

# EXOTIC PETS

---

## PART ONE: THE FURRINERS

*Julia V. McDonough*

*www.FortunateK9.com*

Exotic pets: you mean tarantulas, geckos and spiny hedgehogs? Well, no. Not that I have anything against sporting a 7 foot corn snake around your neck as a fashion accessory. Oh, wait a second, yes I *do* have something against that: it seems pretty selfish to obtain an unusual, high maintenance pet to increase one's "look at me" status. But I'll leave the dormouse and scorpion set out of this. I'm more interested in the modern obsession with *canine* exotics: hybrids, "rare" breeds and the various imported street dogs. It's as if no one wants to buy a carefully bred, thoughtfully raised purebred from a responsible breeder anymore. And likewise, why can't someone just go to a shelter and adopt an abandoned dog who's had the benefit of professional veterinary care and at least some feasible background history? Today, a trainer's dance card is filled with satos, exotic mastiffs, and pricey designer crossbreeds. When someone contacts me with a nice German Shepherd mix from their local pound, or an intelligently researched and genetically sound Lab puppy from a small scale breeder, it's a rarity. It didn't used to be this way. But I believe that we're seeing the result of Internet-based instant gratification coupled with our American desire to keep up with and even surpass the ubiquitous Joneses, even in the area of dog ownership.

"Oh, you bought a Golden Retriever pup? How nice <yawn>. You know *we're* on a waiting list for a dog rescued in that earthquake in India (or that tsunami in Malaysia or that avalanche in Tibet)..."

Thursday April 3<sup>rd</sup> must have been a slow news day in China. Because a story about dogs made it into that day's edition of *The China Post*. (Go here to read it yourself:

<http://www.chinapost.com.tw/taiwan/foreign%20affairs/2008/04/03/150104/15-stray.htm>)

It seems that a group called Animal Rescue Team Taiwan successfully sent fifteen disabled stray dogs to the United States, where they will be placed in L.A. and Seattle shelters until adopted by American families. At first blush, this is sure to warm the hearts of any animal lover: two disparate cultures and nations uniting in the cause of helping unfortunate dogs. But many dog professionals have

justified concerns about the effects the stray import business has on our own dogs and dog owners here. And this isn't a bunch of "Buy American" jingoism you're hearing from me. Some of my own dogs have parents imported from Europe, I often train to salsa music, and I even ride Japanese motorcycles. It's much deeper than that.

The very first question is one of displacement. In our rush to adopt a canine refugee with an exciting backstory, are we ignoring the domestic homeless dog who sits in a shelter for endless days, waiting for someone to see the "special" in him? Import agencies' protests about a dog shortage ("people want small dogs", "people don't want black dogs", "people want puppies" etc) sound a little more than disingenuous when the same animal rescue groups rail against responsible dog breeders and insist on mandatory spay and neuter laws as they repeat the mantra of overpopulation. Fact is, *voluntary* spay and neuter has been so effective that parts of the country really *are* facing a dog shortage, one that can be balanced out by bringing in dogs from the more overpopulated areas of the U.S., such as the deep south, and the midwestern states. And the portrayal of the shelter adopter as having specific demands that only an imported stray can meet sound suspiciously like the hucksterism of the worst backyard breeders and modern hybrid producers ("people want non-shedding dogs", "people want 'gentle family guardians'", "people want puppies"). The way many rescue and shelter people see it, if a potential dog owner decides to purchase from a breeder because he wants a small dog, or a white dog, or a puppy, he is shallow and heartless. But the same sentiments are rewarded if the source of the dog is not a breeder, but a rescue. Basically, it's ok to drive the market if the market is a morally acceptable one, like an animal shelter. Likewise, if even the most responsible breeder says "People want puppies", they are greedy, selfish and uncaring about dogs. But if a person in the stray importing business says "People want puppies", it's ok, and it's justification for spending large amounts of time and money that could be spent on caring for the luckless dogs in one's or one's neighbors' figurative backyard.

