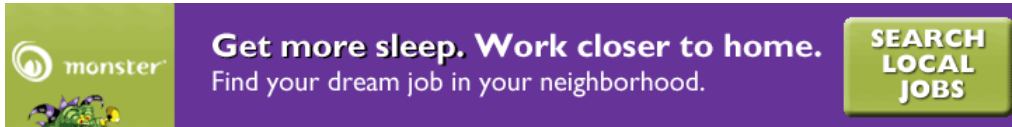


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BORN TO PERFORM

By Elizabeth Wasserman

Sure, Lassie has the looks. She's got long silky hair, good teeth and a svelte figure. But what really made that dog a star? What do Lassie and Benji and Beethoven have that the average Biscuit doesn't? Those dogs have "star" quality. They were born to perform.

"Many people think looks make a 'star,'" says Carol Riggins, the official trainer of Lassie, who is still making movies and other appearances. "Well, the truth is, looks play a secondary role to the 'personality' of the individual dog. That's what really makes or breaks their stardom."

Those personality traits may also be in your pet. Does your dog need to be on center stage? Is it more extroverted than other canines? Can it master new tricks quickly? Your natural-born performer may have potential on the silver screen, in volunteer work or just as a neighborhood crowd pleaser. Here are some traits to look for and tricks to try:

The Social Networking Pet

To make it in pictures, a dog has to be energetic, curious, playful and confident, Riggins says. They have to enjoy social interaction with humans. The relationship between dog and trainer will get them to perform at a higher level. Some pups master 60 to 70 different behaviors to become a star. Riggins suggests the following test: "Take your dog out away from home, place him or her down and walk in the opposite direction than where you came from. Verbally coax your dog to come to you while clapping your hands and kneeling down. You want the dog to readily come to you, tail up."

Handles Stress Well

Life as a film star, like any job, brings demands with it. "There are a lot of cute dogs out there, but that doesn't mean they can handle life on a movie set," says Heather Long, a trainer with Hollywood Animals, of Los Angeles, an animal talent agency that has supplied pups for parts in such television shows as "Monk." "There are a lot of things moving around, lights and flashes and activity. That's what really takes a lot of adjustment time." Long says her agency looks for dogs that have the temperament not to be overly distracted -- or cowed by -- loud noises or movement. A canine actor needs to concentrate on its trainer and follow commands when it hears, "Action!"

Willingness to work

Teaching a dog tricks requires patience, repetition and lots of encouragement. But your pet also has to have an *esprit de corps*. Your dog must be willing to go along with the trainer and crew and to work hard. Certain breeds tend to be more easily trained, such as collies, shepherds and sheepdogs, which have been bred for centuries to herd animals. "That doesn't mean that other dogs cannot be trained," Long points out. Riggins suggests testing your pet to see if it has a work ethic. "Crumple a piece of paper into a ball," she says. "Once you have his or her attention, throw the paper a few feet ahead of you. Your dog should chase after the paper ball, pick it up and run away with it or bring it back." If your dog doesn't flinch, it'll never get off the casting couch.

Some Hollywood tricks

It's best to master the basics, such as "sit," "down" and "stay" before moving on to this star material:

Speak Lassie is a pro at this, but Riggins suggests starting your training at dinner time. "Get the dog excited about the food so that it barks," she says. Say, "Good, speak!" and give it a couple of pieces of kibble out of the bowl. Do this three times and put down the dish. "Repeat this training every day until your dog starts to respond to your verbal cue without the bowl," Riggins says. "Your dog should eventually learn to speak when you give it its cue."

Play dead You've seen it in pictures, now master it at home. Start your pup sitting or standing. Say, "Play dead," while giving the hand signal for the dog to go down. Master this before adding the next step, which is to teach the dog to roll on its side. While the dog is down, wave a snack in front of your dog's face so that it rolls its head and body to the side. Reward with the treat.

Cover your eyes Movie audiences love this one. Begin with the dog in the down position. The object is for your dog to hide its eyes with a paw. Start by lifting your dog's paw over its snout and then reward with a treat. Repeat until your dog makes the connection between the yummy treat and the action of putting its paw over its muzzle.

If your dog tires of learning movie tricks, don't push it, Riggins says. Know when to say, "That's a wrap!"

About The Author

Elizabeth Wasserman a Washington, D.C. area-based freelancer, has been writing about pets, among other topics, for more than 15 years. Her love of dogs, in particular, was handed down through the generations from her great-grandfather, Eric Knight, who wrote the book Lassie Come Home in the 1930s.

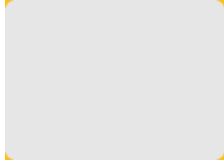
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