

How do I pick a good dog?

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People often ask me what they should look for in a good working dog.

It's the question I most often get asked. Sometimes it's put the other way round in typical farmer fashion such as, "What do you look for in a good dog?". Let's presume that you would want to choose a class act. A very good dog ...after all, who would deliberately set out to choose a second rate worker to help you for about 10 years? Unfortunately not everyone spends the time doing their homework. So let's look at what you should know.

Benefits

Stock handled by good dogs "do" much better, carry better condition, grow out better wool, they are less stressed, don't run into and out of watering points, move through yards and sheds much easier without hammering themselves against rails or gates and are much calmer on the boards for shearers.

Additionally, good stock handlers walk less distances and don't put themselves into OH&S situations where they are riding motorbikes at speed, walking through mobs in yards, manually lifting sheep or pushing cattle and therefore lessen their chances of injury.

The bottom line is better prices, less stress, less injuries, saving time and happy shearers.

All round it is a win/win situation. And this is multiplied remarkably when we look at marginal land and/or harsh conditions.

A good dog should be well looked after (like any other valuable member of the workforce) and should be with you for up to 10years.

Very conservative figures suggest that over a 10 year period a good dog will save you approx \$300,000.00 in today's figures.

Background

It is not generally known, but bitches have multiple embryos. Therefore, they can also have multiple sires if the breeding is not conducted under controlled conditions. So, in the case of an accidental mating, the sires may be the Collie cross next door, the Labrador from nearby and the Staffordshire from down the road. Those types of matings cannot guarantee who the sires were. Dogs will travel considerable distances at night to visit a bitch on heat (and vice versa).

Even if someone took great care to ensure that there was only one sire, most people in the "home" or "on farm" situation do not have any method of ensuring that there is no close relationship between the dogs, and they may be practicing line breeding or in-breeding without being aware that they are doing so. The resulting inherited problems are catastrophic for the dog. Not to mention emotionally disturbing for the family, especially children.

Increasing your chances.

You can increase your chances of choosing a quality dog by being aware of some facts. Treat with caution advertisements that are "giving away" dogs, dogs that come from "good working stock" and dogs that are "low in price". It goes without saying that any dog that is a "give away" has no value. Dogs that come from "good working stock" have no guarantee of the sire/s or in-breeding and low-priced dogs just don't cut it anymore. It costs approx \$70.00 for the first vet visit to get a C5 immunisation and then the booster is around \$55.00. So far the total is \$125.00 and that doesn't factor in the worming at 2 weeks, 4 weeks, 6 weeks and 8 weeks – the calcium supplements, worming and correct diet for the bitch - and the proper puppy food to just get the pup to the ripe old age of 8 weeks.

Needs Analysis

Like anything you are about to obtain it is essential that you work out just what you need to have and what is not quite so important. Unconsciously we do it all the time on the farm. Do we need 4WD? How much horsepower. How wide? How heavy? Where can it be kept? And I can go on. Choosing a quality dog is no different.

1. What are your work requirements of a dog? Paddock? Yard? Utility?
2. What type of stock. Cattle? Sheep? Goats? Dairy? Etc.
3. How do the stock handle? Are they quiet, flighty,...
4. What is the terrain like ... hills, scrub, flat paddock, etc.
5. How many do you work in a mob?
6. Is most of your stock work done by yourself?
7. Do you draft by yourself...or would like to.
8. What breed of dog do you prefer? Kelpie? Border Collie? And why?
9. Have you got a proper run to keep my dog in with a continuous supply of water and safe from snakes and other danger?

OK, worked out that stuff – now where do I find my dog?

Here's a short list and by no means does it contain everything.

Look for:

A registered stud breeder of "Working Dogs"

1. Be careful that you are not dealing with a Bench/Show dog kennel or breeder.
2. Be sure that the breeder can supply a pedigree that goes back about 10 generations. Nowadays, pedigrees from reputable studs are computer generated and contain the ancestors registered numbers and in-breeding coefficient calculations.

