

Norwich Terriers, 2-16

Title: The Perfect Demon: Selecting for Temperament

Above all else, Norwich Terriers are appreciated for their temperament. Today, in fact, I received a typical inquiry from someone who having just met a Norwich Terrier “fell in love” and wants one. The official breed standard says, “Gay, fearless, loyal and affectionate. Adaptable and sporting, they make ideal companions.” All through the history of these terriers we find their owners and breeders putting the emphasis on temperament, expecting them to be sporting without being quarrelsome, and having a loving temperament. Marjorie Bunting, in her book *The Norwich Terrier* (1997) mentions that “the Norwich should be a real rattling terrier but with a non-quarrelsome loveable temperament, seldom likely to start a quarrel but quite prepared to give as good as he gets should he be provoked into one.” It was their spirited, determined and friendly disposition that first attracted me to the breed, and having bred them now for many years the consistency and predictability in temperament is remarkable. As breeders, it seems important that we select on temperament if we are to ensure continuance of the correct Norwich Terrier temperament.

Before the emergence of dog kennel clubs at the end of the 19th century, breeds or certain types of dogs were selectively bred to optimize their performance in herding, hunting, and guarding—tasks which required selecting for specific morphological features and behavioral features. More recently, a plethora of “puppy tests” have been developed to help select working dogs (e.g., potential police or guide dogs) and also to match potential companion dog owners with dogs having personality characteristics that match their lifestyles. These tests are generally based on observations and interactions with a dog in a neutral setting and rest on the assumption that behavior is somewhat consistent across time and situations, although research examining the consistency and usefulness of puppy tests in predicting adult behavior is sparse.

Dog temperament researchers have studied a broad array of traits, but summarizing the findings is difficult because the studies use different methods and populations. One challenge is a non-standardized vocabulary. While the words temperament and personality have been used interchangeably, temperament is generally defined as inherited, early appearing tendencies that continue through life. Because the research has emerged from different disciplines, there is no standard lexicon of dog traits and behaviors. Words like “confidence” and “friendliness” have not been defined consistently. Researchers have summarized traits into broad temperament dimensions such as reactivity, fearfulness, activity, sociability, responsiveness to training, submissiveness and aggression, but different studies have used the same term to refer to different behaviors.

Dog temperament research has been motivated by practical concerns, with the largest research contribution in the working dog domain because of the need to identify breeds and individual dogs with temperaments most suited to successful job performance. In fact, there is bias in the breeds assessed in research studies with Labrador Retrievers and German Shepard Dogs dominating the literature (nearly one-third of all studies). I found only one study that included terriers. This study by Borbála Turcsán and colleagues (*Applied Animal Behaviour Science*, 2011) characterized dog breeds on the basis of their typical behavior (trainability, boldness, calmness, and sociability) and tested whether behavioral differences could be attributed to the breeds’ historical function and/or their genetic relatedness. Whereas prior studies reported ambiguous results when comparing behavior at breed-group levels, this study

concluded that differences in breed specific behaviors are determined partly by genetic factors and partly by differences in the historical function of the dogs. The most striking result was in trainability and boldness in the group that included terriers. This does not seem surprising since their genetic relatedness is associated with structural and functional similarity and shared geographic origin. Results were less striking in breeds that have derived from cross-breeding of other breeds independently of their historical function and genetic relatedness—for example, selection for toy dogs has diverged from their original function.

Behavioral traits which may have been the primary focus for many hundreds of years play little role in breed selection today and, especially in Western cultures, dogs are usually regarded as family members or companions and generally no longer used in their original role. In our modern breeding programs, dogs are less likely to be selected for breeding on the basis of their performance regarding historical functions and more likely to be selected based on success at dog shows. Norwich Terriers are courageous and ready to take on a challenge—fortunately these traits are favored in the show ring. Also, these small terriers are desired for their charming sensitive personality as loving members of a household, and they can be energetic or quiet depending on the mood at the moment. I will tend to prefer the feisty pup, whereas a puppy buyer may prefer the quiet one, but I wonder if we, as breeders, favor selection on traits like calmness, will we lose the sporting terrier temperament over time? Although I don't breed Norwich Terriers to bolt fox or dispatch small vermin, occasionally one has bagged a chipmunk and I'm fascinated every time that the behavior has endured. I especially like the wording of an early breed standard (1961) that asked for “a perfect demon yet not quarrelsome and of a lovable disposition.” Although our puppy buyers may place high value on *affectionate* and *loyal*, I hope as breeders we continue to breed to preserve the attributes of a *fearless, sporting* Norwich Terriers whose historical function and temperament are reflected in their typical behavior. Our founding breeders developed a strain of small hardy working terriers with both the fortitude and desire to hunt destructive rodents and an affectionate temperament to earn his keep as a loyal companion.

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