

Picking a Working Puppy

By Deborah Palman

When I asked on the USPCA e-mail list what subjects people wanted to see for articles in the Canine Courier, someone replied that they would like to see an article on how to pick puppies for police work. Fortunately, I have had considerable experience in this area. Besides breeding a half dozen or more litters myself and seeing many of the grown up results, several times I have been personally involved in the quest to pick the perfect puppy for my own working companion. I have also served as a "consultant" for friends who were looking for puppies and have tested over a dozen litters, mostly German Shepherds, picked or rated puppies from these litters and was able to see the results of these picks when the puppies grew up, some as working dogs and some as not.

Working Dogs and Working Dog Sports

Besides training police and search and rescue dogs, I have been active in the sport of Schutzhund, which was originally created to evaluate the working ability of German Shepherds for breeding. Since only a few police dogs are bred, Schutzhund serves as the primary means of proving working dog stock in German Shepherds, and anyone who has any amount of success and experience in the sport will tell you that the judging and temperament evaluations that occur during Schutzhund trials are getting harder with the passing years. While it is true that training has a great deal to do with the performance of the dog, Schutzhund and other European dog sports have done a great deal to improve the working ability of the dogs used in American police K-9 programs today. The predominance of the use of dogs from European working bloodlines in police, SAR, detector and other working fields testifies to the success of screening for soundness and working ability that has gone on in Europe for years. Personally, I won't even look at a litter descended from anything but ancestors with working titles.

As with much in the working dog world, experience is the key to success in breeding and picking good dogs. My findings have been that only people who have personally worked dogs at a high level appropriate for their breed for at least five years, or consult with and trust the opinion of others who have served as helpers, decoys, training directors, professional trainers etc., have any understanding of what a good working dog is. It is not that those who don't work their breeding stock are dishonest, they are just

ignorant of what a good dog should be like. I know it took me 15 years experience to learn what a really good working dog is. If you have never seen a 9 or 10 on a scale of 1 to 10, and all your experience has been with 6 or 7s, you will tend to think that a 6 or 7 is the best there is.

If you are looking for a German Shepherd, look for a breeder that works their stock in police work or Schutzhund, HGH, KNPV or Ring; if looking for a Labrador, look for a breeder that participates in field trials or hunt tests; if looking for a Border Collie, look for a breeder that does sheep herding trials, etc. No one breed will be able to participate in all the dog sports, but the parents should be working in the areas they are bred for.

Working Temperament

Breeds that are expected to do apprehension work add a whole new dimension to the temperament breeding game. Dog that do protection work need to have some suspicion or defensiveness, but not so much that they are shy or sharp. They need to have good "nerves," but not so much nerve that they are dull. They need to have some dominance so they will stand up to those that they do not consider pack members, yet they also need to work under the direction of their handler. Add to this mix differing levels of prey drive, fight drive, hunt drive, energy level and whatever attributes you want to classify those innate traits that make a working dog a working dog, and when you breed two dogs together, you seem to get an infinite combination of different traits of different levels in the puppies, sometimes creating a wide range of abilities within a single litter. Unless the breeder or the person directing the breeding understands how all these temperament traits are passed on, the litter may produce a large number of undesirable dogs.

For example, dogs have different levels of "reactivity," also called nerve strength or sharpness (at least as it relates to the perception of threat). A sharp dog is nervous, reacts to small amounts of stimulation and can be either shy or sharp shy or just react aggressively to every challenge. On the other end of the scale, a dull dog is unreactive, generally displays a low energy level and takes a lot of stimulation to get going. A good working dog is neither too sharp nor too dull, but has good "nerve" so that he accepts new environments, people and sensory challenges without reverting to avoidance or inappropriate aggression.

There are dozens of other traits besides nerves that are greatly influenced by genetics like pain thresholds (or touch sensitivity), dominance, emotional sensitivity, sound sensitivity, etc. etc. Many of these traits are carried from generation to generation, and the better German line German Shepherd breeders can tell you which ancestors carry what traits that are likely to be expressed generations down the line even if they are not immediately apparent in the parents of the litter.

Physical Problems

Besides the temperament of the dog, there are a number of genetically based physical problems that German Shepherds and other breeds are susceptible to. If you are shopping for a puppy, familiarize yourself with the physical problems common to the breed and the tests that can be conducted to screen the parents. For example, X-rays are used to diagnose hip and elbow dysplasia, blood testing can check for thyroid and hemophilia problems, and X-rays can check for congenital spine defects. The Orthopedic Foundation for Animals (OFA) is one screening organization in the US.

