

Picking a Puppy for SAR

By—Judy Graham

This is the big day. I'm about to choose a puppy to be my companion for the next how many years—to guide me through the dark on night searches and give me a quick lick in the face when I'm discouraged, and drop a rock on my foot when I'm not paying attention to business.

I've helped choose SAR puppies before for myself and others, so I have a pretty good idea what I'm looking for. But the choice is still awesome. It's hard to predict how a ball of puppy fur will turn out a year from now, six years down the line.

I've narrowed the field down to one particular litter of eight-week old German Shepherds and, further, to the bitch puppies in the litter. Some of my teammates are working other breeds, but I'm a Shepherd person. And I prefer bitches.

I've done my homework. I checked the pedigree and recognized a lot of old friends, dogs I knew or had heard about. I know what the pups' ancestors produced in the way of structure and working temperament.

Closer to home, I've visited the sire and gotten to know him. I've talked to his owner about the puppies he's producing. His temperament is solid; he has good substance, sound hips, and a handsome head.

The mother of the litter is a search dog. I've watched her work, and I like her style. She covers ground effortlessly, with balanced shoulder and hindquarter action and a solid back. That's the kind of movement I'm looking for in a SAR puppy.

I've visited this litter from the time the pups were born, and I know their getting the early socialization that's so important to a well-adjusted dog. When they were tiny, I held each pup on its back in the palm of my

hand, to see which were the screamers, which accepted this kind of "discipline," and which curled up, perfectly content.

As they got older, I watched to see which were the most adventurous, which followed me wherever I went, which stuck close to their mother. Since I've seen them often I don't have to rely now on a one-time shot when the best puppy may be sacked out after a rough play session.

Now, at eight weeks, I'm going to run the puppies through a little test adapted from Guide Dogs for the blind in San Rafael, CA. Besides providing socialization and early training, a series of temperament tests gives a good indication of intelligence, courage, and willingness to please—traits essential to a guide dog, and to a search dog as well. These tests should extend over a sev-



A simple fetch-test can tell a lot about a puppy's intelligence, courage, and willingness to please.

eral-week period, from six to ten weeks of age, for instance, for maximum training and socialization, as well as for evaluating the pups. Most puppy buyers I don't have the luxury of several weeks of testing, but they should try to observe the puppies more than once.

One by one I take each puppy to a place she's never been before. I give her a minute or two to check out the new surroundings, and I make note of how curious she is. Next I put a thin nylon show lead around the puppy's neck and try to get her to heel beside me. This is all fun and games, no jerks or heavy leashwork. I'm looking for a puppy who naturally likes to walk beside me when I ask her to, who doesn't play dead dog or try to gallop off into the sunset.

Now we do a series of three comes and three fetches. A pup of this age should run happily to a stranger; she certainly should come to someone she knows as well as me.

Then I rollout a small rubber ball and ask her to get it. If she sees it but otherwise ignores it, I score her pretty low on curiosity (intelligence). If she's interested but won't go out for the ball, I wonder about her courage. If she grabs it and runs, she may be more willing to please herself than me.

It's a rare puppy who dashes out, grabs the ball and brings it back fast, dropping it in the tester's hand—especially without previous training. I won't automatically reject a puppy who doesn't fetch. In the tradeoffs between intelligence and willingness to please, I don't mind a little independence. After all, my future SAR dog is going to be working out ahead of me, off lead, making decisions based on what her nose tells her.

Next I show each puppy herself in a mirror, another test of curiosity-courage, and I set off an alarm clock a few feet away. I won't pick a pup who runs from the big noise.

Now I summon a handy "stranger," friend who's been waiting in the wings, to



Look at structure as well as temperament in choosing a puppy for SAR. Note the shoulder extension and easy movement in this eight-week-old Shepherd.

approach and stamp his foot about ten inches in front of the pup. A good puppy makes sure the foot isn't going to stamp any closer, then goes, tail wagging, to meet the new friend.

For a final test, I place the puppy in a standing position; then, with my hand on her withers, I gently push her down and hold her there until she accepts the fact that she can't get up. I like a pup who resists—but not too much.

After all the tests, I think I've made up my mind. Actually, now I have some data to support why I've had my eye on the little girl with the red collar since I noticed, weeks ago, what bright eyes she has. And that's really the final test. I can't give it a quantitative score, but I'll go with the puppy who grabs my fancy and runs. We're going to be a team, and we'll have good times together.

Editor's note: This is one handler's method of selecting a puppy for SAR work. Dog and handler are a team for the dog's life. It's important to pick the right partner.

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