

Both Ends of the Leash

Once in a Lifetime

Why all our dogs
can't be above average

Patricia B. McConnell

“Just amazing. She adored every person and dog she ever met, and she worked for six years as a therapy dog in my practice as a psychologist. Many of my clients were mentally ill and acted erratically, but Belle loved them all, no matter how unpredictable their behavior. I never worried for a second that she'd do anything to my clients but lick their faces.

You'd think this heartwarming story would make me happy, but I wasn't feeling very happy when I heard it. Jacqueline was ready for another dog, and she wanted me to help her find a puppy to take Belle's place. In Jacqueline's own words, Belle was “one in a million” – and therein lay my problem.

What's the chance that any of the puppies under consideration would be able to fill Belle's paws? You guessed it – one in a million. Okay, maybe that's a bit of an exaggeration, but we all understand the meaning of the phrase. “One in a million” dogs are as hard to find as an August snowstorm in Arizona – they're the Tiger Woods of dogdom. By definition, these dogs are so special that if you are lucky enough to have had one, you have little chance of finding another. In some ways, that's so obvious it is barely worth repeating.

Obvious, that is, until someone loses their special dog and starts looking for another. It seems relatively common to acknowledge the extraordinary nature of one dog, and yet we set ourselves up for failure by trying to find another one equally as good. I've known people who couldn't sleep at night, worrying about which pup to select from the litter, because they absolutely had to have the perfect dog. I know the feeling myself; many of us do. The weight of making a good decision rarely hangs as heavy as it does when responsible, educated people



have to decide which pup to choose: Will it be the right one? The one who is everything I've ever wanted in a dog?

I'm not saying that we shouldn't do all we can to find the best dog available – I wish more people would think this through. It's a wise guardian who knows what he or she wants and goes out looking for it. However, it's an equally wise one who accepts what he or she gets, and goes from there. The best genetics, the best breeder or shelter, and the most impressive evaluation can only provide you with a probability statement. Puppies are like the weather – you can make good predictions about what's going to happen in the future, but the system is too complicated for guarantees. There is one guarantee we can count on, though – dogs who are “one in a million” are, well...one in a million.

Perhaps this is a good time to sit back and ask ourselves what we expect of our dogs. It seems to me that it's a lot more than it used to be. A few decades ago, dogs were expected to potty outside, to avoid eating fresh-out-of-the-nest eggs for breakfast and to not bite the children. Well, actually, that last one isn't exactly true. The most common response to a minor dog bite to the hand of a child used to be, “What did you do to the dog?” or, “Didn't I tell you not to bother the dog while he's eating?” Now we are barraged with reports of millions of dog bites every year as a serious health issue, even though the vast majority of those bites are less injurious than the scrapes and scratches kids get from riding their bikes or playing soccer.

Society at large seems to expect dogs to welcome visitors with perfect manners, tolerate abusive

behavior from children, stay scrupulously clean inside and outside the house, and do everything we ask of them with little or no training. Perhaps part of the problem is that there are some dogs like that – and every time someone has one, it creates the expectation that they can find another. That’s a heck of a burden for the next dog to carry.

There is a positive side to our rising expectations of dogs. Surely one reason we expect so much of dogs is that we are beginning to learn more about who dogs really are. Advances in science are suggesting that dogs have emotional lives and cognitive abilities more similar to our own than previously thought. Psychologists and physicians are acknowledging the value of companion dogs to our health and well-being. We’ve discovered that dogs can use their noses to sniff out cancer, oil leaks and endangered turtles (no kidding). As we deepen our understanding of dogs as complex, sentient creatures, it seems that our expectations of them increase as well. That’s a good thing, to some extent, but surely it’s not fair to expect all of our dogs to be above average.

I had a “one in a million” dog once, Cool Hand Luke, and I count myself blessed because of it. Not just because he was so special, but because my work with other dogs reminded me daily just how special he was.

Luke has been gone for several years, and now I have his nephew, a 10-month-old Border Collie named Will. He hasn’t had a stellar start. At eight weeks, he panicked in terror at the sight of another dog at the vet clinic, and in the ensuing weeks, responded to unfamiliar dogs as though they were monsters. By the time he was three months of age, it was clear that he had potential for extreme dog-dog aggression. I’m pleased to say that Will is making notable progress on this issue (as soon as I finish this column, his best buddy is coming over to play). However, this is not the dog who will ever take Luke’s place working with clients’ dog-aggressive dogs.

Problem behavior with other dogs is not the sum total of Will’s sorry beginning. During his first months with me, I spent much of my time on my knees, cleaning up the results of his firehose-style diarrhea. It took three months, and a lot of reading, talking and vet visits, to figure out how to handle his tender gut. Right around the time we got that under control, he began herding the cat so obsessively that both the cat

and I were ready to find him a “good home in the country.” (Oh, darn...I live in the country.) At nine months, the day I put down a dear and beloved dog, Will badly injured his shoulder and required five weeks of “crate rest” and leash restraint. After about three weeks of having an exercise-starved Border Collie attached to me at all times, I asked my partner Jim to take the “spawn of Satan” (those were my exact words) out of my sight for a half-hour so I could regroup.

And yet, Will adores people of all ages, sizes and shapes. He doesn’t just like them, he dissolves in ecstasy every time he meets a new one. He learns tricks faster than any dog I’ve ever had. He’s lovely to look at, as cuddly as I am and worships the ground my Great Pyrenees walks on.

Is Will ever going to be another “one in a million” dog? I doubt it. I might not even keep him, not if he doesn’t turn out to be a good herding dog. But that’s okay. I already had my “one in a million” dog, and how many can a person expect in a lifetime? If you have been lucky enough to live with one of those special dogs, remember the odds of finding another, and take the pressure off yourself to win the lottery twice. Besides, didn’t our mothers tell us it’s not nice to be greedy?

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