

Picking a Working/Performance Puppy

By Annie Wildmoser

This is a multifaceted question with many variables. This article deals with broad strokes and generalizations, but please keep in mind, as with most things there are exceptions to every rule. This article assumes the buyer is loosely familiar with the sport they want to pursue but doesn't have in depth or practical knowledge of training extensively in the sport or trialing.

Blasphemy Disclaimer

If your love for Agility is greater than your love for the Cane Corso, get a Boarder Collie. If your love for IPO is greater than your love for the Cane Corso, get a German Shepherd. If your love for French Ring is greater than your love for the Cane Corso, get a Malinois. This is an amazing breed that can do and excel at many things. It is also extremely rewarding to live and work with, but getting one with the sole purpose of excelling in a sport is both a dis-service to you and your time, and possibly the breed.

Get Help

Before your puppy is even a twinkle in the bitch's eye finding someone experienced in both the breed and your chosen pursuit is invaluable. Your local sport club may be a good place to start, provided they are open minded and accepting of alternate breeds. Preferably the people you seek input from will have titled and worked extensively with a Corso (or similar breed) in the sport. Find a breeder that has produced dogs that have been successful in the sport, hopefully this person will also have some experience in the sport you are interested in. Mainly this person must be someone who is earnest and you can trust.

Parents

The most important thing in picking your working/performance puppy is to pick good parents. Parents that exhibit the traits you are looking for and, ideally have produced the traits you are looking for. This may sound simple, but it is certainly not easy. Unfortunately there is no fool proof method of parents' guaranteed work-ability outside of having a trained eye and personal observation.

Titles

Titles are a great start, but difficult to find in this breed. Since for this specific

context *consistency* in reproduction is what is most important the fact that multi generational titling is extremely rare at this point in the Cane Corso can make it very difficult. To further complicate things not all titles are created equally. This is true for all breeds. Titles from the internationally recognized sports such as: IPO (Schutzhund), French Ring, and Mondio Ring hold the most weight, as do the nationally recognized sports of Agility, Obedience, PSA and NADF. Be wary and do more research if the breeder is touting titles from an organization you have never heard of and/or is not recognized nationally or by the breed club. Especially where protection sports are concerned there a hundred and one back yard protection tournaments out there, though they can be very fun, few hold much legitimacy. Same thing goes for being aware of titles vs. certificates. Titles in protection sports from one of the above organizations are difficult to attain, that is why we can place some value on them being at least a base line of competency. If basing decisions on titles, looking at actual scores and video is imperative.

Observation and Interaction

Because of the above mentioned difficulties surrounding working/performance titled Corsos there is no substitute to meeting the parents and/or any close relatives of the dogs you are considering. Video can also be very helpful, though be aware that they may be edited. A highlight reel can make a weak dog look strong, actual trial footage is usually the most helpful. If possible, having your mentor in your chosen sport watch with you is a huge bonus.

If you are able to take the time to meet the dogs consider if they exhibit the traits you are seeking. Interact with them if at all possible. Are they shy, sociable, nervous, defensive? Can you pet them? What is their energy level like? Do they like food? Do they like toys? How do they respond to being corrected? How do they act in unfamiliar places? Spend as much time as you can with them. Since your pursuit of sport will require you spending countless hours together consider if the interaction with the relatives is what you hope for and enjoy with your own dog.

Health

Health testing, though in no way fail safe, is a valuable tool. Sports are physically demanding, a dog's durability can obviously impact his quality of life but also your time on the field. Orthopedic hip and elbow soundness are important as is the spine. Cardiac health should not be overlooked. Also ask about common instances of gastric torsion or bloat in the family and be aware of any and teeth problems, especially if you are considering a bite sport.

Looking at the litter

There are a few generally accepted concepts that apply in picking a working puppy. As stated

earlier there are most definitely exceptions, that may change based on how you specifically like to train, but we will focus on what is primarily important to most.

Confidence

A good worker is almost always a confident dog. He isn't too concerned with new things, and if he startles, recovers very quickly. He is balanced between being self-referenced and pack driven. A confident dog can work independently of you and can take the pressures he will inevitably encounter in the sport.

Ask yourself: Is the puppy shy? Defensive? Sociable? Environmentally sound? How does he respond to loud noises? Strange objects? Unfamiliar places and surfaces? If you manage to frighten or startle him, how does he recover? If you make him physically uncomfortable, how forgiving is he? How does he react to being handled and touched? How is he around his litter mates or other dogs?

Drives

Drives have goals. This is what makes them invaluable training tools. Just because a puppy shows a lot of crazy energy does NOT make it a high drive puppy, it merely makes it a high-energy puppy. If the dog is lacking in drive, training will be difficult because your dog will lack motivation. The drives you seek out will have to do with your training style; do you like to work with food? A tug? A ball? If you are pursuing a bite sport the dog should have a baseline desire to have things in his mouth, clamp down and hold on.

Assess drives by asking the following: Is he interested in food? How would you gauge his interest? Is he lazy? If you throw food on the ground does he search extensively even after it is gone? Does he lose interest in it quickly? Can the puppy focus on a toy? Will he go after a ball? Chase a rag if you make it move? Is he very interested in toys? Does he use his paws to try and grasp things or does he use his mouth? What does he do with something he wins? Hold it? Carry it around? Shake it? Take it to the ground and try to destroy it? Is he possessive?

Puppies change constantly and at an alarming rate from birth until about 4-6 months. This is why it is imperative to trust your breeder! A puppy on any given day may show you everything you ever wanted and more, but if he doesn't show it consistently it's not that valuable of an evaluation. If you can see the litter more than once, that would be ideal, but if you cannot, you must trust your breeder to not only report accurately, but to also know what they are looking at to a certain extent. Puppy evaluation tests (such as the Volhard test) are neat tools, but only show you a snapshot in time, so always keep the bigger picture in mind.

Do not overlook your gut feeling. As mentioned before, should you choose to pursue a sport, you will be spending A LOT of time with your dog, liking each other is imperative. If you have picked good parents and the litter is consistent picking the puppy you personally like the most isn't the worst thing you could do.