

## Dog Breeds and Behaviors

Our topics for this week are:

- **Variations in dog breeds' behaviors**
- **Breed behavior as a criterion for selecting a pet**

Over several decades I have owned many dogs. As a child, I had cocker spaniels and a German shepherd dog. While I was in college I had a pug. After I became a veterinarian, I had several miniature pinschers, a rat terrier, and a toy fox terrier. Later in my career I have had 3 Australian cattle dogs. All the dogs were purebreds, except maybe not the rat terrier or toy fox terrier since they were shelter rescue dogs. In all cases the dogs lived where I lived in apartments and houses. They knew my attitude, emotions, and every move, and I knew theirs. Each dog had its own individual personality but their behaviors fell within ranges typical of their breed and not that of other breeds. The cocker spaniels were not as protective of their perceived territory as the German shepherd. The pug was not nearly as responsive to verbal or visual cues as the rat terrier, and none of them, except the Australian Cattle Dogs, had to be trained not to herd humans by nipping their heels. They are not referred to as Heelers for nothing. (BARK)

The lessons I learned from dogs in my life were reinforced by the thousands of purebred and mixed-breed dogs I have handled in my professional life. In fact, I am certain I could describe behaviors of common breeds of dogs to nearly any practicing veterinarian and they could correctly identify the breed being described.

You may be saying to yourself “I know that, I have had many dogs and also observed the same. I could identify breeds by descriptions of their behavior” If you have said any of these to yourself, WAIT! In the April issue of the journal *Science* an article called “Ancestry-inclusive dog genomics challenges popular breed stereotypes” the authors concluded that all dogs are essentially the same and breed behaviors are not meaningfully different.

How can a scientific article conclude something so far from knowledge gained by personal experience? The authors infer this in round-about ways. The title is evidence of that, i.e. “genomics challenges popular breed stereotypes”. A much stronger statement was made as an introduction to the article by an editor where he or she said “Thus, dog breed is generally a poor predictor of individual behavior and should not be used to inform decisions relating to selection of a pet dog.”

That is blatantly wrong and dangerous.

Reporters in the national press were influenced by the introduction to the journal article and spread the misinformation across the U.S.

The study was based on data from a canine genetics laboratory which performs canine DNA analyses for free but without a guarantee of reported results for up to years later. However, owner surveys are mandatory for free DNA analyses. To be assured of receiving a dog's DNA analysis, participants are charged up to \$1499.

There were 21 authors, not an unusually high number of people to be involved in a study but a high number to be involved at author level, yet, none were veterinarians. The owners of 2155 filled out questionnaires that were used in the study. Studies with large numbers of data can increase statistical power. However, if the selection of what is to be included as data is subjective, as in owner questionnaires, the meaning beyond an expression of owner perceptions is poor to none with or without statistical analysis.

The main finding of the study was said to refute the idea that some breeds, particularly pit bulls, are more aggressive than other breeds. To be clear, the data came from owners of dogs with a desire to know more about their dog's genetics and owners who picked the breed they had based on an attraction for that breed. In my opinion, this is biased data. I have been on municipal Dangerous Dog Committees and owners of dangerous dogs almost never perceive their dog as dangerous because it is not to them or their immediate family. The story is different when the dog confronts a neighbor or a stranger. In this study, we were given the unchallenged opinion of owners without neighbors' or strangers' opinions being known. In addition, no consideration was given to physical ability of a dog to cause serious injury to humans. In other words, even if just 2% of all breeds have the same tendency to be aggressive, won't that still make pit bulls and rottweilers more dangerous than a Pomeranian? If raw data is corrupted by input bias and unmeasurable information such as owner questionnaires, the conclusions are weak, at best. The reporting of breeds involved in serious attacks on humans is far more informative of a breed's aggressive behavior.

There good pit bulls, German shepherds, rottweilers and other dogs in the lists of serious dog attack breeds, but that does not eliminate the fact that if you have 100 pit bulls and 100 Labrador retrievers all raised by the same people in the same environment, you will have more pit bulls that are dangerous to strangers than Labradors. This fact was lost in the *Science* article on genomics and breed behavior.

Dr. Jerry Klein, the American Kennel Club's chief veterinarian, disagreed with the study's conclusions saying "I think most dogs conform to the personality standard of their breed. Older breeds such as Tibetan mastiffs and basenjis, which were few in the study, may have more hardwired personalities because they have been around longer." Also, "if the classes of dogs, such as working, toy, herding, etc. had been compared rather than the breeds, they would have

found behaviors more similar to each other than to other classes.” Dr. Klein went on to say “It is the AKC’s position that breed does inform you about general and instinctual behavior, and is the reason owners SHOULD consider behavioral tendencies before selecting a breed in order to make an educated and informed decision that will lead to a happy, lifelong commitment to your dog.”

Therefore if you wish to bring a purebred dog into your family, you should learn the typical breed behaviors and find a trustworthy hobby breeder. They can also help you determine if the breed might fit into your life. Your veterinarian can also assist you. Make sure that the dog is evaluated for inheritable diseases and that the owner will begin its socialization. Selecting a dog based only on its appearance and an assumption that all breeds have the same behavior and propensity to be dangerous is a recipe for disaster for you, your dog, or both.

If you have comments or you're interested in particular subjects contact us at [CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com](mailto:CBC@BetterAnimalHandling.com)

Now let’s recap the key points to remember from today’s episode:

- 1. Breed behavior should be a major consideration when considering acquiring a purebred dog.**
- 2. No dog breed is vicious, but some breeds have a greater propensity for aggression than others and some of these have the physical capability to be dangerous.**

More information on animal handling is available in my book, *Animal Handling and Physical Restraint*, published by CRC Press and available on Amazon and from many other fine book supply sources.

Additional information is available at: [www.betteranimalhandling.com](http://www.betteranimalhandling.com)

Don’t forget, serious injury or death can result from handling and restraining some animals. Safe and effective handling and restraint requires experience and continual practice. Acquisition of the needed skills should be under the supervision of an experienced animal handler.