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the hot times issue

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Meet the Labrador Retriever



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Labrador Retrievers have been America's most popular breed for the past 30 years. Here's why.

By Jen Reeder

First in Our Hearts

a 2-year-old Labrador Retriever named Bobbi has proven life-changing for a 4-year-old boy named Nick.

Nick was only a year old when doctors diagnosed him with a mast-cell disease that sends him into anaphylaxis, a severe allergic reaction that can be life-threatening. Certain smells or extreme temperature changes can trigger a response, but sometimes it's completely random, according to his mom, Brittany Maynard.

"Typically what happens is his lips start swelling, he gets very itchy, and he'll start to have problems breathing," she says. "He turns into the Hulk and it's just very traumatic and stressful."

When Nick had to be hospitalized five times in six weeks, his desperate mom had an idea: Find a service dog. At the time, there was only one mast-cell alert dog in the U.S., but the nonprofit Service Dogs of Virginia worked with the Maynards to train Bobbi to detect histamine on Nick's breath five minutes before his symptoms start so he can take medicine to stop a reaction.

Intelligence and versatility are just two of the traits that make Labrador Retrievers ideal service dogs. Opposite: Bobbi is more than Nick's best friend. She is his protector and medical-alert system.

In the six months since partnering with Bobbi, Nick hasn't had any major reactions, been hospitalized, or needed to use his EpiPen.

"Because of her, we haven't seen the Hulk in a long time," Maynard says. "We're able to do things like go camping in the heat, go to swimming pools in the summer. Nick plays T-ball, which is a perfectly normal thing for a 4-year-old to be able to do, but before Bob, there was no way that we would have taken the chance because I certainly can't tell five minutes ahead."

Bobbi is protective of her boy, frequently sniffing his mouth before going back to her business. She knows calming cues when he's upset and helps him pick up his toys. Nick can now play in his room alone or in the yard because of the independence she brings. They snuggle in bed every night as he falls asleep.

"She works, but

she's his best friend," Maynard says. "They are, a lot of times, just a boy and his dog."

Dogs like Bobbi are one reason why the Labrador Retriever has been the most popular breed in America for the past 30 years. Since their origins as duck retrievers and fishermen's mates in Newfoundland, Canada, and subsequent breed refinement in England through the late 1800s, Labs have become increasingly part of the fabric of society.

With their powerful noses, athleticism, and eagerness to please, Labs help detectives collar arsonists, first responders find missing people, police officers locate narcotics, and conservationists protect endangered animals. This spring, a study showed that eight Labs (and

one Belgian Malinois) at the Penn Vet Working Dog Center can detect COVID-19.

Go Find

At the New Mexico-based nonprofit Assistance Dogs of the West, Labrador Retrievers get to "choose" whether they'll work as service dogs for people with mobility impairment, autism spectrum disorder, or PTSD, or become medical-alert dogs or courthouse facility dogs who support children and adults called to testify.

Founder Jill Felice says 90 percent of dogs used in the organization are Labrador Retrievers because of their high emotional intelligence, social nature, and how easy they are to train and groom. They also tend to be healthy when they come from a good breeder or agency, she



"In the ring, she's a little dynamite," says Lucille Jordan, co-owner of show dog Bianca. A Lab, notes the breed standard, must be well-balanced, enabling it to move in the show ring or work in the field with little or no effort.

Inset: This 1867 portrait of Nell is said to be the earliest photograph of a Labrador Retriever. The name notwithstanding, the birthplace of this breed was not Labrador, but Newfoundland. They were originally known as St. John's dogs, and were developed to aid fishermen by diving into icy water to retrieve fish and nets. The AKC registered its first Lab in 1917.



2021: Year of the Lab?

The Labrador Retriever Club (thelabradorclub.com), established in 1931, celebrates its 90th anniversary this year. In another milestone, the American Kennel Club reported the Labrador Retriever has been the most registered breed in America for the past 30 years.

Origin: Newfoundland, Canada

Recognized by the American Kennel Club: 1917

Size (Males): 21.5–24.5 inches at the shoulder and 65–80 pounds

Size (Females): 21.5–23.5 inches and 55–70 pounds

Trademark Tail: Thick, tapering—called an "otter tail" and acts as a rudder in water



added.

"Labs are really versatile," she says. "You can have a high-drive Labrador that can do work with police officers and work with bomb detection, and then you can have a dog that can be quiet and take care of somebody who is either a victim or witness of crime, or a person with autism. You have a big spectrum of behavior that fits under the Labrador breed."

Felice grew up with Labrador Retrievers. When she was around 10, she taught a black Lab named Amos to fetch her whenever her older sister, who had cerebral palsy, said *go find*.

She's currently living with nine Labs—including six 7-month-old puppies—who allow her to sleep through the night thanks to consistent, positive training methods.

"Regardless of what they're doing, they love to be our partners," she says.

That's why Labs are also terrific at such sports as dock diving, rally, agility, obedience, tracking, and, of course, retriever field trials and retriever hunting tests.

Over There

AKC judge and Breeder of Merit Deb Brown, owner of Northledge Labradors, in Thomasville, Georgia, found

her first Lab in 1974 and "never looked back." Now she has a fourth-generation Master Hunter, a black Lab named Leeway who earned the title at 3, as well as his mother, Covey, also a Master Hunter, and sister Adira, who competes in obedience.

