rockwellian in feeling. However, when we moved, we were shocked to see only one person on our new street with Christmas lights up! The next year, we decorated as we were used to – it was just tradition. Well, the following year, about a half dozen houses were decorated. A couple neighbors joked that they had to keep up with us! We were making them look bad. By now you are probably asking, how does this apply to dogs? Stop and think. How many people go out and get something that no one else they know has just to make a statement or do a bit of one-up-manship? Keeping up with the Joneses. Well, the same thing happens with dogs and often with bad outcomes – for the dog and even those around it.

My family raises a popular breed: Shetland Sheepdogs. I remember getting an email from a woman who was looking for a Sheltie. She was looking for the rarest color possible because no one else would have it. This desire for a rare color led her to a dishonest breeder who was trying to sell her a rare Chocolate Sheltie. The pup was nothing more than a dull sable color with few white markings. Nothing rare at all if you know the breed. Sable is the most common color and comes in many shades from light golden brown to dark mahogany. Mercifully, I was contacted before the pup was bought and I prevented her from being sorely disappointed. After a few more emails to me, she found a breeder who was reputable and bred less common Sheltie colors. (I did make certain the potential buyer was aware of what a Sheltie entailed and was truly ready for one). I wish I had a dollar for every time I heard someone say "I have to get X breed because no one else has it and I have to be different." This is the wrong reason to get a dog. This is also why many people breed dishonestly and will actually try and scam the general public.

Rare breeds are becoming more popular now than ever. This is evident in the rising number of them being turned into rescue groups. Part of the increase in rare breeds has been attributed to the falls of the Iron Curtain and Berlin Wall as well as changes in the political structure of the former Soviet Union. It is easier to export breeds once kept carefully guarded. However, many breeds new to this country retain inherited traits that the average dog owner may not be prepared to handle. I asked around when preparing to write this article about why people became involved with rare breeds. Many of the responses focuses around the desire to have a dog that still had strong working instincts that have all but been bred out of many more common breeds. A strong working instinct

(even in common breeds) can make a dog a challenge to handle. The average dog owner often is not up to giving a dog a job or a sport to compete in let alone be dedicated to giving the dog a couple hours a day of concentrated exercise. (Just letting the dog out in the yard for a couple hours is not providing adequate exercise). Some of this instinct may involve protectiveness and guarding ability that, if not properly worked with or managed by a responsible owner, could end up with a dog deciding when to and not to take control. For example, the Anatolian Shepherd Dog is a breed used to guard livestock and work independently of humans. This breed needs an owner who is dedicated to socializing the dog well. The breed has traits that you may not find in more common breeds once used for flock guarding but are now bred more for companionship or show. The more common breeds may still have their instincts but it may be tempered in many specimens of the breed. In the right hands and situation, the Anatolian Shepherd Dog is a wonderful breed that can be a great personal companion and protector of home. In the wrong hands, the dog can fast become a handful!

This is a sentiment I heard from many owners of rare breeds who were dedicated to their breed. For example, many people desire a dog that imparts a "macho image" like the American Bulldog or Fila Brasileiro. These two breeds are large and strong. American Bulldogs are very close to what the old bulldogs used to be ages ago. They are rugged, muscular and willing to work. They are also protective. In the right hands, this dog can excel in many sports including Weight Pulling and Schutzhund. In the wrong hands, this dog can take charge of the family and wish to be boss. Filas are an extremely protective breed to the point of being aggressive towards strangers. Their sheer size and temperament can make them a liability for the average dog owner. A show handler of rare breeds commented on a televised dog show that the only dog she had ever been bitten by was a Fila who was not fully accepting of her. Once the dog knew her, he was fiercely protective of her, but until then... A Neapolitan Mastiff owner echoed the same sentiments – her breed was protective and required more socialization than many common breeds to make him a good companion.

What is meant by dedication and more work than the average dog? Well, a South African Boerboel owner summed up her breed as needing a dominant owner. These two words say it all – the dog is a breed that will take charge if it feels the need. A dominant owner should NOT be confused with a harsh or cruel owner. A dominant owner is one that lets the dogs know in fair and uncertain terms who is pack leader. This does not mean the dog is beaten down. Rather, the dog is taught and trained from day one to work with the owner. The owner is the one who will call the shots and the dog can relax in his position in the pack. A dog without consistency and work can become confused or decide that he needs to lead the pack since no one else really is. This is where many dog owners of any breed can get into trouble. However, some of these rare breeds may be more determined to be boss and faster to try and take charge. This can lead to very undesirable behaviors that can be far more difficult to work with than they are to prevent in the first place. Many rare breeds have their own agenda with life and can be more of a handful to train.