Hip dysplasia in German Shepherds has been such a problem that the Germans have formulated a rating system for breeding stock. The system and the US based OFA seem to be helping, as hip dysplasia in stock that has been screened for generations is definitely decreasing.

Potential physical problems are the reason I discourage police officers from buying puppies to raise for work. No matter how much you screen the parents, there is still a chance that the puppy will grow up to have a problem that will keep it from working. Happily, that risk is smaller with the better breedings, but many families find it impossible to give up a dog that was raised from puppy hood, not to mention the costs in time and money to purchase and raise the dog. There is a reason good working dogs are not cheap.

So what is the best way to find a good puppy? One way is to look for a working dog you like, contact the breeder of the dog and see if a puppy from a repeat breeding is available. That would be the best way, but, unfortunately, many of the best dogs are bred out of the country and/or repeat breedings aren't available because the breeding life of dogs is relatively short. By the time a dog is 3 to 5 years old and trained and proved to be an excellent working dog, its parents are deceased or too old to breed. Then you have to look at the current breedings the breeder has. Are the parents titled and working? Can you watch them work and/or take some bites? Are equally successful breedings available?

I support Schutzhund and other protection dog sports in the US because they are the only way, besides placing dogs in police home, that civilian breeders can evaluate the working ability of their breeding stock. If a dog has been campaigned for several years and been titled and scored reasonably well and is well respected by the local decoys and training directors as a good working dog and is still out there working without major injury, then it has proved its durability for work. If the dog passes health and breed rating screens and comes from similar good working stock, it will probably pass on its positive attributes to its progeny. It is from Schutzhund dogs that I personally know and have trained with that I will probably pick

my next puppy from. Unless you see the dog in training, you can't know the real temperament of the dog. Some dogs are hard and/or dominant and cannot be easily trained, so they never score highly. Some quality dogs end up with poor handlers that aren't good trainers. Some dogs are softer and train easily for decent points in a trial but wouldn't stand up to a hard fight with a real adversary. This is where years of experience training dogs creates the ability to judge whether a dog is good or not. Whether or not the dog will produce good working progeny is only learned by years of experience breeding or being able to look at the results of previous breedings from the sire and dam.

My Opinion on German Shepherd Working Lines

MY OPINION, based on years of working German Shepherds in police and Schutzhund, testing and tattooing numerous litters and working picking puppies for myself and others, is that prospective puppy buyers should seek out experienced breeders who work their own stock and breed working line dogs. For German Shepherds, this means the working lines from Europe, not the so-called "show lines" from Germany, show dogs that have Schutzhund titles but are bred to win in the show ring rather than to perform in working trials. While some of the show lines work well, it has been my experience that they don't consistently produce this ability. Working lines are bred to work in trials, not to win conformation shows, although the dogs have to be sound, and, if the dogs are German Shepherds bred in Germany or registered and bred under the United Schutzhund Clubs of America (USA) registration system, the dogs have to meet minimum conformation standards, have working titles and be screened for hip dysplasia. I also tend to shy away from dogs with more than a quarter "East German" lineage because many of these dogs can be too emotionally sensitive, although if the parents are good working dogs, the puppies will probably be okay. The only other breed I have had extensive experience with is Labradors, but the same rules apply – buy from a breeder that works, titles and screens their breeding stock. The more experience they have in this area, the better.

Pick the Breeder before you Pick the Puppy

Finding a breeder you can trust is more important than the actual picking of the puppy. A good breeder will steer you to the right litter or puppy based on their experience with their progeny. A good breeder will do their best to make things right if something goes wrong and the puppy has a fault that won't allow it to work. Because of all the work that goes into getting titles on dogs, good puppies from good breeders will not be cheap, but to a great extent you get what you pay for. Look into the breeder's

reputation and how they have treated others, and how many of their dogs are working in police and Schutzhund homes. Ask for references and contact the owners of those working dogs. Breeders are often a good resource for older dogs that have been returned because of divorces, life changes, etc. A good breeder will let you see and work with the parents, review the titles and scores with you, produce paperwork for screenings, breed ratings, etc.