3. Any previous customers who can give independent referrals about the breeder and their dogs?
4. A guarantee that if the pup will not work by age 12 months and, you have given it every opportunity to do so, the pup will be replaced or your money refunded.
5. The stud can demonstrate one or both parents actually working.
6. The pup comes from a background of Intelligence, Trainability, Temperament, Working instinct, Eye and Cover.
7. Pay particular attention to the mother. Generally, that's where most of the traits come from.
8. Are the Sire and Dam calm on stock? You don't want a dog that races around out of control and barks a lot. In other words you need a dog that works stock...not "dogs" stock.
9. Take your time. You are looking for a dog that has the "science" bred into it – this is a decision about a 'mate' that will give you years of service.
10. Don't hesitate to ask the stud master any questions you may have. It is in the stud's best interests to supply you with a top quality dog. After all, their reputation is made on the dogs they breed.
11. And last but definitely not least. Make sure you like the little one...you're going to have him for awhile.

If you've decided to purchase an older dog then make sure you clearly understand the meaning of the definitions of – "Started Dog" – "Well Started Dog" – "Trained Dog" – "Fully Trained Dog".

Got my Dog – What now?

Those people who start with a dog bred with the "science"... strong working instinct, intelligence, good temperament, eye and cover, and then give it the right

training, will be rewarded with a mate who can do the work of several men ... and give you the freedom to be able to work stock without having to rely on other people. So by starting with the best bred dog you can afford you will likely save yourself a great deal. Consider it an investment,

Unfortunately, working dogs don't come with a manual and, as yet, no one has written "Working Dog Training for Dummies". It's a good idea to invest in yourself and get some training. Just owning stock and dogs doesn't give you the skills and knowledge to make the job easier.... It's often the handler, not the dog that needs the training.

If you are buying a "started" or "trained" dog, it's also important to attend some training if you haven't already done so. Otherwise you could be spending many thousands of dollars and potentially ruining your investment by not knowing how to actually work the dog and get the best out of him.

It is extremely common for farmers and stock owners who have had dogs and stock around them all their lives, to struggle with their stock handling. I meet them all the time. The skills for handling stock and dogs well...must be learned ...they don't come from just owning a dog or copying someone else. Once having attended a training course they find how simple it can be when they have control of the situation. No more frustration or swearing!

As an example. Many people made the most basic mistake of allowing a young dog to be trained by an older dog. It's an absolute No, No. Think about it. Who is the leader here? Who gives the orders and signs the cheque? The older dog – or you?

If you start with a pup it will take you about 2 years to fully train your dog and yes, you can ruin the dog by teaching the wrong skills at the wrong time and trying to train far too early or for too long. In other words

you can very easily, "Take the dog out of the dog"

So think about your investment ... A Working Dog Training Course will give you a sequence of what to train first then next etc. Additionally, the course will very quickly highlight if you have made a mistake in your choice of a dog. Then you can make a decision and get a different or better one before you spend 2 years trying to train the wrong dog.

How much is a good dog worth?

Generally a good pup is between about \$500 and \$800; started dogs between \$800 and \$1500 depending on their age and ability, and fully trained dogs have sold in Australia for over \$7,000.

If you have a certain type of dog you would love to own – consider putting an order in for it. You may have to wait, but it could be worth your while.

Your dog investment is relatively cheap when you consider how much it would cost to pay for labour (if you could get it) damage to vehicles, the number of years service your dog will give you, the work ethic of the dog. Always willing to work, with no overheads. All they ask for is a kind hand, a safe place, worming, immunisation and a feed at night.

Most people would pay far in excess of this for a vehicle, but when you have a good, well-trained dog, sometimes the best place for the vehicle is back in the shed.

Choose carefully. Choose wisely. Respect these wonderful workers. This is probably one of the best investments you'll make.

Written by Ben Page

Pages Working Dog Centre

Breeder of working Kelpies and working Border Collies, trainer of working dog handlers, trainer of working dogs