Rare breeds tend to be pretty healthy. However, some may have problems not seen in

other breeds. For example, the Lundehund can develop a potentially life threatening intestinal problem. Other breeds may have health concerns seen in other more common breeds such as Hip Dysplasia and eye concerns. However, since these dogs are rare, most breeders appear to be very dedicated to breeding only the healthiest dogs to help prevent what has happened to many more popular breeds. This is still NO excuse for not insisting you see documentation of all health tests and the results the breed should have. There are still those who will not test and can be passing on health problems. At least two American Bulldogs owners I contacted are having hip dysplasia issues with dogs from breeders who did not test. If the breed has health concerns not seen in more common breeds, make certain you educate your vet well about the intricacies of your breed. Many vets do not know various breeds aside from personal experiences and many do not know rare breeds. Vet med is such a tough program that breed identification and intricacies may not be taught due to lack of time in the curriculum. Much of what vets learn about various breeds may come from dog owners. Find a vet you can work with and who is willing to learn from you. Do this and you should be in good hands as opposed to using a vet who feels he knows it all about all breeds and is not willing to learn.

The biggest fears I found among owners of rare breeds are that the breed will become more popular and/or fall into the wrong hands. Popularity can be the demise of many breeds. For example, Cocker Spaniels were originally hunting dogs. However, their popularity as a companion grew – no thanks to Hollywood – and people began to capitalize on the breed. After "Lady and the Tramp", everyone had to have a Cocker. Dishonest and uneducated breeders began breeding the dogs with little or no concern for health and temperament: This led to a serious decline in the breed's health and temperament. Cockers became one of the breeds most likely to bite and developed a reputation as a snappy, untrustworthy pet. Over the years, dedicated breeders worked hard to return the breed. Hollywood is responsible for the "advancement" of many breeds into popularity. For example, when "Turner and Hootch" came out, suddenly everyone heard of Dogue de Bordeaux (French Mastiff). In "Homeward Bound" (the remake), there was a Golden Retriever (#2 AKC registered breed in 1999) and an American Bulldog. And everyone knows what happened to Dalmatians after the releases of 101 and 102 Dalmatians! Even my own breed felt the backlash of Lassie.

As for falling into the wrong hands, all you have to do is look at what happened to the American Pit Bull Terrier. When I was a child, you rarely heard of APBTs. This is a wonderful dog if gotten from a reputable source and raised in the right environment. However, the breed (as well as crosses lumped into the pit bull heading) have been so destroyed and made so unpredictable that many communities and even countries are banning the breed. There are many, many wonderful APBTs out there and fantastic breeders of them. Sadly, there are enough bad owners and breeders that the breed is suffering as a whole. Even breeds that resemble the APBT are being banned out of ignorance. Granted, some breeds were bred to fight and guard, however, if you read the breed history, the dogs were also bred to be safe and reliable with their people. Ironically, some of the breeds deemed great family pets today were bred to hunt poachers on estates. It is the macho image of some breeds that attracts human scum and eventually robs the breed of their often loving and honest reputation.

I have yet to meet a pit bull from a reputable source and raised in a good home that is vicious. The type of people who should own the breed owned most of the ones I have known: dedicated people who did their homework and researched breeders or rescues before acquiring a dog. The ones I have known that were not great dogs were in the hands of the wrong people – either thugs or ignorant people who were not willing to put the time and effort into properly raising any dog. When a dog becomes a status symbol for thugs like guns and cars, it is all but doomed. Those fighting to protect and educate the general public have a long row to hoe...

Another sentiment I heard echoed throughout those I got responses from is the importance of researching. This goes for any pet. Failure to research gets most people into trouble. They see a dog they like, go out and get one and have no idea of the time commitment and work the dog entails. Some breeds are very high energy and have such a strong work drive that they can become destructive due to "energy overload" and the need to find a job. For example, a Border Collie (a breed exploding in popularity thanks to "Babe") is possibly one of the worst pets. They require up to three hours a day of exercise and work. This means some form of thing they can interpret a job such as Agility or Flyball as well as walks and play. Not to give a Border Collie what he needs physically and mentally to be happy often means trouble. The dog may find his own job to do and often it is not what the owner wants the dog to do.

A Neapolitan Mastiff owner I knew personally got her dog because she wanted to be the Joneses. She found a breeder who failed to research the prospective owner, got a pup and was completely unable to manage it as the pup grew. The dog was unsocialized and untrained. The owner's excuse being that the dog was too big for her to handle and she did not believe in puppy training since puppies should be allowed to have fun. This dog caused a severe bruise to my leg that ran from hip to knee and halfway around my leg when she charged me. I was unable to walk well for several days due to muscle damage. Luckily, I knew how to handle the dog (and I am far smaller than her owner) and ended up with far less serious injury than the dog was able to cause. The dog was not nasty, just unruly. When she found out I would not tolerate her antics, she was a great dog. But she was far too much dog for her owner who had to be the first in the town with one... The owner found out too late that this dog was not what she wanted. Though she had owned dogs in the past, she was inexperienced with large, powerful breeds. The dog ended up being the one suffering.

