



The Hydrant

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Breed Spotlight: *Finnish Lapphund*

by John Jusczak

A jolly old fellow may once have said, “Hey Dasher, hey Dancer, hey Prancer and Vixen... Hey you stupid reindeer – where the heck are you! We’ve got work to do! It looks like I need a reindeer herding dog.” So, this month we visit the AKC FSS (Foundation Stock Service) for our breed spotlight, the Finnish Lapphund.

You can learn something just from the name. Hund (dog) of the Lapps, from Finland. OK, maybe learning something about the Lapps will give us some insight into the breed. Today, you will rarely see these people referred to as Lapps, preferring instead the more proper name of Sami (or Saami). Although Lapp was in widespread use *outside* of the Sami community, it was not used by the Sami people as the word means “patch of cloth” used for mending and was taken to be a derogatory term when used to refer to them. The Sami were originally nomadic people who fished, trapped, and hunted throughout northern Scandinavia and into adjoining portions of Russia. Their travels were largely influenced by movements of reindeer, who were very important to their existence. Around 1500, some of the Sami people began to capture and raise reindeer, leading to the domesticated version

currently raised.

As one might guess, their homeland is a pretty forbidding with long, cold, dark winters – ours would probably seem pretty nice in comparison. One of the few Sami words that have found their way into other languages is *tundra* – gives you a feel for the region.

If you were trying to “design” a dog that could serve these people well, you might try for a multi-purpose dog that could serve as hunting companion, herding dog, or a watch dog. A tough, hardy, cold-tolerant dog that was also courageous, fast, and very agile to deal with the large reindeer that just don’t give a dog any respect. You’d, of course, be designing the Finnish Lapphund.

Remains of the precursors of today’s lappy have been found in archeological digs dating from about 7000 BC. The remains of these spitz dogs found in the digs are similar in many respects to today’s lappies. These early lappy ancestors originally served the Sami as hunting companions but evolved into herding dogs as the Sami themselves evolved from a hunter-gatherer existence to a herding existence. First written reference to lapphunds occurred in

the 1700’s.

The Sami people used two types of dogs – a long coated dog and a shorter coated dog. Many contend that it was the same breed of dog, occurring with various lengths of coat. They were often interbred and litters sometimes contained dogs with both long coats and shorter coats. In any event, attempts to collect and standardize the dogs began around the 1930’s. Unfortunately, World War II interfered with these efforts and, coupled with a distemper epidemic in Finland following the war, threatened to wipe out the breed altogether.

Attempts to standardize the dogs resumed with the remaining dogs after the war. The Swedes chose to concentrate on black or dark brown dogs with no tan points and few, if any, white markings. The breed they established, the Swedish Lapphund, tends to be a slightly smaller dog than the Finnish version, occurring in black or dark brown only, and of a more “assertive” or aggressive nature.

The Finnish Kennel Association accepted the standard for the Lapponian Shepherd Dog in 1945 and allowed for a long haired and a shorter haired variety. In 1967, it was decided

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to develop separate standards. The long coat dogs were called Lapinkoira (known as Lapphunds elsewhere) while the shorter coated dogs were called Lapinporokoirra (Lapponian Herders). Standards of both were revised in 1975. The lapphund standard was revised again by the Finnish Kennel Club in 1996 with the name refined to Suomenlapinkoira (Finnish Lapphund) and an English translation of the standard was accepted by the FCI in 1999.

While it is possible that lappies may have immigrated to the US along with Finnish immigrants, the first concerted effort to bring the breed to the US occurred in 1987 with a number of importations occurring since. In 2001, the registry was turned over to the AKC. The AKC-recognized US breed club, the Finnish Lapphund Club of America, was established in 2003 – although there had been a loosely-organized group of US breeders since 1988. The registry is still open in both Finland and the US to allow unregistered dogs from Lapland that conform to the standard to become registered.

Now that history sounds relatively tidy and uncontroversial. OK, time to complicate things. One of the early European kennels involved in preserving the breed is alleged by some to have “adulterated” the breed, intentionally or unintentionally, with outside blood to create a “show line”. Some of the “show line” dogs displayed a more square conformation (whereas the standard calls for a dog slightly longer than tall), which was cited as “proof” of the contamination. Also, PRA, unknown in the herding lines, began to occur in the show line and this was cited as further proof of outside blood. The response was establishment of Paimensukuinen Lapinkoira (often abbreviated as “PS” dogs). These breeders claim that their dogs are the original Lapp working dog, tend to breed a lappy that is more “Lapponian Herder-like” in its general conformation, and have their own breed standard. Some of these PS dogs are outstanding examples of Finnish Lapphunds, using the FL standard as a guide. Despite the claims of the PS dogs being the true working dogs, dogs from both lines are equally adept at herding. As one might guess, breeders in both lines can have very strong feelings about the “correctness” of their line. Many PS breeders maintain no contact with “show line” breeders and will not allow their dogs to be used in breeding with the “show line”. However, some will allow their dogs to be used with “show line” dogs and this adds to the genetic diversity of today’s Finnish Lapphund.

