

Earthdog or Ratter?

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How often have you heard a Norwich owner say their dog will hunt for hours at home or in fields, but when it comes to earthdog tests, he doesn't want to play the game? Many conclude that the earthdog test is artificial and that their dogs are too bright to fall for caged rats they can't get.

I think they are half right. Their dogs do know they can't get the rats and that barking and growling at the cage isn't going to work. That said, I also think the AKC earthdog tests do a pretty decent job of simulating a hunting situation — for earthdogs! Earthdogs are bred to enter the tunnels or dens of their prey and hold that prey at bay until the owner can dig down to kill the cornered animal. Since the diameter of a burrowing animal's den is typically the size of its head, and since the earthdog must be able to traverse the tunnel, we are talking some pretty big prey!

The confusion over the authenticity of the earthdog test begins with the caged rats used to represent the quarry. Many owners assume that since Norwich are bred to hunt rats, they should be naturals for AKC earthdog work, right? Not necessarily! Earthdog rats are simply stand-ins for the badger or woodchuck that would usually live at the end of the tunnel. "Real" rats live anywhere they find food and protection from the elements. Few species are true burrowers, and those that are will average a tunnel diameter of just over three inches. No earthdog is going to be traversing the rat tunnel, barking and growling to hold the rat at bay! The goal is to dispatch, requiring silence and patience in order to surprise the unsuspecting target.

A successful ratter is a dog who is able to locate the quarry and quickly kill it. This requires a dog with a keen sense of sight and smell, the ability to move with speed and agility, and a bite strong enough to clamp down on the rat and give it the single shake needed for extermination. Equally important, the dog must possess the drive to succeed and a constitution that allows him to tolerate the potential consequences of the hunt.

An earthdog requires very similar qualities. Most likely all terriers have a little earthdog in them, as well as a little ratter. It basically boils down to a question of style. More than once I've watched my Cairn Master Earthdog bark and dig to get a rat she's found in the woodpile while one of my Norwich waits quietly at the other end, catching the unsuspecting rat when it tries to make its escape! Both are following their instincts.

Of course, Norwich can and do successfully compete in earthdog tests. Some are naturals, while others can be guided and trained to do what is required to pass the test. If at first your dog doesn't succeed, look at it from his perspective. He needs to learn that this is a game. The real winners are the dog and owner who get to spend a nice afternoon together, playing in the dirt!

— Jill Petersen · Seattle WA · dchipster1@yahoo.com

Guest columnist Jill Petersen lives in Seattle with two Norwich (one a Junior Earthdog) and a Cairn (Master Earthdog). She participated in the first AKC earthdog tests in 1994 and had the first JE, SE, and ME Cairns (mother and son). She is an AKC and CKC earthdog judge and is also very active in

obedience. In her professional life, she works for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, helping to provide Coast Guard support during oil spills.

Needless to say, I am very grateful that Jill could find the time to contribute this column, which outlines the distinction between earthdog and ratter. Thanks so much, Jill.

— Leandra Little, AKC Gazette Breed Columnist

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