

## Matching Puppies to Homes

I find matching puppies to homes to be one of the more stressful parts about breeding dogs. A good match results in a happy puppy and a happy owner and years of notes about how well their new Belgian is doing in that home. A bad match is an unhappy puppy and unhappy owner, not a good situation all round.

Hopefully you have a lovely litter and hopefully more people interested in a puppy than you have puppies. First how do you decide which homes are suitable Belgian homes and second how do you determine which puppy goes to which home?

What makes a good Belgian home? I find the single most important factor is the role the dog will have in that person's life. I know many other Belgian fanciers who got their first Belgian and didn't meet your typical requirements for a 'good home', including me as a college student living at home. But their dog came first and they fit their schedules and lives around its needs. You need to be pretty good at both reading people as well as evaluating puppies and it is good to talk over homes with other more experienced breeders

You can have questionnaires to do some initial screening but I find chatting on the phone and listening carefully to puppy buyers and how they talk about past dogs the most useful. I listen to what happened to their last dog, the research they have done to find a Belgian, are the questions they have sensible and expectations of a dog realistic, and you also find out if you can communicate with each other comfortably which is so important! Will they listen to you when you give advice or have they read a book and now know everything about dog training?

People who are serious about showing or performance sports tend to make their dog a priority. The complication here is that they may be looking for something very specific in conformation or temperament and be disappointed if their puppy does not meet expectations and either return the puppy or rehome it when it does not turn out to be a 'big winner'. You need to be objective about the puppy's potential and they need to be honest about their expectations and plans for the puppy if it isn't exactly what they are looking for.

Pet homes can be the most rewarding to place a puppy in but tricky to evaluate. If they have had a Belgian before you need to learn about its temperament and what they liked about it and what they would have liked to have changed. Some people have had a sweet sensitive girl and like the idea of a bold and more confident boy. But the reality is sometimes too much dog. And the opposite can be true. They had a bold confident male and find a sweet sensitive female disappointing. They need to be realistic about what sort of personality they want to live with. They may have just lost a 14 year old Belgian and have forgotten energy level and time commitment and puppy needs. Call the breeder of their past Belgians if at all possible, there may be a reason they are not getting another puppy from that breeder you should know about, or the other breeder can help in deciding which puppy is the best match for them based on their experience with them.

Some homes which have never had a Belgian before have turned out to be great homes! It depends on what breeds they have had before, the research they have done and lifestyle. Some have 'caught the bug' and gone on to be successful performance or conformation competitors which is really exciting to

watch. I prefer to only sell to new Belgian homes only if they are local, they can meet my dogs and I can see their reaction to big black dogs who might jump up and say hello and are in various stages of shedding. This can be very enlightening! Are they comfortable with the adult Belgians and enjoy them even if they act like dogs? Does hair on their clothes upset them? Do they have good dog skills and seem to be able to read the dogs? I have dogs that 'smile' and if not a 'doggy' person and able to read the rest of the body language it can freak people out to see a couple of big black dogs coming out you smiling!

Once you feel you have some very good Belgian homes lined up you need to match your puppies to the new homes. Breeders do this in many different ways.

If you have been breeding awhile you get a good feel for how a puppy behaves growing up and have a good idea what temperament it will have as an adult. You watch how each puppy reacts to new people and noises. Which ones are first ones to explore an new environment, watch how they react to toys and new surfaces, which ones like to cuddle and which ones are always on the go. By 7 or 8 weeks you have a good idea of which ones are your potential performance puppies and which might be happier in a quieter pet home. I do temperament testing. When I started breeding I found it helped me look at my puppies in an objective and standardized manner. Can you say a puppy will be a HIT winner? No! And how they interpret the scores is different than I necessarily would. But I can observe each pup on its own in a new environment and with a new person and new somewhat stressful situations. Most importantly it gives me a communication tool to discuss why I think a particular puppy is not suited for a particular home. Or that another puppy does have the traits they were looking for in a performance puppy.

Some people like and need a bold confident puppy, they are comfortable setting boundaries and are consistent in training. Others prefer a more submissive puppy and have the patience and training methods to build confidence in a sensitive puppy. When I started breeding in my early 20's I thought everyone had the dog skills that came naturally to me and could handle the type of character I loved. Self-confident, lively and bold. Not so much!

I don't think there are hard and fast rules. So much depends on if the novice puppy buyer is willing to listen to advice and learn when issues come up in raising their new puppy. And this is why being able to easily communicate with the new home is so important.

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