

Breeding for Performance

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This is a controversial topic among Airedale breeders. One camp of breeders maintain that if you “just breed to the standard, performance will follow.” Another camp believes that if you don't deliberately select for specific performance traits, you will lose them in your gene pool. The second theory is more consistent with dog fancier experiences in other breeds. The selection for performance vs conformation controversy has split many breeds into two types, a field type and a show type and generally the two types have widely different conformational and temperamental traits. In Airedales, their use for performance functions has become increasingly less common over the decades and the show type Airedale is far more common. There are a handful of well established breeders, that do emphasize hunting traits in their selection process, and they pay less attention to conformational traits. Some of these breeders started with oversized “Oorang” or “Mountain” type Airedales and others started with show bred Airedales. This handful of breeders have continued the tradition of highly hunting oriented Airedales.

Another group of Airedale breeders has attempted a more difficult task. They have tried to breed dogs that are both conformation and performance oriented. This group is active with the ATCA (Airedale Terrier Club of America) and its hunting/working committee. They have seen varying degrees of success with their hunting and show activities. Some of their dogs really do seem to “have it all”.

On the subject of performance breeding there is a growing body of scientific research on the topic. The demand for performance dogs (for working purposes rather than hunting) has grown exponentially in recent years. The training success rate of these dogs has been unfortunately poor with dogs from the general population of working breeds, for their training as search and rescue dogs, bomb and drug dogs, military and police dogs, and seeing eye and service dogs. This has led to “purpose bred” breeding programs, often with government contracts, to breed dogs that have much greater odds of successfully completing training and having long productive service careers. Very large breeding programs, involving hundreds of dogs in closed breeding systems with tight selection and rigorous standards has produced working dogs that vary greatly from the breeds that they

originate. Often working traits are not compatible with livability as pets. Working dogs (for many tasks) require a great deal of drive, boldness, courage, and intelligence. These traits are essential for heavily worked service dogs, but are often less suitable for typical pet dogs that live most of their lives on the sofa. For the typical pet owner, a more calm, even bashful pet is more handleable and more suitable.

These purpose bred breeding programs have used rigorous scientific approaches for health selection, performance selection and breeding selection. This is creating a growing wealth of information for breeders of show and pet dogs. Breeders that begin to study this information will be able to improve their breeding programs significantly.

What is the significance of this for Airedale breeders? Airedales are historically represented as multi-functional and multi-talented dogs. Yet it is clear that you must select for traits in order to retain them. All breeders can occasionally get an outstanding individual dog that “has it all”, but how are breeders going to be able to consistently produce outstanding multi-functional dogs, that still fit the standard of the breed (avoiding show fads and fashions)? It is a huge and difficult task. The breeder has to also consider the livability of the dog as a pet as they progress through the selection and breeding process. Then the specific performance traits that the breeder wants to retain have to be identified and selected. Are the traits-of-interest hunting (nose, trailing, fight, retrieving, independence), obedience and agility training (drive, attentiveness, speed, dependence) or service work (involving a huge variety of tasks depending on purpose). These traits are not always compatible.

So how does a multi-purpose breeder proceed? What specific traits are selected? Few breeders have consistently produced multi-purpose dogs. Identifying the temperamental traits for selection is one of the goals of Texter Airedales.

Our approach at Texter Airedales is evolving. We claim no special expertise in the functional temperament area of breeding selection and look forward to learning more. We are trying to incorporate the successful selection techniques that are becoming widely appreciated in the scientific dog breeding community within the temperamental goals of our own breeding program. We do not hunt, so our goals does not include selection for hunting traits. Further, we are not interested in dogs that are people

aggressive, so military and police selection criteria are not suitable for our breeding program. Our dogs are primarily pets, so livability traits are essential. We believe that our program can produce dogs consistently above average in suitability for obedience, agility, tracking, scent detection, and search and rescue while still maintaining typical Airedale personalities. Our evolving selection criteria are consistent with these goals. Time and testing will determine if our approaches will be successful.

The following is our temperament scoring technique and selection traits. The scoring system is somewhat arbitrary and is intended only as a guideline for our selection. For example, dogs that scored well overall, but were particularly aggressive or particularly shy or had traits inconsistent with livability would be unlikely to remain in our breeding program.

Selection traits for young dogs

Trainability – This is the fundamental trait for selection. It is evaluated by actual training dogs on simple tasks, like “sit” and stand for examination on a grooming table. Dogs are scored from one to five and the score is tripled for emphasis on importance.

Fetching and toys Toy and fetch orientation has been strongly associated with success in training for multiple purposes. Dogs are scored from 1 to 5 and scores are doubled for emphasis. If a dog naturally fetches repeatedly, returning the toy to the thrower, and obviously enjoys carrying toys, it scores high.

Confidence and drive- This is a temperament trait that has to be carefully assessed. Dogs with extraordinary drive are often hard to live with, if they are not positively directed. (Think Border Collie). We see Airedales like this occasionally, and don't find the personalities to be very livable. Confidence is another matter. Airedales should be bold personalities that are not intimidated by circumstances. Further, they should handle correction without sulking or ducking. This trait is the counterpart to shyness and is scored from one to five. Four and five are for dogs that are confident and bold regardless of circumstances and are given as bonus points to emphasize this positive trait.

Calmness- Airedales are active dogs. It is expected that they investigate any stimulation in their environment. However, hyperexcitability negatively

impacts trainability. Bonus points are awarded to dogs that exhibit willingness to investigate, but don't persistently "stick their nose" into all activities. Up to five points are awarded to more laid back personalities.

Nose- We don't hunt and don't plan to start hunting. However, nose is a characteristic useful in a number of performance venues, including tracking, drug and bomb detection, and search and rescue. This is evaluated on a 1 to 5 scale as pups seek hidden treats. We hope to discover a better, repeatable test for this trait.

Anxiety, fearfulness, and shyness- Research has strongly indicated that these traits are not consistent with performance oriented training in any field. Texter assigns a negative score for this trait in temperament evaluation. Minus points are assigned for dogs that occasionally exhibit situational shyness, more, if situational shyness does not resolve with pup/dog investigation of noise or situation.

Livability- These are negative scores assigned for certain traits associated with how suitable the dog is as a pet. Traits for deduction would include escapism, drinking with head submerged in the bucket, and other obnoxiousness personality traits. We have found many of these traits to be highly heritable. This subjective score would range up to negative five depending on severity.

Aggressiveness- Any aggressiveness toward humans results in immediate removal of the dog from the breeding program. The only exception would be in an obvious protective situation. Aggressiveness toward other dogs is scored as a negative. Few Airedales will back down from a fight, so only excessive aggressiveness is penalized. Puppies that bite other pups and hold, and that draw blood are given negative scores. All pups are expected to co-exist without separation. Adult dogs that seek fights with other dogs, consistently fence fight, or that must be isolated from other dogs are given negative scores.

These criteria are evolving and we expect them to change as we gain experience with more quantitative, systematic, repeatable, and rigorous temperament evaluation techniques. We have the good fortune of having a large enough breeding program to permit rigorous selection for temperament, conformation, and health issues.

