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Breeders Tell Fans of Water Dogs: Keep Your Paws Off

First Pup Bo Unleashes Demand, but Picky Sellers Turn Buyers Away

By **NANCY KEATES**

After two interviews, three applications and months of anxiety, Nicole Grayson, a stay-at-home mother of three in Portland, Ore., finally got the nod. In April, Ms. Grayson learned she had been chosen to purchase a \$2,000 Portuguese water dog.

Breeders "made it clear I had to prove myself worthy," she exults. "We were really nervous." Now she relishes the attention her puppy, named Capri, attracts at her son's baseball games. She has also set up puppy play dates with another Portuguese water dog in town.

Ever since the Obama family anointed Bo the country's First Dog, requests for Portuguese water dogs have been soaring, jumping by about 100% in the U.S. and 122% in the U.K. from a year earlier, according to officials at the Portuguese Water Dog Club of America. The breed's new vogue has made it harder than ever to get a "Portie," a cute and intelligent dog jealously guarded by its breeders.

Since the early 1970s, when the first few dogs arrived on U.S. shores, the nation's estimated 200-odd water dog breeders have kept a tight leash on the adoption process in the name of protecting the dogs. Even before Bo, many prospective owners had to submit to an interview with the breeder and fill out an application that can run 11 pages.

Sample essay questions: "How would you describe the ideal dog for you and your family?" and "What other breeds have you considered?" and "Of the dogs you have owned, what do you enjoy most about dog ownership?"

According to Art Stern, the Texan who bred Bo, the President and Mrs. Obama weren't subjected to the usual scrutiny when they accepted the puppy as a gift from Sen. Edward Kennedy and his family. But Mr. Stern, who usually insists on a face-to-face meeting with children to determine an adopting family's suitability, says he carefully considered the behavior of 7-year-old Sasha and 10-year-old Malia on television and concluded they were water-dog-worthy.

"We weren't about to throw a wrench in the process," Mr. Stern says. The first lady, through her press secretary, says Bo is "a perfect fit."

Just 1,400 puppies are born a year, which means the Bo boom has created acceptance rates worthy of an Ivy League college. Amanda Ford, a breeder in Carnation, Wash., says she has seen

casual inquiries for puppies increase from once a week to once a day. Her rejection rate -- before Bo -- was 10 to one.

"We try to discourage people," says Mary Eadie, a breeder in Annandale, Va., who says she has had 300 calls since Bo Obama came on the scene. She says she narrowed the field by eliminating anyone who wanted a dog immediately or wanted a female to breed. Then she weeded through applications, finally inviting the final 30 for interviews to vie for the 10 puppies her two females gave birth to in March. "We try to educate the public about the commitment involved in taking on this dog," she says.

Ms. Eadie has a Web site and is on the water dog club's list of breeders. She says that with demand raging, she has created a few other parameters as well. She will sell only to people who can stay home with the dog or take it to work, who have a fenced-in yard and don't have children under the age of 6. And winners don't get to pick their prize: Ms. Eadie says she tests the puppies' temperament herself to make the perfect match.

As for the losers, "I don't tell people they'd be a bad owner," she says. "I just tell people we don't have a puppy for them."

Andrew Weitzer, a 57-year-old owner of an outdoor advertising company in New York, says he tried repeatedly to persuade a breeder to sell him a puppy, which he imagined frolicking happily at his country house. But Mr. Weitzer says he was rejected several times because his kids, then just 2 and 2 years old, were too young.

Once rejected, some would-be buyers find themselves forever scorned. Julie Pincus, a 48-year-old graphic designer, barely escaped breeder banishment. Unable to have children and having battled breast cancer, Ms. Pincus decided a few years ago that she wanted a little company and underwent the lengthy review process, only to conclude her \$1,500 dog had an underbite, a genetic flaw that compromises its value. She returned the dog to the upset breeder.

A few months later, Ms. Pincus found a breeder in a different state, reapplied and drove three hours to the interview. Suddenly the breeder changed her mind. Only after many calls did the breeder confess she'd heard about Ms. Pincus's prior experience from the first breeder and had decided to reject her application. "They're all nuts," says Ms. Pincus, who was eventually able to persuade the second breeder to allow her to adopt her current dog, Milo.

Breeders say they're tough because they care about the puppies' welfare and contend the caution is needed because the breed demands a lot of attention. Historically, the dogs lived on fishing boats, where they fetched tackle underwater and acted as couriers, strengthening their hind legs and sharpening their retrieval skills. According to the water-dog club, the dogs, considered sacred in pre-Christian times, require regular and extensive grooming, need a lot of exercise, think independently and, as puppies, can bite.

Ms. Pincus wouldn't dispute that. Even after expensive dog training, she still muzzles Milo when they go out so he won't nip people in their building or go after strangers in unusual clothing. Still, she says, she loves his funny, canny ways, like the way he spins his favorite stool with his nose or presses a button on the oven to hear the sound it makes.

Milo's "wormed his way into our hearts," says Ms. Pincus, adding that she'd add another water dog to her menagerie, if only she didn't have to reapply.

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