

THE "LEFTOVER PUPPY"-- COMMON MYTHS ABOUT ACQUIRING A DOG

A lot of opinions have been written about acquiring a dog or puppy. Many are by so called "experts" and some are simply old wives tales. After more than 30 years of dealing with Aussies, I don't believe there are any absolute rules that haven't been proven wrong. Dogs are as different as night and day, just as people are. How can anyone make absolute statements that will cover all puppies, all dogs, and all the people who will own them? Kind of silly actually.

First let me address the "leftover puppy". This is the puppy that is not sold by eight weeks. Or the one in the litter that isn't spoken for. I can't tell you how many times a caller has asked with a very suspicious tone, "is it the leftover puppy?" That is often followed by, "I will wait or look around". So let's look at why one or two puppies would be left unsold?

A litter of mostly boys when the demand at the time is for girls (or vice versa) will leave a guy or two waiting for a new home. I have often had deposits on 8 or 10 puppies with some people specifying a color and sex. I have returned half the deposits more than once because my litter did not produce what was wanted at that time. A rush of callers looking for reds when the litter is mostly blues and blacks can leave a breeder with a puppy or two unsold. But somehow the suspicion remains regarding the "leftover puppy". People seem so sure that they missed the "best one". Having observed people's reasons and methods for choosing puppies over the years, they don't have much to worry about. The last puppy has just as much chance of being that "dynamic working dog" and that "companion of a lifetime" as the first one chosen.

Let me tell you about a couple of "leftover puppies". The first that comes to mind is WTCH Las Rocosa Bonny Kyle. Kyle won the 1983 Futurity, was a multiple HIT winner and is a Hall of Fame Sire. At the Futurity his owner, Kerry Russell, told me when he called Hartnagles looking for a futurity prospect he was told they had only one puppy left (one of two that had been kept by the Hartnagles as "pick puppies"). You see, leftover doesn't always mean "not wanted." Often, breeders keep back their own picks, to choose from later! I know Kerry never regretted the purchase of his "leftover puppy".

Another "leftover" was purchased at several months of age by Joni Swanke in 1992. That puppy was WTCH Hangin' Tree Dude RD PATDcs RTDcs, National Finals winner, National Specialty HIT winner and Hall of Fame Sire. So much for the lack of quality of "leftover puppies".

This discussion is about working or companion dogs of course and not conformation show dogs. Since conformation puppies are at least partially purchased based on their structure and cosmetic appearance, an educated guess can be made on whether or not a puppy will mature into a show quality dog. The first puppies taken may be the "best prospects" since some of the traits important to his purpose are visible to the eye. Less visible are traits like working instinct and trainability

There are times when a breeder has held back what they considered the "pick puppy" and then decide to sell it at a later date. This delayed decision to sell is not necessarily because the dog is no longer good quality. Many breeders would rather end up raising and caring for their favorite pup if they are going to keep one to an older age. It isn't uncommon to hold back a pup to train, but if the right home comes along it is available.

What about the theory that you must take your new puppy home at 7 or 8 weeks or it's entire personality will be formed before you enter it's life? And the older puppy will never bond to you. How ridiculous! If it were true I suppose all dog breeders should euthanize all puppies who are not sold by the age of 8 weeks because they are doomed to failure. That, of course, makes about as much sense as the original theory.

Puppies have successfully gone to new homes at 7 weeks, 10 weeks, 16 weeks and later. Older puppies will conform to their new home, take training and turn into outstanding dogs if the genetic potential was there in the first place. An older puppy may take a few weeks to adjust to a new home while an 8 week old pup is less aware of his surroundings, but what are a few weeks to the total of a dog's life? Puppies, of course, do not all mature at exactly the same pace. Absolute statements about puppies make about as much sense as absolute statements about children.

Some folks feel it is terribly important to get that cute fuzzy little puppy because he is, of course, so cute. The three month old puppy is probably gangly, not fuzzy any more, and sure not as cute. On the other hand three or four month old puppies don't need as much constant supervision, are less delicate, and are getting to an age where they are more naturally housebroken. That little puppy requires a lot of attention and before you know it, he isn't cute and fuzzy any more either!

The uncertainty about acquiring an adult dog seems widespread. Those involved in rescue or who have obtained a rescue dog know better than anyone how wonderful adult dogs can be in a new home. Those who have purchased a trained or started stock dog are aware that the dog can make the transition. The Australian Shepherd has a strong need to bond with a human. Taken from the human(s) they love, they are much more likely to bond rapidly to another than to spend time "missing" the original person in their life. Dogs sent to a trainer have often bonded to the trainer and are not interested in their owner when he sees the dog for the first time several months later. However, they will transfer this affection back when returned home. I personally have known and obtained dogs who were adults, even to the ages of 5, 8, or 10 who fit in perfectly in their new home. Again, it may take a few weeks to build the bond, but isn't your dog worth it?

To find the right dog for you and your family don't narrow your search for the "perfect" dog by buying into myths or absolute rules, supposedly written to cover everything from the Toy Poodle to the St. Bernard. The "right Australian Shepherd" may be any age and just might be someone's "leftover puppy".

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