Check Out the Parents

Once you have located a breeder and a litter, check out the parents. I strongly recommend that prospective police dogs be of medium size and not over-angulated. Large dogs don't have as much stamina as smaller dogs and large and over-angulated dogs are less agile and more prone to injury. Look for a compact build and a strong, straight back. Watch the parents move and work and see how fast or agile they are. If the parents are agile, the puppies will be also. For dogs that will do bite work, look for a strong head, jaws and teeth.

If all you want for a dog is a working dog that will not be bred, don't get obsessed with color or other conformation details that don't affect working ability. Often a breeder will sell a dog with less color or missing teeth (note- you won't know if a puppy is missing teeth until it has its adult teeth) or has an undescended testicle for a reduced price, and these dogs will work as well as any dog that can qualify in the show ring. When I talk about missing teeth, it is not uncommon for German Shepherds and other breeds to be missing pre molars, the smaller teeth behind the canines. This will not affect the dog's working ability. Obviously, if the dog is missing a canine or has an extremely poor bite, the dog's ability to do protection work might be compromised. In German Shepherds, if the parents and grandparents have passed breed surveys, most of the progeny should have teeth correct enough to work.

Personal Preferences

If you have personal preferences in a working dog, examine the parents with these preferences in mind. For example, I don't want a dog over 80 pounds. While few female German Shepherds will reach this weight, many of the males will, so I would want to look for smaller parents if I want a male. Some German Shepherd bloodlines are known to produce very hard dogs that readily exhibit aggression towards their handlers. If you aren't able to raise and handle this type of dog, ask the breeder for their advice in this area regarding their dogs.

Testing Puppies

Once you have picked a breeder, inquire about their puppy testing process or if you will be allowed to test the litter and pick your own puppy. Also inquire about how the puppies are kept and socialized as they are growing up. Early socialization, play and exposure is essential to proper puppy development. If the breeder doesn't do much with the puppies, it will affect their performance on the puppy tests. Most good breeders socialize and work with their puppies, and many are kept in the house with the family, ensuring a good basic socialization period.

If the puppies have not been worked with, this can be kept in mind when giving the test. If the parents still seem very good, are from good working lines and the puppy you want still tests out fairly well, then don't hesitate to take the puppy, but be aware that you have some extra homework to do by socializing the puppy with people, new environments and other dogs before the end of the critical 12 week period. For a good article on the dog's critical developmental periods, go to www.westwingsess.com/critical_stages.htm. For some more excellent information on raising puppies, I strongly recommend that puppy buyers purchase Dr. Ian Dunbar's books, [Before You Get Your Puppy](#) and [After You Get Your Puppy](#).

I have found that the puppy tests I've conducted over the years were excellent predictors of the adult dog's personality when the puppies grew up, whether good or bad. Experience is crucial in this process, so if you can get someone who has tested litters before, particularly of the breed you are looking at, get them to do the tests, even if you have to pay to get the right person. Many breeders conduct tests or have someone conduct them for them, because the tests need to be done by a person who is a stranger to the puppies. The key is to learn to read puppy behavior, which is the same as dog behavior but on a smaller scale. The puppies' body postures will reveal what they are feeling at the time of the test more than where they go and what they do. For example, bold and independent puppies will run up and greet the tester because they want to interact with them as a playmate or social companion out of instinct and also to see if the tester has anything good for them, running with head and tail up and approaching boldly and climbing on or even biting the tester. The submissive puppy may also run up to the tester, but they will do it with head and tail low and may climb on to the tester, but they will approach a little tentatively and hesitantly. The submissive and insecure puppy will follow the tester because they are insecure in the new place and see the tester as security and will have a low tail and head. The bold puppy will follow out of social attraction, but his or her head will be high and tail up and wagging. Both types of puppies approach and follow the tester, their actions are basically the same, but the body language they display reveals the difference in their emotions or reasons for doing the actions.

I find that many new breeders have problems rating puppies because they become emotionally involved with their puppies. The puppies will also react differently with them because the puppies know them, and the breeder usually interacts with the puppies as a group instead of individually. It is not a good idea to rate puppies based on how they behave in a group, one, because they will react differently when alone, and two, because you tend to compare the puppies against each other (that one was first out of the litter box, first to greet me, etc.) rather than evaluating the attributes of the individual. Rank order and competition affects the puppies' behavior when they are in a group. The puppy that greets people first is not always the best one. That puppy may be just a little insecure, or just more physically developed than the others, who aren't quite a fast yet, or the other puppies are more secure and less worried about pandering to the people in their lives.

