



SHOULD YOU BUY OR ADOPT A BORDER COLLIE?

A recent TV commercial features a wife urging her visibly under-the-weather husband to take a certain cold medicine. “The sooner you get well,” she promises, “the sooner you can go out with *the boys*.” The ailing husband imagines bonding with the guys at a professional hockey game, but the camera pans instead to the eager faces of two Border Collies holding leashes, their eyes bright with anticipation of an outing with Dad. The ad’s final clip brings viewers firmly back to everyday reality and we glimpse Dad trotting after *the boys* on one of their obviously frequent “walks”. While this commercial was designed to sell a product, it also captures some important truths about becoming a companion to a Border Collie through purchase or adoption. The keen intelligence and photogenic beauty of this breed often make them irresistible, whether you are recovering from a cold or making the decision to share your home with a dog. From the movie *Babe*, where Border Collies are clearly the smartest inhabitants on the farm to the Purina Incredible Dog Challenge, where a BC outjumped the retrievers to become world champion dog diver, the exuberant talents of these animals have captured many human hearts and minds. Before you resolve to claim one as your own, however, there are some questions you should ask yourself. They are important because the well-being, and perhaps even the lives, of Border Collies depend upon humans making good – and honest – choices about their ability to interact with and accommodate these extraordinary dogs.

Have you ever owned or adopted a dog before? If not, you probably should not begin the profoundly rewarding canine-human relationship with a Border Collie. They require significant knowledge about how their instincts as sheepherding dogs might affect the daily interactions of your household. Many have argued that Border Collies also need convincing leadership from their humans. The capacity to command respect through consistency of action and character and to make dogs feel they are doing the right thing for the right person are leadership qualities that are not innate but learned (see Price, p. 20, below). While some first-timers do extremely well with this breed, Border Collies are generally more appropriate for those with more experience.

Do you have children at home? Adults who have children at home should be aware that Border Collies exhibit their strong herding instincts through a constant focus on motion. When they perceive motion, they will often try to stop the moving object by placing themselves in front of it or cutting it off. Their strong herding instincts can also cause them to chase cars, bicycles, and children. It is not unusual for them to inadvertently knock young children over or cause a child riding a bicycle to crash. Border Collies herd sheep by nipping at their heels and may similarly nip at the heels of running children – or even an adult running to answer the telephone. All parents should take this into consideration when assessing the ability of their children to cope with an intense herding dog in the household. Consistent training plus adequate stimulation and activity are key in redirecting these instincts in more acceptable directions.

Do you have sufficient time for exercising and training? We live in a world where many people substitute “quality” time for quantity, but this attitude is a disaster in the making for a Border Collie. As Michael DeVine notes in his excellent introduction to the breed, you do not have to sacrifice your social life, abandon your spouse or partner, or give up other interests to own a Border Collie, but you *will* have to make adjustments. Border Collies are highly energetic dogs who are born to work, so if you don’t own sheep or cattle (and don’t want your cats or children becoming substitute furry objects), you will need to provide BCs with vigorous daily exercise such as throwing a ball, extended walks or runs, participation in agility, or visits to the dog park. If you have an inactive lifestyle or travel frequently because of your job, this is not the dog for you. Border Collies also need mental stimulation as much as they need physical exercise. This is why you will need to make time for ONGOING TRAINING in obedience, obedience, obedience! The single most important ingredient in forging a loving and lifelong bond with your BC is helping it learn how to become a good citizen as well as a constructive member of your household. Agility, flyball, rally, herding and tracking are all performance-based activities that enable the learning of new mental skills, and they are particularly beneficial for Border Collies.

Do you recognize the variety of Border Collie temperament and personality? People attracted to Border Collies have often known an exceptional example of the breed whose temperament and resourcefulness would even put Lassie to shame. This BC only herds to keep the children out of danger and never, ever digs up the yard! While such exemplars of the Border Collie world certainly exist, potential owners should know that it is risky to predict what personality characteristics any particular puppy might exhibit as a mature dog – even if they are the offspring of our BC Lassie. Any Border Collie owner/adopter should hope for the best, but also be prepared to deal with the wide range of behavior and personality quirks that make these animals so intelligent, so intense and sometimes, so exasperating.

Border Collies can become wonderful companion animals with some forethought, education and commitment on the part of their humans. For further reading about whether you should purchase or adopt a Border Collie, the BCSA recommends that you consult the following widely available resources:

Mike DeVine. *Border Collies: A Complete Pet Owner’s Guide*. Hauppauge, NY: Barron’s Educational Series, 1997. (see especially the chapters, “Are you Border Collie Material?” and “The Nature of the Border Collie”)

Carol Price. *Understanding the Border Collie: The Essential Guide to Owning Border Collies and Collie-Crosses as Pets*. Bristol, UK: Broadcast Books, 1999. (See especially the chapter on “Who Shouldn’t Have a Border Collie?”)

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