Interestingly, with the recent development of the genetic marker test for PRA for Finnish Lapphunds, it has been demonstrated that the PRA gene is found in both the show and PS lines. Evidently, being a recessive trait, the PS lines were just lucky in rarely producing a dog with two of the recessive genes (required to be PRA affected).

Today’s lappy makes an excellent herding dog and, like other herders, is a natural for agility. Many display hunting instincts and can be excellent trackers. While they are very alert and make great watch dogs, their extremely friendly nature with strangers makes them useless as guard dogs. Many excel in obedience. They are great in a family environment and most do very well with other pets, but, as mentioned in previous spotlights, socialization of the pups is important to insure this. They can adapt to apartment life but, being a herder, need ample opportunities for plenty of exercise.

The lappy is an extremely intelligent, playful, energetic dog that runs towards the small end of mid-size (bitches often 25-35 lbs., dogs about 40-45 lbs or perhaps a bit more). The dogs bear a long, coarse outer coat (that is not normally shed) along with a denser, fluffier undercoat that is generally shed annually in dogs and twice a year in bitches. Despite the profuse coat, care is easy with weekly grooming (although grooming more often may be prudent when they are “blowing coat”). Most breeders advise bathing only a couple of times per year (if possible) to help maintain the oils in the coat that keep the coat easy to maintain and somewhat “nonstick” to dirt. These dogs are inherently clean; most doing an excellent job of grooming and

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personal hygiene – one of the many cat-like qualities the breed displays.

Lappies are mature at 2 years of age but many dogs, especially those from the PS line, may take 3 to 5 years to reach their full potential. Lappies typically live to about 14-16 years old. However, lappies remain vital and energetic for many years. A good case in point is Sugarok Nautitava UD, MX, MXJ, who earned all of his AKC titles and made it to the AKC agility nationals the first year lappies were eligible. He finished 27th out of 175 dogs at his jump height. Not too shabby for a 9 year old dog.

While lappies have a desire to please their owners, like most Northern breeds, they can sometimes be difficult. Most will generally quickly tire of activities that they see as pointless (such as fetching). Ways must be found to motivate them. Some activities such as herding or agility, are generally rewards in and of themselves. Regarding other activities, most lappies are very food motivated which helps greatly in training. Lappies seem to enjoy activities that they find mentally stimulating.

Lappy pups and young dogs, like many breeds, can have a tendency to be destructive if bored. Giving them toys, bones, and chew toys allows them to focus these destructive tendencies on these items rather than your woodwork, carpets, or furniture.

Like other Northern breeds, they have a tendency to bark or howl (which some refer to as “wooning” or “rooing”). With firm and consistent training, they can be taught to obey when you desire silence. However, we have observed that the low, mournful howls of a bitch in season can be hard to discourage.

Their intelligence is a double edged sword. They can very quickly trained for many uses. However, this same intellect allows some dogs to become quite manipulative of their owners. It is not uncommon for people with lappies to say that *they* are owned by their lappy. Staying alert to this possibility is helpful in maintaining your position as the alpha individual.

Lappies are a very hardy breed. While a variety of diseases do occur, most are not common. The main problem had been PRA. Luckily, this had not been a major problem in the US. While there are some dogs that are carriers in the US, there are only one or two known PRA affected dogs here. Now, with the availability of the genetic test, it is possible to insure that no further PRA affected dogs are produced and it should be possible to eventually completely wipe out this disorder in the breed.

One very real caution exists for this breed. While they can tolerate high temperatures, efforts must be made to restrict their activities and, especially for dark-coated dogs, keep them out of direct sunlight at these times. The dark dogs in particular can heat up very quickly on a hot sunny day with fatal results – at least one dog has been lost in the US due to hyperthermia. As pointed out in one of our Hazards of the Season columns, any dog that has overheated is in a life-threatening situation and lappies are particularly prone to overheating on hot, sunny days.

Finnish Lapphunds are still quite uncommon in the US (currently less than 250 dogs) and it is not uncommon for importations of new dogs or sperm to maintain a diverse and healthy gene pool. While there are few breeders in North America, it is well worth the effort to seek out this attractive breed.