If a breeder says that they perform puppy tests, ask them how the tests are done. To be done correctly, they need to be done on each puppy individually, by a person who is a stranger to the puppies, and in a place the puppies have never been before, usually indoors, because outside has too many distractions. If the breeder's testing doesn't fulfill these requirements, you should ask to do your own tests, even if it is just with the puppy they present to you.

Some breeders will only allow you to test one puppy, the one they have picked for you, or a few puppies that are available for sale. Experienced working dog breeders know their puppies and are very good at picking pups based on their experience and tests. Buyers should not get upset if they don't get what they think is the best puppy, because it is the option and duty of the breeder to save the best for breeding.

Volhard Puppy Test

When I test puppies, I use the puppy test formulated by the Volhards that can be found at www.volhard.com. It has worked well for me, is utilized by many different people and has allowed me to compare litter scores down through the years. The test includes social aspects, dominance, hardness, forgiveness, noise sensitivity, retrieving and chasing a rag. Combined with knowledge of canine body language, it is an excellent tool for predicting the adult personality of the puppy, assuming that the puppy is raised in a reasonably good environment.

The test I first learned includes one additional element that was added to the Volhard tests at the start of the test, and that involves observing what the puppy does when first placed in the testing room, a place new to the puppy. When the breeder first puts the puppy in the room, it is put down about 10 or more feet from the tester, facing away. The breeder exits quickly and quietly and the tester doesn't make a movement

or noise, but just observes. Since most puppies can't see very well at distances at this age, they suddenly think they are all alone in the room. It has been my experience that puppies that show confidence at this point and readily start exploring the room with a positive attitude will be confident as adults and able to work in new environments with confidence. While testing, the breeder may observe through a glass window, but they can't make any noise or distract the puppy in any way.

One caution about the test: sometimes individuals in a litter or even entire litters develop a little slowly. The larger GSD lines will be slower in development and often the larger puppies, like males, will be slower developing than the females. These litters or pups can be tested a little later than 7 weeks, like 8 or 8.5 weeks. I have seen litters from retrieving adults where the smaller pups retrieved well but the larger pups did not because of developmental delays. These pups did make attempts to retrieve and chased things, but did not pick them up or carry them as well. In general, if the parents are fetch freaks and the puppies make decent attempts, they will probably grow up to be like the parents even if they don't do it due to developmental delays at testing time.

Most German Shepherd puppies being tested around 7 to 8 weeks are just beginning to see distances and can have a hard time focusing on moving objects and pursuing them. The retrieving and biting objects need to be tailored to the size of the puppies – many do not have mouths big enough to pick up a tennis ball, so a ball of paper, small ball and bunch of keys may be used as testing objects. Malinois and other breeds develop faster and will show clearer responses. Even if the puppies haven't progressed far enough to show a clear response, usually their attempts will reveal how dedicated they are to the test. If they are trying with everything they have to catch the ball or rag, then they are good prospects.

All tests need to be done in a place that is new to the puppies and with a person that is new to them. One element that can affect the testing is having to test in an area where a lot of other dogs are barking in the background. This often happens in kennel situations. If the puppies have heard this before, it is not a problem. If the puppies aren't used to it, their responses in the first exploring part may be delayed as they get used to it. After all, a whole bunch of adult dogs barking is important and threatening to a puppy. The better working dogs will adapt and their body language, head and tail up, will reveal their confidence by the end of the testing.

If a puppy is obviously sick, it may not test well and should be re-tested when it is healthy.

Key Elements of Testing

Some key elements that I have found important during the test: one, I put great weight on what the puppy does in the first part of the test,

when the breeder brings it into the strange room, puts it down in the middle of the empty floor facing away from the exit and then leaves, hopefully without the puppy following. The very best working dogs recover very quickly, perking up and moving off with head and tail up, exploring the new place within 3 seconds or so. This response has been relatively rare in my experience with German Shepherds and Labrador puppies. Most pups sit there over 4 seconds and then go. How they go is then important, is it head and tail up, fast or confident, or head and tail down, slinking around. The more confidence a pup shows in this part of the test, the more confidence it will show in new environments. Any puppy that does not explore or spends all its time trying to cling to the tester because of insecurity should not be picked as a working dog.