So, when we think about displacement, we have to consider that not only is the four year old Golden cross languishing in a kennel at the dog pound being displaced, so, too, are the resources to help him. In the *China Post* article, we are informed that the Taiwanese agency mobilized fifty volunteers to make it happen. Once the dogs arrived in the States, you can probably double or even triple that number to include the veterinary staff, shelter workers, adoption coordinators, foster homes and transport teams who will be involved until the dogs are adopted. I spent a long time working for a major breed rescue and can tell you how difficult it was to find reliable, committed and qualified volunteers, and even paid employees. It's hard for me to imagine the rescuers of the Taiwanese dogs being as enthusiastic and organized about the poor pups in their local city facilities. Are they? Is it just

not newsworthy? Or are my experiences with the subspecies of human, *Homo Rescues*, going to prove out again? It's only human nature to be motivated by excitement, and the more exciting the story behind the rescue, the more popular the project becomes. I'm hoping that the silver lining might involve some of the west coast volunteers staying on after the novelty of the Asian rescue wears off and applying themselves with the same vigor to the plight of the more mundane mutts in the area's kill shelters.

The other major concern when it comes to imports is one of health. While today's laws make it pretty much impossible to get a fruit basket through Customs, somehow one can bring a dozen "street dogs" or shamefully raised puppy mill Chihuahuas into the country from places where even human disease control is questionable, let alone modern veterinary care. In September 2007, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announced the "victory over rabies" in the U.S. But with the trend of unvaccinated pups being brought in from regions of the world where rabies is still an issue, that declaration may be a bit optimistic. Pups who are too young to be vaccinated are supposed to be held in quarantine for 30 days before being released to the public. Even so, oversights have happened as recently as one year ago, when a family brought their pup with them from India to the States. The pup was given a medical thumbs up when it landed in Seattle, but was then diagnosed with rabies once it got to its new home in Alaska. And some of us haven't forgotten the local scare back in 2004 when a Puerto Rican pup brought into Massachusetts was diagnosed with rabies. Since then, there has been more awareness of the risks of "humane relocation", and the best of the importing agencies have increased their vigilance. However, the concern remains about the legal loopholes which exempt less scrupulous non-profit groups from some of the checks and balances other pet businesses must follow. When the platform these importers stand on is one of ethical superiority ("How can you ignore these poor unfortunate dogs!"), it's hard to ignore the potential repercussions of their charity.

Does all of this mean that you should avoid adopting an imported shelter dog? Not at all. If the shelter dog that fits your requirements happens to have a fascinating history of foreign intrigue and world travel, why not? You've just helped a dog who would have inevitably fallen through the cracks of indifference in a culture that is less sympathetic to its animals. But use your judgment. Deal with well-established agencies who emphasize health screening. Insist on as much documentation as possible. Ask what the agency actually *knows* about the dog's background, not what they guess or what they wish. Temperament is not solely determined by environment and recent history, there are some inherent traits that can manifest in a dog regardless of how cautiously he is raised and trained. A diagnosis of poor breeding/genetics and lack of early human interaction is the usual suspect for most of

the behavioral problems we see in dogs, but it just doesn't sell as **well as the abuse clichés such as:**“He was beaten by an evil street vendor, which is why he hates men who smell like barbeque”. And when the dog in question is alive solely because his parents, grandparents and great grandparents learned how to *avoid* humans and scavenge in the foreign streets from which he was rescued, the shyness and suspicion won't just **magically** disappear due to good intentions and the comforts of life in the States **or how much the adopter “loves” him.**

Most importantly, ask the importing agency what they're doing to establish spay and neuter programs in the homeland of their refugees. If there is no complementary population control effort being supported by the agency's fundraising, the whole supply-and-demand arrangement with a foreign dog broker starts looking a lot like the arrangement between a puppy mill middleman and a pet store. Spay and neuter is obviously doing its job here in the U.S.; exporting the concept overseas in direct proportion to the importing of pups would be a noble cause, indeed. After all, wouldn't it be nice if dogs all over the world were actually *wanted* and not just by people thousands of miles away?

Imports aren't the only exotic pets my colleagues and I have been dealing with lately. Some of the most exotic and problematic dogs seen by modern trainers are bred right here in the USA, and their owners make us scratch our heads way more than we do over the rescuers of street dogs. But you'll have to wait till next month to learn about that phenomenon. In the meantime, if you're looking to adopt and are on a waiting list for an import, please don't forget your local shelter, your responsible breed rescue organization, and your neighborhood dog pound. There may be someone waiting for you, and you won't even need to check his passport!

*2008 Dobermind press  
All rights reserved*

**Julia V. McDonough**  
**Fortunate K9**  
**Dog and Owner Training**  
***When you're ready for results!***  
Trainer@FortunateK9.com