

So you're thinking of a Bouvier

You may have just seen them in the Warner Brothers' movie, *A Dog of Flanders*, in dog shows, or being walked by their proud own-



ers in the park or on the street. With their fabulous coats and distinctive profile, Bouviers certainly command attention wherever they go. Their owners will tell you of the joys of owning a Bouv — that they're good guardians, great with kids, and non-shedding, and that they are extremely intelligent and have real character.

With some exceptions, these claims are true. But the Bouvier is also aloof and strong-willed, huge and often intimidating, slops water all over every time it takes a drink, requires significant grooming, may kill your cat, and is more expensive to maintain in terms of feeding and vetting than smaller breeds.

STILL INTERESTED?

The following information has been assembled to help you decide whether the Bouvier des Flandres is the right breed for you. It includes history and characteristics of the breed, the negatives of the Bouv, and the cost factor.

If, after reading that, you are convinced that the Bouvier is right for you, you may continue on to learn how to find a breeder, questions to ask, what to look for when you visit a kennel, and some Bouvier resources and contacts.

Finally, please take the time to read about the benefits of finding your new dog through the American Bouvier Rescue League. There are innumerable advantages to opening your home and your heart to an adult dog whose owner, for a variety of reasons, can no longer keep their pet. We hope that you will give this option serious consideration.

ABOUT THE BOUVIER

The Bouvier des Flandres (literally, Cow Dog of Flanders) originated in northern Europe as a working farm dog which managed stock and protected farms. During World War I, Bouviers were used to carry supplies to the front lines, deliver messages, detect the living-wounded on battlefields, and do military tracking. Because of the dangers of war and the intensive fighting in Belgium during WWII, along with the decline in farming, the Bouvier nearly disappeared.

Thanks to a few people dedicated to the breed, the Bouvier des Flandres (which is pronounced boo-vee-ay day flahndr) was saved as a breed. In 1963 the American Bouvier des Flandres Club was formed and the breed became established officially in North America. Today, in addition to being a companion dog, it is used in police, search-and-rescue, handicapped assistance, drug detection, stock herding, and guard work.

The typical Bouvier weighs 65 to 100 pounds and is 23.5 to 27.5 inches tall at the withers. It is a square, powerfully built dog, rugged and formidable in appearance. Tails are usually docked (at about 3 days of age) and ears cropped (at 7 weeks), although Bouviers with natural ears and tails are also seen. The harsh double coat protects the dog in all types of inclement weather. Cold weather and snow delight them; they tend to suffer in heat. Colors are gray, black, brindle, and, less commonly, fawn. The usual life span is 10 to 12 years. The breed is vulnerable to hip dysplasia, hypothyroidism, and bloat. Recently a heart problem, subaortic stenosis (SAS), has been identified in some lines. Bloat and SAS can be fatal. Canine eye diseases, including glaucoma, are also concerns.

Adult Bouviers are serene, laid-back dogs with stable temperaments and strong guarding and herding instincts.

They tend to protect by using their sheer muscular strength and most often will knock down or corner an intruder rather than bite them. Those coming from working lines can be very intense, high-energy dogs which require especially committed trainers as owners.

The usual Bouv attitude is sober and thoughtful, reserved and dignified. They are

cooperative, if a bit stubborn and strong-willed. They are very intelligent, and once they have learned something they tend to retain it. Your relationship is likely to be one of mellowness, depth, and subtlety.

Calm and self-possessed indoors, outside the Bouv will exhibit surprising energy, speed and agility, including herding and prey behavior. When enthusiastic they're likely to leave the ground as though on springs, which can endanger those of frail build, nerve, or character.

Many but not all Bouviers are gentle and tolerant with children, often herding them about the house. However, children **MUST** be taught how to behave with them or serious problems can occur with a dog of this temperament and size, including bites and extreme possessiveness.

While appearing aloof and detached, the Bouv becomes deeply devoted to its family. Human companionship is very important to them and they don't like to be left alone. If you are thinking it would be nice to have a dog to guard your property and intend to leave it in a fenced yard or chained up for this purpose, this breed is not for you. A Bouvier's need for human companionship coupled with its assertiveness will turn what might be a sweet dog into a miserable and possibly dangerous animal.

Some people who have dog allergies do not react to the Bouvier; others do. If this is one of the reasons you are thinking of the Bouvier, be sure to check your own reaction to the breed first.

THE DOWNSIDE — read carefully!

It is truly a shaggy dog. The long beard collects water like a sponge, can mat, and can smell. A drink of water is likely to leave a sopping wet trail across your floors and rugs. The amount of dirt, mud, snow and debris that a Bouv can track into your house is phenomenal.

