

# EXOTIC PETS

## PART TWO: “SERIOUS” BREEDS IN A FRIVOLOUS WORLD

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Have you ever known someone who was blindly obsessed with the latest thing? Have you ever known someone who has acquired a habit, an accessory or a companion that was simply *all wrong* for them? How do you handle them? Do you confront them with the folly of their ways? Do you try to sell them on the tried and true, or do you try to shame them into recognizing their personal limitations? How honest can you be without irreparably damaging the relationship, whether it's a friendship or a business arrangement? How much are you willing to risk being called unfair, or mean, or envious? If this person comes to you for advice regarding their inappropriate choice, will you call it as you see it? Or will you dance around the elephant in the room to avoid hurting feelings or being seen as politically or socially incorrect?

Some dog trainers have to deal with this scenario all the time when it comes to clients making breed decisions. There are so many arrows being shot at dog people these days from the outside, in the form of BSL, insurance problems and public access, that we've become hesitant to acknowledge some of the less pleasant truths about dogs. And in the strange and delicate climate of the dog world, we fall all over ourselves to avoid appearing “prejudiced” against any type of dog for fear of being lumped in with the loathsome breed-banners. But how honest are we being when we refuse to warn a potential puppy buyer or rescue adopter about the shortcomings of his chosen breed? And are we doing our job as dog professionals by avoiding any breed specific issues that may prevent our training program from succeeding in the context the owners present to us? Sure, I know, “A dog is a dog is a dog”. But to believe that all dogs, regardless of breed, are exactly the same in temperament, aptitude and tolerance is either inexcusably naïve or willfully ignorant.

In my last column, I addressed the phenomenon of the shelter-dog importing business and complained that no one seems to want to adopt a nice, normal mix from the pound without an exciting back story. Likewise, when it comes to purebred dogs, it's as if the average American household is too sophisticated to purchase a well bred, "common" pup of the Labrador or German Shepherd (or Beagle or Poodle, etc) variety. Instead, many people bring me obscure flock guardians, estate mastiffs or rare terriers whose major problems stem from them trying to do the job they were bred for in an environment that simply doesn't support it. However, their owners have been sold on the image of the "gentle family guardian" who "needs no formal training to defend you with his life" while somehow being able to tell friend from foe based solely on his own discretion and perhaps a kind word of direction from you, his keeper ("It's OK, Vlad, that's just Uncle Joe. He's *family*." To which the doubtful Neopolitan Mastiff is supposed to reply, "Well, even though he looks like a serial killer, smells like a six pack and keeps trying to pull on my jowls, your word is law, Boss, so he's OK with me."). Reality dictates a different outcome: a dog who has inherited hundreds and in some cases, *thousands* of years of behavior in which suspicion of strangers, intolerance of other dogs or extremely predatory tendencies was desirable, is not going to have a one or two generation temperament makeover, no matter how much his fans wish it so. Hence we have the English Bull Terrier making waves at the public dog park, the Caucasian Ovcharka being less than desirable as a hiking buddy on the weekend jaunts of his leashless owner and the Boerbel mastiff valiantly "protecting" his owners from their friendly neighbors on the suburban cul-de-sac.

The world changes fast. Dogs change slowly. Only one hundred years ago, a sharp, defensive medium size dog who would protect his handler from any human or canine bad guys was a desirable companion for a working class Everyman. But by the 1970's, the Doberman Pinscher had one of the worst reputations in dogdom. Remember? "They turn on their masters", "Their brains get too big for their skulls and they go crazy", "Only a criminal would own one of those". In the US, Doberman breeders sought to soften the temperament of the breed with what many Dobe traditionalists would call mixed results. Today, we hear that the Dobe can no longer do the job he was bred to do, and is essentially useless as a law enforcement or military dog. Along the way, a lot of mutant branches have grown off of the Dobe family tree, resulting in "King" Dobermans the size of a small pony with the lifespan of a Woolworth's goldfish, and "rare white Dobermans" with health problems as exotic and expensive as themselves. And a high number of the Dobs I see in

my practice suffer from what can best be described as neurotic behavior and inappropriate sharpshyness, as if they still feel pins and needles in the phantom limb of their original purpose. All of this in the name of making a purpose-bred animal fit into a society which holds few opportunities for a dog with a work ethic.

Some breeds of dog simply do not make good pets for the average American household. There, I said it. Perhaps if you, too, were confronted with a high number of heartbroken owners who are facing lawsuits and life-changing decisions based on their choice of dog, you would be brave enough to say the same thing. Some of the more serious breeds simply hear a certain music in their heads, which in the vacuum of a perfect world, is melodic and stately. But against the cluttered noise of the normal person's lifestyle, it becomes discordant and jarring. You own a busy in-home hair salon and a Fila Brasileiro. There may be a problem. You are a young guy who enjoys beer-camping hi-jinks with your buds every summer weekend and you have a Chow. There may be a cringe-worthy YouTube video in the making. You are a person who owns a dog as an extension of your social network, and you love to spend time at the dog park, and want your pup to have birthday parties and sleepovers. You decide to purchase a Tosa Inu. After all, it's *different!*

Let me be the first to say that there is nothing inherently wrong with any of these dogs. They aren't "bad" breeds, they're just bad *choices* for most modern pet owners. Of course, intelligent management and balanced, results-based training make a positive difference in almost any situation, but then the owner must decide exactly how much of his time is going to be spent *dealing* with his dog rather than simply enjoying his dog. What about the tried and true breeds developed to work as partners with man, to be biddable and sensible, to adapt as gracefully as possible to the sometimes precipitous changes in environment and circumstance that modern life presents to us? Are we so jaded as dog lovers that a "regular" breed is somehow beneath us? Or are we so naïve that the Disneyfied images of "gentle giants" and "natural family protectors" in the glossy back pages of the dog magazines sell us as easily as ads for soft drinks and laundry detergent? Maybe we're all subconsciously striving for that long ago time when "a man and his dog" meant something as iconic and profound as a philosophy or a religion. Perhaps that part of us goes missing in life and we sometimes want the thing that it represents. But to own a serious dog, one must become a serious dog person. Your dog, hardwired with the music of his heritage, cannot change the station when it suits your needs, nor can he or should he retain the exotic appearance while his heart and soul shrink in character and purpose.

If you are set on an exotic breed, honor your future dog by learning all about him, not just the rainbows-and-lollipops version, either. Ask yourself and answer honestly how you will deal with an animal who defines “persons of interest” as anyone who doesn’t live full time in the household, including visiting family and friends. How will you answer your friends with the social butterfly of a mutt when they keep asking why your newly-adult “gladiator” breed can’t hang around with him anymore? What is your training and management plan? Have you found a trainer experienced with dogs of this type? Are you willing to pay what they charge? Are you willing to make training a lifelong habit rather than an occasional chore? If you can rise to the challenge of ownership, then you may end up with the dog of a lifetime, and a challenging but rewarding experience in the world of dogs. But if you can’t, it’s no shame. There are thousands of other dogs out there who will happily adapt to your busy schedule, your exciting social life and your open door policy for new canine friends. The thing that will make your dog unique is not his appearance or his pedigree: what makes him unique is that he is *yours*: a reflection of all you put in to him. Set yourself and your potential new dog up for success; choose wisely, train sensibly and enjoy. Nothing’s more exotic these days than a well-trained, trouble free dog!

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