For work, if a puppy shows noise shyness, it should be rejected. Startling and investigation are desirable, but startling and a fear response is not. Working puppies should also be emotionally and physically hard.

Working puppies should chase moving objects and it is preferable that they mouth, grab and pick them up. The better ones will retrieve a bunch of keys or other metal objects. I always play with a small rag or sock if testing dogs for bite work. How puppies pursue and bite the rag reveals their "genetic" grip. Puppies that pursue eagerly, even if uncoordinated due to delayed development, grab the rag full or at least regrip to full, then hold hard, calm and firm will do the same if properly trained in bite work. If the puppies grab, thrash, rebite, etc., they will probably do so as an adult, not matter how they are trained. Puppies that are bred to do bite work should be very mouthy, biting people, objects, carrying stuff, etc.

If you aren't allowed to do full tests on a puppy, you can get a pretty good idea of the puppy's quality on your own. Before the puppy gets to know you, take the puppy to an area where the puppy has never been before, preferably indoors with few distractions or outdoors without much to smell, like on pavement. See if the puppy will explore while you stay still, and what its body language is like when it does explore. It should explore, preferably with confidence. Walk away, call the puppy, and let it come to you and then walk again and see if the pup follows you. How does it follow? Head and tail up with confidence is best. Do something to make a loud noise that the puppy can investigate, like drop a wooden board or pot about 5 feet behind the puppy. It will probably jump, but then it should approach the source of the sound, not run away.

Take the puppy over some new footing, like a plastic tarp, metal sheet, etc. The puppy should follow willingly. Then check retrieving by playing with a crumpled paper ball (for little pups), a smaller ball or toy, then something hard like a bunch of metal keys. Play with a soft rag, like a small towel or sock, and sometimes tying it on a string or thin rope helps the puppies to play with it instead of you. Is the puppy's play enthusiastic, all out? Does it bite the rag full, hard and calm? If the puppy appears a little

too young for the tests, it may not be coordinated, but if it tries really hard to play or grab, it is probably a good candidate. Effort and emotional make up are more important to read in these tests than actual performance at physical tasks if the puppies are young and uncoordinated.

Note the energy level of the puppy during testing. If the pup gallops and runs everywhere, doing everything at a fast pace throughout the whole test, the pup has a very high energy level. If it trots most of the time, it is a medium level dog, and if it walks or is sluggish, it is a low energy dog. High energy dogs are high maintenance because they require constant attention and management. Not every handler likes this type of dog, but they are willing and ready to work anytime and anywhere. Kept in good physical shape, they can work 6 hours straight, take a short break and bounce back ready to work another 6 hours. They have a high capacity for training and can be trained for longer periods with more intensity than other dogs. This is an advantage if you need to finish the dog's training in a short period of time.

I prefer puppies that make eye contact with people. The better working puppies have the confidence and socialization to do this.

The Volhard test scores puppies with a numerical score that, in general, rates the more pronounced or confident and dominant responses with the lowest score. For a working dog, the lowest scores (more confident responses) in Social Attraction, Following, Touch Sensitivity, Retrieving and Sight Sensitivity are desirable. In my opinion, a 2, 3 and possibly one 4 in Restraint, Social Dominance and Elevation Dominance make for a more trainable dog that will accept guidance and leadership from a handler. A puppy that tests out as all 1s, biting and growling even at a young age, will definitely be a handful and probably exhibit handler aggression when an adult unless they are raised and trained very carefully. Sometimes a dog that has very high aggression and dominance and yet lacks true confidence will fight restraint and their lack of control in the Dominance exercises.

Socialize, Socialize, Socialize

Your work has only begun once you pick and buy a quality working puppy. You have to raise it properly, including extensive socialization with other dogs, animals and people. I strongly suggest you buy Dr. Dunbar's books on raising puppies, as they are a great help and will save much time and aggravation by preventing common puppy problems. Most dog aggressive dogs are caused by poor socialization. A good working dog is created as much by how it is raised and trained as how it is bred. Proper raising teaches the dog many basic behaviors and creates a life long relationship and communication between the dog and its handler. Many basic training exercises and "foundation" or "imprinting" work for later work

can be accomplished at a young age, setting the stage for rapid learning when the dog begins formal training for work.