The Bouvier requires a considerable amount of grooming. The undercoat must be combed out at least weekly. Without it, the coat mats severely. It is customary to clip the head, ears, and rear and to do some scissoring on the coat and paws every 5 or 6 weeks.

Training is not optional with a breed that is this large, strong, and independent of mind.

Because of the temperament, you also need to be committed to continued work with the Bouvier to maintain performance, even the most simple “sits”, “stays” and “downs”.

The Bouvier needs an owner committed to a bonded relationship. To become a good companion, the Bouvier also needs early socialization with managed exposure to a variety of experiences and environments. It does not like to be left alone and needs human attention every day.

Unlike some of the more energetic breeds, the Bouvier won't exercise itself. While it adapts to apartment living and doesn't need huge amounts of exercise, it should have long walks twice a day. If you cannot provide this, get a more active house dog or one that will fetch balls.

Bouvs tend to be aloof. They don't wear their hearts on their sleeves as many breeds do. Many people prefer a dog that shows its affection more outwardly.

Many Bouviers have high prey drive and may pursue cats, squirrels, and other small mammals — even birds. Some live peacefully with other animals, others do not; some are best friends with cats; others kill them.

A well-bred Bouvier is not aggressive but is assertive when challenged. Its size and air of calm appraisal can be intimidating.

THE COSTS OF BUYING AND OWNING A BOUVIER

A well-bred Bouvier pup from parents that are AKC-registered, health-certified, and one or both are American champions, will sell for a minimum of \$700 for pet quality and \$1000 or more for show or breeding quality.

If you see them selling for less, it's because you are getting less — a lot less. A good Bouvier is expensive. But as in most things, *you get what you pay for!* And while no breeder can guarantee 100% perfection in a pup, a good one will stand by their pups and give you a guarantee. Not only that, a reputable breeder will honor that guarantee — their reputation depends on it.

“If I'm just buying a pet, why should I care about all the fancy show titles in the parents?” Because you want a dog that is

structurally sound, with a stable temperament, and which has an excellent chance of living a long and healthy life. Serious breeders measure the quality of their dogs in competitive arenas. The conformation title (Championship, or CH) is evidence that a stud or bitch meets the established standard for the breed.

A poorly-bred pup, purchased from a “puppy mill” or a “backyard breeder” who uses questionable parents, may cost less money up front. But in the long run, it is likely to cost you more money and heartache than if you had bought from a recognized, well-respected breeder in the first place. A good breeder will be able to sell you a healthy, happy, home-raised pup that came from healthy, sound parents. And they will guarantee it in writing.

After buying your puppy, you will have the costs of supporting that dog for the rest of his life. Big dogs cost more than small dogs — they eat more and vet bills are larger, as medications are usually proportional to body weight. Annual costs of maintaining a Bouvier: food and routine veterinary care: \$600-900; professional bathing and grooming: \$500-1000. Add to this the costs of obedience training, spay/neuter, additional vet care, a crate, dishes and beds, collars and leashes, toys, and basic grooming equipment.

FINDING THE RIGHT BOUVIER FOR YOU

If you have decided that the Bouvier is the breed for you, your next step is to find the right source and the right dog for you. How can you, the prospective buyer, tell the “backyard breeder” from “commercial breeder” from the “reputable” breeder? How can you distinguish a healthy pup from an unhealthy one? How can you decide which puppy will fit in best with your life and family?

Or would it make better sense to adopt a Bouvier through Rescue, or to purchase an adult from a breeder?

Finding the right breeder and the right dog can take weeks, months or even years. Good breeders often have a waiting list for future litters. You may decide to drive or fly some distance to get your Bouvier.

Whatever it takes, your dog will be a mem-

ber of your family for ten or more years so it is worth the time and effort to make sure this is the right breed, the right breeder, and the right dog for you.

It is almost impossible when you see a pup of any breed not to go “Awwwwwww...” because all puppies look adorable. *Before you even go to look at a puppy, DO YOUR RESEARCH!*

They are several ways to seek out information (see also RESOURCES below):

1. Contact the American Bouvier des Flandres Club. In addition to information on the breed, they can give you the names of reputable breeders and provide statistics on the top studs and bitches in the country.

2. If you are in the Mid-Atlantic states, contact the Greater Washington Bouvier des Flandres Club. The Club maintains a list of qualified breeders and current litters. They can also can introduce you to people who own Bouviers who would be happy to talk to you and let you meet their dogs. For information call (215) 464-3997.

3. Go to several dog shows to see different specimens of the breed. If you see a dog you like, seek out his owner or handler after show time. Then, with their permission, you can touch the dog, check out its personality and temperament for yourself, and ask questions. See insert for upcoming dog shows.

