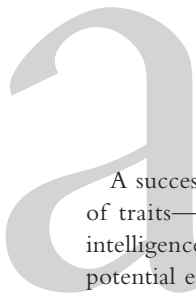# measures
of greatness

A working dog is born, then made. One expert in search-and-rescue and police-dog training recommends a scientific approach to picking a partner.

By William Dotson, Jr.

a successful working dog must possess a combination of traits—nerve strength, soundness, scenting ability, intelligence, and drive, just to name a few. You can spot potential early, when the dog is less than a year old, and it's important to cast a cold, analytical eye on the candidate, not allowing emotions or other factors to sway you. If you start with the right raw material, training will seem easy.

Over the years, I've developed a set of tests to examine potential working partners. Careful attention to these tests, and a no-nonsense approach to the evaluation, will greatly reduce the risk of training a dog only to find out that he's not able to do the job for which he was chosen.

Too many people make selections based on emotion, particularly with puppies. It is important to select wisely.

Working dogs come from all kinds of backgrounds, from top breeders to community shelters. When starting with a puppy, the best advice I can give is:

• Look only at puppies from reputable breeders.

• Determine that both parents have *working* titles (either sport titles or are certified professional dogs).

• Ask for the medical history, including hip and elbow results.

• Ask to *see* both parents, and, if possible, assess their abilities for the job. If the parents don't have the genetics, the pups won't either.

• Be ready to look at a litter and then *not* purchase a puppy if it isn't correct.

• Understand that puppies come with built-in risk, and that they may fail.

• The dog's color has absolutely no bearing on the potential for the dog.

Basic Requirements

When assessing a pup or adult dog, remember that working dogs must have the following attributes:

• **Ideal body type**

The dog must be able to physically perform in the normal environments encountered on the job, whether it's a rubble field or a busy airport terminal. Proper structure is

critical. It allows the dog to perform with the least expenditure of energy and with reasonable agility. This means that the dog must have a structure that is efficient, strong, and without genetic anomalies. The skeleton must consist of a dense bone structure, sound joints, and proper orientation of the skeletal system. His musculature must be well formed, and ligaments and tendons must be without anomalies.

I recommend that the reader consult *Dogsteps,* by Rachel Page Elliott, to better understand the relationship between structure and function. She explains the subject better and in more detail than I can in this article.

• Scenting ability

Almost all canines possess adequate olfactory ability for most jobs they will be asked to perform. But the dog must also have a desire to use that ability, and not all do.

• Drive

The dog must have the necessary drives, the internal genetic motivation to perform the required tasks. These drives are genetic in nature and nurtured and developed by training.

• Nerve strength

I watch to see if a dog will maintain a direct gaze with my eyes. Does a loud noise or something falling on him, cause him to focus on the unexpected event, or does he shrug it off and keep on going?

• Socialization

They must have appropriate reactions to humans and other animals, including other dogs.

Process of Elimination

My testing method for working ability follows a fairly rigid sequence. If the dog passes one exercise, we move on to the next. While performing these tests, I will be observing the dog to determine if he has attributes that are important to the working dog and to the job he will be asked to do.

Testing should be conducted in a location unfamiliar to the dog, and should follow this sequence:

• As the dog enters the testing area, watch for body carriage, friendliness, awareness of surroundings, and attention on the tester. If the dog shows fear or appears unsure, the test is over. If he is reasonably sure, continue.

• Using a ball or tug, get the candidate's attention and toss the object in full view of the dog. If he ignores or leaves the test object, the test is over. If he immediately grabs the test object, the test continues. Look for assertiveness as the dog grabs the object. For this exercise, use an object that is not familiar to him.

• Throw the ball 15 to 25 feet from the dog. Here we look for the dog's intensity as he goes to and grasps the object. There is no need for the dog to *retrieve;* in fact, I prefer that the dog does not want to give it up. The true retrieve is a trained behavior. If there is concern that the dog cannot be caught, put the dog on a 30-foot-long check cord. The dog must continue to run to the ball and grab it at least 10 times. If he doesn't, the test is over. I have thrown the ball literally 50 to 60 times for a dog as I talked to the owner. If the dog will not continually run to the ball and grab it with intensity, that is a sign that as a detection dog he might quit and be inconsistent in his job. This is a test of *prey drive,* one of the big-two drives, without which the training will be frustrating and fruitless. I have watched good handlers work for years and not be successful and then find the correct dog and get further in a week.

• After throwing the object and determining that the dog has

Working-Dog Blueprint

We could develop a "specifications" sheet for this animal, much in the same way as we would for a piece of machinery.

- Capable of climbing, negotiating obstacles—good balance
- Renewable energy source
- Tough outer coating—resistant to abrasion and weather
- Engine capable of powering for extended periods of time
- Portable, able to be moved on several kinds of transportation systems and carried by handler if necessary
- Chemical sensing capability that can detect odors to parts per billion or less
- Programmable by verbal and visual commands to operate in a predictable manner
- Functional memory module that can be programmed for specific tasks
- Rugged, reliable, resistant to environmental distractions and conditions
- Weight: 35–70 pounds
- Twin audio sensors—bi-directional, source locating
- Twin video sensors

This may be a lighthearted way to look at the working dog, but it's also a good way to think about the necessary capabilities, the working dog as a mobile, self-powered scent-location device.

adequate prey drive, the tester holds the dog by the collar and throws the object into high weeds or light debris. Watch the dog for about 10 seconds. The longer he keeps his gaze on the spot where the object disappeared, the better. If the dog immediately runs to the last-seen location of the object and starts hunting for it, watch the intensity as he hunts for the object. The dog should hunt for up to five minutes. If he doesn't, the test is over. Here the object is not whether the dog finds the tug or ball, but how intensively he searches for it. I have tested a number of dogs using the "fake throw" and watched them search for 10–15 minutes with no loss of intensity. This assesses the dog's hunt drive, the second of the two major drives.

Learning Curve

If the dog does well in these exercises, I will accept him for training unless there's a remarkable, and visible, physical flaw.

With any dog, there is still a possibility of a hidden flaw, such as hip or elbow dysplasia, eye problems, or heart conditions. Before training starts, a veterinarian's OK is needed. The veterinary evaluation should include hip and elbow X-rays, eye exam, blood work, and a general physical.

As training progresses, watch for behavioral or physical problems that may arise. If one crops up, you may have to make some hard decisions about whether to continue to train. As soon as possible, be sure to have your dog experience all kinds of potential obstacles he may encounter on the job, such as slick floors, dark spaces, and tight spaces. Some of these fears cannot be trained through, and the sooner you know it, the better. For disaster-dog candidates, during the evaluation I will toss a ball into rubble. The dog must, without hesitation, immediately enter the rubble, maneuver through it, and grasp the thrown object. If he doesn't, he is not a candidate from that point on. Many dogs can be trained to move through rubble in an acceptable manner, but under stress they will not perform.

Assessing a dog in this manner takes time, and an ability to set emotions aside in the selection of a dog for a specific job. But using this testing method, you can make sure that the partner you choose is truly ready for duty. gz