

# THE BEGINNER'S GUIDE

## Selecting Your Breed - Harder Than You Might Think

Chances are you've already fallen in love with a breed, but have you considered the little things that make a big difference? My husband and I have had Akitas as our companions since 1999, but when it came time to pick a breed for my first show dog, I simply didn't want to have to worry about grooming a double-coated breed when I had so many fundamentals to learn - like handling, terminology, and so on. I wanted a dog with a solid temperament that was "wash and go" so to speak and wasn't a high-energy breed. When all my research was completed my husband and I sat down to discuss potential breeds within these parameters. We couldn't have been further apart in our idea of the perfect breed! I thought a Pug would be ideal, and he voted for a Great Dane. Let's explore some of these issues in a little more depth.

### SIZE MATTERS

How did my husband and I come up on opposite ends of the spectrum? Well, I was thinking about my husband's career moving us every few years and the small backyard we had at the time. He was thinking about a dog that could keep up with our activity level and provide me with a sense of security while he was away. Compromise helped us make the best decision for our family, but I'm not a marriage counselor and will leave that to Dr. Phil! We discussed what each of us wanted and expected from the new addition to our family and came to a decision. So began our search for the right Great Dane.

### Things to Consider About Size Home/Apartment

- Do you have white or light rugs or furniture? You might not want big muddy paw prints tearing through your house.
- Crate space - the size of your dog will dictate the size of crate you will need.
- Lots of knickknacks or priceless family heirlooms? A big dog's tail will knock things over and the dog will nose things around out of curiosity.

### Property

- Does it take ten steps to reach your property line from your back door or do you have rolling acres?
- Regardless of size, do you have a fence?
- So you don't have a big yard or a fence but think you'll start walking if you have a dog? You probably won't. If you're not active before getting a dog, chances are you won't want to be much more active after you get a dog. We are creatures of habit.

### Vehicle size

- Do you have a Mini Cooper or a VW Beetle? Maybe a Suburban or full-size van? Your mode of transportation to a show or to the training classes you will likely be attending must accommodate you, your dog, and lots of cumbersome show equipment (such as umbrella for shade or rain, exercise pen or crate, chair, grooming bag, grooming table, etc).

Don't think size would make that much of a difference? Here's a list of the changes we made. Keep in mind we had two large dogs when we added the third (a giant breed) to our household:

- Our cloth furniture saw its way to the dump and distressed leather furniture took its place.
- Our dining room moved into our living room to accommodate the size of our dog's crate. We often joke that our dog's crate is a small game room where we could comfortably play a game of Scrabble while drinking wine and nibbling on cheese and crackers!
- With the new couches, taller furniture was also brought in to protect our dust collectors from a waste-high wagging tail and curious, drooling lips.
- Baby gates made their way into our home so we had "dog free" zones.
- We started with a midsized SUV and ended up with a Suburban and Toy Hauler.

**OUCH! Yes, these additional and UNEXPECTED costs hurt, but changes had to be made, and some of my husband's toys were sold. Hey, he wanted the big dog!**

### SEX (The Dog's Gender, Silly!)

Statistically you will get a better dog than a bitch as your first show prospect. Breeders must keep the best of the best in their homes, but at times they will choose to keep a bitch over a dog in order to continue to move forward in their breeding programs. In general, breeders feel more comfortable placing a bitch in a proven show home over a novice home to minimize the risk of an accidental breeding, and no one really knows, not even the individual, if a new show home is really in it for the long haul.

Oftentimes these quality bitches are only available on a co-ownership agreement, and these differ from breeder to breeder - as much as the colors of the setting sun. In other words, fewer show-prospect bitches are available compared to show-prospect dogs. If you've never experienced a bitch in season, you'll probably want to ease into it. Even if you have experienced a heat cycle in the past with another bitch, you have an enormous responsibility to preserve the breeder's pedigree, and the utmost caution must be in place to protect a bitch in season from outside dogs. You also must consider what is best for your current situation. You may already have a dog and feel a bitch would make a better canine companion to maintain harmony in your own household.

If you're getting into dog shows with the intent of breeding and starting your own line, consider purchasing a dog first so that you can learn the nuances of the breed without shouldering the pressure of breeding before you're ready. When I decided I wanted to get my first show dog I was also interested in breeding - albeit someday. Things have changed for me. The more I've learned, the more I realize how little I

know. Why? I'm educated now. I've been around long enough to know that there is so much more to learn, and I don't want to create precious lives without learning much more. I also want to focus on developing my handling skills in order to show my dogs to their full advantage each and every time I enter the ring. I had no idea how much skill handling actually takes until I was out there! Now, being the best handler I can be for my dogs is my main focus and where I spend most of my energy.

### COLOR

If your selected breed is divided by color, you more than likely already have a favorite. I was recently talking to an Australian Shepherd breeder who relayed that a puppy buyer was looking for a very specific coloration, including eye color. After some talking, she was able to educate and redirect the puppy buyer toward the right dog for the family instead of selecting a dog just for the preferred color.