Another fear that was brought up was dishonesty and it is amazing how many so-called breeders will create breeds and colors just to make a sale. Some kennel clubs actually encourage the intentional breeding of crosses and gives them funky names to make sales! These clubs are very popular with puppy millers and dishonest breeders. So when you begin looking for a rare breed, do your homework and do not hesitate to research the breeder as well as the breed. Beware of anything that sounds too good to be true and ask if the breeder is a member of a breed-specific club. Also, make sure the breed is recognized by a legitimate kennel club such as the American Rare Breed Association, Federation Cynologique Internationale, United Kennel Club, Canadian Kennel Club and

even the American Kennel Club has breeds that are quite difficult to find with far less than one hundred being registered each year (as well as contacts for breeds they do not recognize yet.) Ideally, the breeder should also be associated with a local breed specific club or national breed specific club. If something seems too good to be true, it probably is. For example, I have seen ads for rare AKC Sheltie-poops. A Sheltie-poo is a cross between a Shetland Sheepdog and a Poodle – nothing more than an intentionally bred mutt. But I have seen them being advertised for hundreds of dollars and AKC registered. Note: the AKC only registers purebreds so crossbred pup cannot be AKC registered, even if the parents are AKC recognized and registered dogs. A Presa Canario owner was very concerned about dishonest breeders turning to rare breeds after being suspended by the AKC or UKC for unethical breeding practices of more common breeds. They turn to rare breeds for the sole purpose of profit. Another concern raised was people intentionally breeding crosses but falsifying papers and selling them as pure. Even rare breeds are not immune from dishonesty. Buyers beware, and do your homework! And a note on kennel clubs: several kennel clubs are using names with the initials of legitimate kennel clubs and this can be confusing to the uneducated dog person. So again, beware and do homework. Contact various breeders, contact people who compete with the dogs in various activities, read several books on the breeds and ask around. The guy down the street who owns what you are looking for but is not involved in the dog world may not be the best resource.

Are rare dog breeds for everyone? No, just like no breed regardless of popularity is right for everyone. However, rare breeds require more homework. Since many rare breeds still maintain a strong drive to work and traits the breeds was created to have, they can be a bit much to handle for the average family. Also, finding a breeder can be more effort and you have to be willing to wait for a puppy. It is easy to find a German Shepherd but more difficult to find a Xoloitzcuintli breeder! Many rare breed owners are very protective and concerned about the future of their dogs. You may feel you have the right stuff to own one, but the breeder may not.

As mentioned earlier and it cannot be emphasized enough: many rare or rarer breeds have not been bred for companionship as long as many more popular breeds. Yes, many popular breeds were originally bred for various purposes such as hunting, guarding, herding, and ridding, however, in many cases, the strong instincts have been tapered down and the dogs bred more for companionship and show than working. This may not be true with many rarer breeds. The guarding instinct you will find in more popular breed (which can still be strong) may be far less than what you would get in a not-so-common breed that has been bred more for working ability. Failing to realize this can be very detrimental to the dog. Also, training and good socialization starting at an early age is vital. Many so-called behavioral problems in most dogs were not really behavioral problems to begin with. More often than not, it is a failure of the owner to properly socialize, train and set fair and consistent ground rules for the pup. As the pup hits adolescence (starting at about six months and lasting until about 12 – 18 months on the average), he will begin to test limits even more than when he was younger. If an owner fails to set limits and rules early, it will be harder to reinforce them when as the pup turns teen. Most dogs of any breed or cross that are turned over to rescue groups for

"behavioral problems" are adolescent, unneutered males that had little to no work put into them as pups. "You will only get out of a dog what you are willing to put into it" is my motto.

Before you think about getting a dog of any breed or cross, make sure you do your homework. Failure to do so can mean tragedy for the dog and even owner. Every year thousands of dogs are given up due to lack of responsibility or forethought on the humans end. Though rare breeds can be a challenge to locate, this does not mean that all breeders are legitimate. There are breeders out there who are into rare breeds only to make money. Even puppy millers are beginning to capitalize on some of these breeds. Again, do your homework, research the breeds and breeders and make an informed choice. Uphold your end of the dog-owning bargain. Give the dog the extra work it may need depending on breed and you should end up with a wonderful companion for many years to come. But if you want a rare breed just to be or to keep up with the Joneses, this is the wrong reason to own any living creature!"

For more information on rare breeds contact:

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