4. Check with clubs that specialize in obedience, agility, herding, tracking, and Schutzhund. Bouviers are working dogs and you may be able to see some in action.

5. If you have Internet access check for Bouvier web sites, mailing lists and dog news-groups.

THE ADOPTION OPTION

You may wish to consider adopting a Bouv through the American Bouvier Rescue League (ABRL).

The ABRL is a standing committee of the American Bouvier des Flandres Club whose members identify dogs in need of new homes, evaluate them for adoption, and provide foster homes while permanent homes are located.

ABRL receives dogs from shelters and homes where they are no longer wanted.

Dogs are provided with any necessary veterinary care and spayed or neutered if needed. Remedial training is provided if required for successful placement. Prospective adopters fill out a questionnaire and are carefully screened.

Some dogs have lost their owners through illness or death. Some adoptions are the result of a bad match — the Bouvier was not a suitable breed for the owner. Some have been mistreated or neglected. A few are found on the road or in shelters. Once deemed ready for adoption, Bouvs adapt easily to their new homes and have been reported to be absolutely delightful — and grateful — pets.

Why adopt?

Although, on occasion, Bouvier puppies come up for adoption, most Bouvs that become available are older puppies or adults. Essentially, this means that the new owner gets to avoid the puppy stage and all of the energy that is involved in surviving it, particularly with regard to teething and house-breaking. In addition, in a mature dog the personality and disposition are clearly evident. And that is a contributing factor in the success that ABRL enjoys when it matches a Bouv with its new owner.

Why you should know about and support ABRL

Even if you choose to purchase a puppy from a qualified breeder, it is important that you know about ABRL and how to make contact. As Bouv owners, we never know when or where we are going to hear about a Bouvier that needs a helping hand.

If you have an interest in the adoption process, or know of a Bouvier that needs ABRL assistance, contact the national director (see RESOURCES below) or call (215) 464-3997.

Older puppies and adults

Often breeders keep one or two puppies from a litter as show prospects. If the puppy develops some minor fault that precludes it from getting its Championship, the breeder may be interested in placing it with a family as a pet. Or a breeder may have an older bitch who has been used for breeding and is now ready to retire into a good home. There are other legitimate circumstances as well.

An older Bouvier from a good breeder can be a great option.

If you are interested in this option, ask the breeders you contact about it.

QUESTIONS TO ASK A BREEDER

Following are some questions that you should ask of any breeder even if you “only” want a pet-quality Bouvier. If they cannot provide you with the answers, or if you are uncomfortable with their answers, find another breeder. It is recommended that you visit at least two breeders in order to get a sense of differences in goals and practices and dogs among them.

Who are the sire and dam of this litter?

See the dam and at least a picture of the sire.

How old are the dam and sire? Bitches and dogs should not be bred until they are at least two years old and have passed at least minimum health tests.

Have both parents been checked for hereditary problems?

No Bouvier should be bred until it has been certified for hips and heart, at minimum. Ask to see the *original* certificates from OFA (Orthopedic Foundation of America), CERF (Canine Eye Registration Foundation) and/or PennHip. (Photocopies can be altered.) Ask what the ratings are. Also ask if the parents have certifications on elbows, eyes and thyroid.

Why did you choose to breed these two animals to each other?

What are the strengths and faults of each of them? What are the temperaments of the dam and sire? What are the overall goals of your breeding program?

How often do you breed? How long have you been breeding?

Be cautious if they have never bred before or if they are constantly breeding.

Has the dam had other litters?

If so, when was the last one? How often is she bred? Bitches should not be bred more than once a year.

Are both parents AKC registered?

Ask to see their papers and their registration numbers. Ask to see their pedigrees. (A pedigree is a family tree of a dog's parents, grandparents, great-grandparents, etc. It can be 4 and 5 generations back.) Ask to see a pedigree of this litter as well. If there is no pedigree

for the litter, or if the same dog appears many times, be cautious.

Do the parents have any conformation or working championships?

These do not guarantee a great litter, but if they do not have any qualities that have been proven in competition, the reasons for the breeding are all the more important.

What titles have dogs from your litters earned?

This may tell you about the overall quality of their breeding program.

At what age are the puppies available?

A good breeder will not release them before 8 weeks of age.

Do you temperament test your puppies?

What were the results? Tell me about each puppy, and what you see of their basic inclinations and temperaments. What kind of home do you think would be best for each one? Puppies from the same litter are *not* all alike. Be sure to get one that suits your own temperament and family profile.

Are the inoculations up to date?