Breeders take a lot into consideration when placing a puppy with a family; even a show-prospect puppy is carefully selected for each home based on what the family is looking for, the dog's temperament, and the family's intentions. By placing color over conformation, you narrow your expectations to the exclusion of other qualities. Consequently, you may find your selected dog to be wanting, which can be disconcerting to you and the dog.

### Some Food for Thought

I was given this advice from a respected breeder: "If you have your heart set on a specific color, wait for it. Just be patient to find the color you want with the quality you need in a show dog."

Another piece of valuable advice I was given from a retired professional handler: "Learn to appreciate a good dog in your breed because it's a good dog, regardless of color."

### GROOMING

I absolutely love a furry dog with a beautiful, healthy coat. With two Akitas to groom, how much of a difference would one more have made? Well, there is a significant difference between pet grooming (brushing twice a week) and show grooming (methodically brushing 30 minutes a day). All "coated" breeds require 30 minutes of skilled brushing a day to keep their coats in show condition. Take time off from grooming and it will show the next time you're in the ring.

Thirty minutes isn't really much - it's a TV show. Just keep in mind your many other responsibilities, such as chauffeuring your child to extracurricular activities or late nights at the office. Just because your dogs have short or even smooth coats, don't assume that they don't need grooming. They certainly do - just not as much.

### EXERCISE

I adopted my first dog when I was 13 years old. My parents took me to the shelter, and I picked out the cutest Border Collie/Dalmatian mix you'd ever hope to lay eyes on. I named her Kayla, but Rocket would have suited her better. I'd promised to take care of her, train her, etc. I did, but in the process, she taught me what I did AND didn't want in a dog.

Kayla lived to be 14 years of age and I loved her dearly but they were a very long fourteen years. Throughout her entire life, she challenged me - both physically and mentally - to keep her stimulated (I'll be sure to share some of my training mistakes in a future article - I'm certain some will tickle your funny bone). Even at a mature age, her "inner puppy" would take charge at times, and she would leap off the deck to run zoomies around the yard - quite a sight to see.

On the other hand, a dog that has a limited desire to play or interact with you might not be your idea of a fantastic companion either. Consider your current activity level. Are you the type that runs a few miles every day and would like a running partner? Do you love to lounge around the house on the weekends and catch up on your favorite TV

shows? Or is Sunday consumed with football? Your current behavior should dictate the energy level you look for when researching breeds.

### BASIC SUPPLIES

As with any hobby, there are some basics that you will need in order to prepare and participate. Here is a list of some of the basics you'll need for your show dog:

- Grooming table
- Grooming arm
- Grooming supplies
- Shampoo and/or conditioner
- No water cleanser (for when accidents happen at the show)
- Nail cutters/Dremel
- Clippers/trimmers/scissors
- Forced-air dryer
- Brush
- Show collar
- Show lead

- Wheeling cart (to move all your cumbersome show equipment)
- Crate/exercise pens (to contain your dog between showings and exercising)
- Washcloths (these are nice to have regardless of breed)
- Cooling coat (to keep your dog cool in the summer at an outside show)
- Warming coat (to keep your dog warm in the winter at an outside show)
- Ice chest stocked with water and snacks (for both you and your dog)

### Breed specific

Be prepared to pay for quality on some things, such as your grooming supplies and show lead for - and nutrition for that matter. After all, you'll want your equipment to last for years. However, be creative as well. There are ways to save money on some items without forfeiting quality.

### Thrifty Tips

- Check out your local thrift store for washcloths, towels, fabric, ice chests, etc.
- Learn to sew; borrow a coat used by someone in your breed or a breed similar to yours and make an outline to use as a pattern, and then sew your own cooling and warming coats. This isn't being cheap; it's customizing!
- Check auction sites in person (yes they still have auction houses) and online for cheaper crates, exercise pens, and wheeling carts.
- In a pinch, use a bathroom mat on a sturdy table or flat-top crate as a makeshift grooming table.
- Once you've been around for a year or so, you'll start to figure out what you like specifically and what people in your breed use and recommend.

### INTERNET RESOURCES

Access to the internet is like having a personal treasure trove just waiting to be explored; just remember that anyone can post anything to the internet and there is a lot of garbage out there.

- Narrow down your search for the right breed with Animal Planet's Dog Breed Selector.
- Use AKC to learn more about the breed(s) you're interested in.
- Join Yahoo! Groups, MSN Groups, or any other Internet Group site to meet others in your breed (search specifically for your breed with "show" or "conformation" added in your search criteria for best results). These lists are chock full of knowledgeable people in your breed and have a plethora of information and opinions on everything including health, nutrition, training, breeding, etc.

Whichever breed you choose, you must possess a deep love of your chosen breed and have a desire to preserve breed integrity in order to be truly successful. Listen to your heart; balance what you like with what you learn, and you will make a wise decision. There is no telling where this wonderful adventure will lead you; you could be the next top handler or the breeder greatly revered in the AKC annals. Best wishes as you begin your search for the breed and dog meant for you.

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NAIA <http://www.naiaonline.org/index.htm>



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