

Choosing a Performance Puppy

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With the increase in the variety and availability of performance events more people are discovering how much fun it is to compete with their Wheaten Terrier partners. Before searching for a performance puppy it is important to realistically evaluate your goals. Pick the performance venues of interest, and choose the right balance for you of conformation (if you also plan to show in the breed ring), temperament to fit your life style, and competitiveness in your chosen sports.

Although Wheaten Terriers aren't a common breed in performance events, they have competed successfully in many arenas including agility, obedience, rally, tracking, flyball, herding and freestyle. There are other competitions that are available for Wheatens including strong dog, dock diving and Flying Disc. Many Wheaten Terriers can experience some level of success in most of these venues. There are a number of Wheatens that have earned the MACH and UDX titles as well as the AKC versatility titles (which require titles in obedience, agility and tracking). However, if your goals are to win at the top echelons of one of the competitive sports, you may be happier with another breed. I don't expect to see a Wheaten on the agility World Team or as the next national obedience champion.

Most of my experience is in agility, obedience and rally, although I have done some tracking. Whatever your own specific goals, it is nice to pick a puppy that maximizes your chance of having a good working partner that can stay sound for many years. In all cases it is important to select a puppy with good structure and temperament. Which specific traits are most important depends on which venues are most important and what level of performance is desired.

Structure

Good structure is important in all working Wheaten Terriers. A dog with good structure will be able to perform better and hold up for an extended career. While most breed show dogs compete for a relatively short period of time, many performance dogs compete into their middle or even senior years.

Structure is particularly important for agility dogs since the physical demands of this sport are significant. Jumping ability, ground speed and ability to turn tightly are all desirable in an agility partner. Not all Wheaten Terriers have good jumping style. The most common faults I have observed are stutter-stepping, jumping early and overjumping. The stutter-stepper has a hard time picking a take off point, and adds extra strides before jumping (these dogs also frequently jump early). Dogs that jump too high may have good timing, but their style adds hang time and reduces their speed on the course. A good confident jumper is the most efficient and fastest on course. Examples of three jumping styles are shown in Figures 1-3.



Fig 1: Correct jumping style



Fig 2: Poor timing, jumping early (note the hind legs pulled forward to clear the jump)

When choosing a performance puppy, ideally you can evaluate the performance of the sire, dam and/or other relatives, although nice working dogs can certainly be found in litters without proven parents. The proof of a working dog is in the ring. Titles indicate working ability, but actually seeing the dog work is even more useful. Some things like drive, attention and jumping ability are impossible to truly evaluate from the titles.

When evaluating structure there are several aesthetic faults that can be overlooked, if you are not interested in competing in the conformation ring. Incorrect coat quality or color, ear size and set, bite and head shape do not adversely affect the performance dog. There are also some breed structural faults that aren't detrimental to performance dogs, including a sloped croup, lower tailset, topline that isn't perfectly flat, and a longer body (if the length isn't in the loin). However, it is very important to select a puppy with balanced conformation including good front and rear angulation.

An accurate evaluation of structure is important. If a puppy is sold as "pet quality" due to structural faults it will not be the ideal performance choice. The most important traits to look for are a well angulated front and rear. Most Wheatens tend towards straighter angles. A conformation assessment is usually done at around eight weeks of age. If you aren't comfortable evaluating structure, you will need to depend on the breeder or bring in an outside person to help evaluate the litter. Figures 4 and 5 show a more angulated and less angulated puppy at eight weeks of age. Both of these puppies have gone on to successful agility careers although the more angulated puppy is a better jumper. When jumping 16", there is some difference in jumping style, but it shows up significantly more at 22". The less angulated dog has less power and has to choose her take off place carefully to clear the jump.

Temperament

When I evaluate puppy temperament for performance, I look for specific traits in three categories: drive (desire to work), biddability (willingness to be trained), and general qualities (easy to manage and live with).

The ideal puppy has strong drives. He loves food and toys and will both tug and retrieve. The pup has a long attention span and is very sociable with people, preferring interacting with people to dogs. A smart puppy is easier to train, but the pup also needs good focus, and a willing and forgiving attitude to be a good partner. Other desirable qualities include boldness, curiosity, and a medium to high energy level (preferably with the ability to settle when not working). For agility I also like a puppy with some body awareness. These pups are coordinated and in my opinion they seem to be more careful jumpers.



Fig 3: Overjumping



Fig 4: More angulated puppy



Fig 5: Less angulated puppy

Competition life will be easier to manage if your pup is a good traveler, and has no noise sensitivity. A dog that is not reactive to other dogs is an advantage in both the class and trial setting.

Evaluating puppy temperament

Temperament testing of litters is a useful tool. I have used the Volhard test as well as a test developed by Sheila Booth (it is called "Positive Puppy Preview" and is available on audio tape). The basic tests are similar, but Sheila's unique perspective tries to determine if a pup's drive can overcome its stress. She has a nice method to assess food and toy drive and the ability to switch between them. Ideally, the breeder will have the litter temperament tested and will share the results.

I have noticed that some puppies respond quite differently with a stranger or in a new location. Don't rule those pups out as long as they score well otherwise. However, they will take more patience to learn confidence in all situations. The breeder's perspective and opinion are also valuable. A temperament test is only a snapshot, while the breeder has spent countless hours playing with and observing the pups in many settings. Ideally, the breeder has provided an enriched environment for the litter including introducing them to many surfaces and noises, and exposing them to children and strangers.

When I evaluate a litter I look at them both individually and as a group using a variety of games. To evaluate independence and "pushiness" I take the pups into a yard, get their attention and run. Typically the pups all chase me and once they are close I feed each one a treat, and then run off again. Some pups wander off or lose interest if they aren't the first one fed. Some get distracted by other things in the yard, while others get more focused on the game. I look for the pups that find the game exciting - even after quite a few repetitions they are pushing me for more.

I also look for the puppy that wants to be with me in general and seeks eye contact. I also pick a task to teach each puppy individually - it can be sit, spin in a circle, whatever. I prefer the puppy that learns quickly, doesn't get bored with the game and is pushy. I am also looking for resilience - if I change the game slightly the pup should keep trying or offer an alternative behavior rather than giving up. When I raise a litter I work each puppy away from the litter at least every other day so I can evaluate their behavior one-on-one.

Finally, part of what makes a great performance dog is the teamwork — everyone has a different training style and personality preference. If you like an assertive puppy, it may be harder to train a more docile puppy that needs a lighter touch and takes more work to build confidence and drive. On the other hand, if you like a softer temperament, the pushy puppy may frustrate you as a working partner and pet. Remember that most of the time you will spend with your dog won't be training or in the ring, so picking a pup that you personally enjoy is of utmost importance.

Genetic temperament traits are only part of what makes a nice working partnership; the final result is up to the trainer. Positive training methods work very well with Wheatens and a good trainer can accomplish a lot with almost any dog. Although most Wheatens aren't given an opportunity to compete in performance events, I believe there are many that would make great working dogs given the chance!