Ask to see their records. The price should include two or three sets of immunization shots against such diseases as parvovirus, corona virus, hepatitis, rabies, distemper (depending on age of pup going home; 3 sets needed by 12 weeks) plus at least 3-4 dewormings, tail docking, dew claws removed and usually ears cropped.

Will you give me a written health guarantee?

A typical one would be a 2-year guarantee against hip dysplasia (of a degree that would be debilitating and painful to the dog), temperament problems and other health-related issues. If they require a second opinion from a specific vet in order to honor the guarantee, be cautious. In the event that such a problem arises, how will the breeder compensate you? Refund your money? Replace the pup with another from another litter? Can you keep the original puppy? Get it in writing.

Within 48 hours of taking your new pup home, you should get a checkup from an independent vet.

If the vet finds a problem, how will you assist me?

Could you provide me with two references from other breeders and three references from buyers?

If I have questions as I get acquainted with my new puppy, can I rely on you for assistance?

A good breeder should ask you a lot of questions, too. They want to know what kind of home you will provide for one of their puppies, and what your lifestyle is, and what you expect out of your dog. You should ask yourself, "Do I feel comfortable with this breeder? Do I sense that they are trying to find the right match for their puppies or just trying to sell me a dog?"

Are you thinking "I'd be embarrassed to ask so many questions!"? A good breeder will welcome all these questions and be impressed with your thoroughness, increasing the chances that they will allow you to purchase one of their pups. A questionable breeder will be irritated by your research and/or will find it difficult to give you straight answers. If you want a quality puppy with a good temperament, please ask questions.

BEWARE OF CLAIMS!

"Comes from championship lines. . ."

Virtually every pedigree will show dogs with Championships (CH) in its history and doesn't alone prove the quality of a litter. If both parents have earned CH, this is a definite asset.

"We have the #4 stud dog in the country. . ." Does this refer to the numbers of puppies it has sired, or to the quality of the puppies? The American Bouvier des Flandres Club keeps records of the studs and dams and the titles their progeny have earned. Check claims with them. The Club statistician is Nancy Eilks (414) 648-3192.

"We are the biggest breeder. . ." What does this mean? In terms of quantity? Remember, a quantity breeder may not be a quality breeder.

"AKC registered. . ." AKC only means purebred. It is *not* an indication of health or quality.

A REPUTABLE BREEDER . . .

Breeds selectively, only a few litters a year

May have a waiting list; their reputation has made their puppies worth waiting for

Does health checks on the parents and willingly talks to you about them

Interviews you carefully and helps you select the puppy best suited to your situation and family

Requires you to sign a contract

Requires spay/neuter for pet-quality pups

Insists on returning the dog to them if you are ever unable to keep it

Provides you with information and support during purchase process and throughout the dog's life

A QUESTIONABLE BREEDER . . .

Breeds extensively and advertises widely; always has puppies available

Or — got two dogs and decided it would be nice to "have a litter"

Doesn't require spay/neuter for a pet-quality puppy

Will dismiss the importance of health certifications

Cannot provide you with a pedigree of the litter

Gives you no useful information on the various temperaments in the litter — let's you "pick"

May encourage buying more than one

Makes no inquiries as to your lifestyle and whether you can provide a good home for the puppy

RESOURCES

American Bouvier des Flandres Club
www.bouvier.org, Dorothy Kent, Secretary, 10520 W. 102nd Place, Westminster CO 80021
(303) 466-1242

Greater Washington Bouvier des Flandres Club, Joan Faltot, Secretary
9832 Softwater Way, Columbia, MD
21046 jdfaltot@compuserve.com
(410) 792-0296

American Bouvier Rescue League
c/o Dale Cuddy, National Director
P.O. Box 157, Rowley, MA 01969
BouvRescue@aol.com (978) 948-7039

North American Working Bouvier Association
www.bouvier.net/nawba/nawba.htm
Kathy Heilenman, Secretary
2928 Dubuque St. NE
Iowa City IA 52240
l-heilenman@uiowa.edu
(319) 338-4835

Green, Pam, "Don't Buy a Bouvier",
www.bouvier.net/info/dontbuy.html

Engel, James R., *Bouvier des Flandres: The Dogs of Flandres Fields*, Alpine Publications, P.O. Box 7027, Loveland, CO 80537. 1991.

McLean, Claire D., *Bouvier des Flandres*, Alpine Publications, P.O. Box 7027, Loveland, CO 80537. 1974, 1981.

Bouvier conversation on the Internet:
Majordomo@nilenet.com [message: subscribe bouvier]

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Get lots more information on the Internet at CCB's bouvdogofflanders.com

"We just don't want any parent who leaves the movie with a kid whining 'I want a dog like that' to just go out and buy a Bouv - without really knowing what they are truly getting into."