She says as gundogs, Labs get along with all manner of people and animals, which is particularly important at boat access points and in hunting blinds with other dogs.

During one early-morning hunting excursion, Brown was in a cover with Covey as two other hunters shot geese, which Covey retrieved with a Lab's trademark

soft mouth. She thought her dog had retrieved every goose they shot when Covey turned 180 degrees and started staring.

"I said, 'No, that's not a bird. It might even be skunk. Leave it,'" she recalls. "But she just stared and stared. Finally, as it got lighter, I realized it was a goose. Somebody hit a goose and it flew that far and she watched it and none of us saw it. And sure enough, she brought it back."

Too Friendly?

Energetic Labs often need a job to channel their energy and engage their brains.

ADAM BERNADIN; INSET: PUBLIC DOMAIN VIA WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Trevor Thomas, aka The Blind Hiker, and guide dog Tennille have hiked more than 13,000 miles together.



(Exhibit A: John Grogan's mischievous Lab in *Marley & Me*.)

Charlie Kimball, the first IndyCar driver with diabetes to qualify for and finish the Indianapolis 500, learned that the hard way. His black Lab, Lilah, decided to create her own jobs—digging up the garden or barking at anyone who walked by the house—until he had her trained as his diabetic-alert dog.

“She took to it like a duck to water,” he says. “She absolutely loves working with her nose.”

Even though Lilah is a working dog who takes her job seriously when she's in her vest, she's also a family dog to Kimball, his wife, and two small children, and loves cuddling with them.

Ironically, the qualities that make Labs such fantastic companions might be the very reason why they've never won Best in Show at a major conformation competition—America's top dog is an underdog in the show ring.

David Frei, who was the voice of the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show

for 27 years, believes that because Labs are so affable and focused on pleasing their handlers, they don't have the “edge” that terriers seem to possess. (Terriers have won 47 times at Westminster; Labs have never even won their group.)

Lucille Jordan hopes her yellow Lab, Bianca, will change that. Registered with the AKC as Bronze G.Ch. Tampa Bay & Eagle Pond's Kisses Sweeter Than Wine (because she loved giving kisses as a puppy and her sire is Italian, so she's called *Bianca* for white wine), the dog is America's number-one Labrador Retriever in all-breed points (as of writing).

“When she's in the show ring, she's a little dynamite,” Jordan says.

Learning Labs

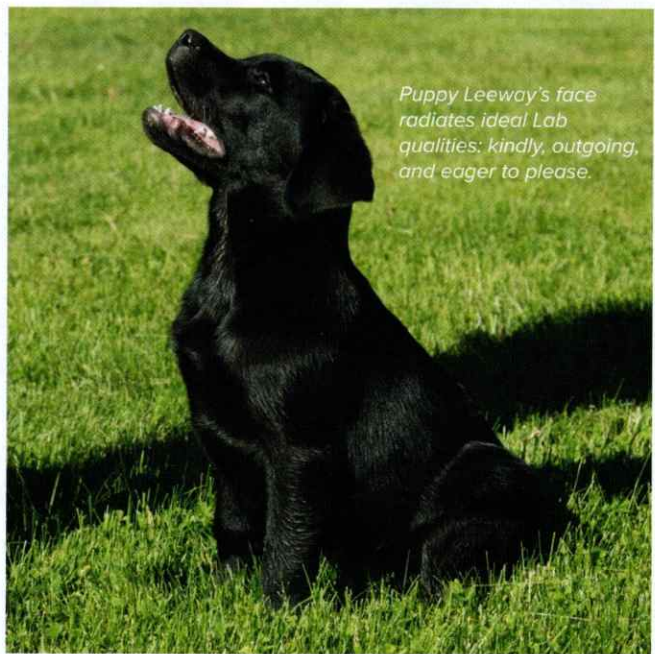
Bianca's also worked as a campus comfort dog at New Hampshire's Nashua Community College, where Jordan is president. Labs are no strangers to learning environments.

Minnesota educator Cheryl Bann, Ph.D., enjoys watching her 13-year-old chocolate Lab, Wilson, interact with children in libraries as part of the Reading Education Assistance Dogs (R.E.A.D.) therapy dog program. While the goal is to boost children's literacy by instilling confidence as they read to dogs, Bann has also seen gentle Wilson help kids overcome a fear of dogs.

One scared boy slowly inched closer to Wilson before finally petting him, sharing a book, and even smiling. He squealed with joy when Bann gave him a



TOP: COURTESY TREVOR THOMAS; BELOW: JANE BERNARD AND BREEDER, SHORELINE LABRADORIS AND ASSISTANCE DOGS OF THE WEST



Puppy Leeway's face radiates ideal Lab qualities; kindly, outgoing, and eager to please.

Top: This trio demonstrates two things Labs love—swimming and retrieving. The Lab coat, a distinguishing feature of the breed, should be short, straight, and very dense. They come in three colors: black, yellow (ranging from fox-red to light cream), and chocolate (light to dark). Below: Yellow Labrador puppies at play

bookmark with a photo of her dog.

“Afterwards, the mom said, ‘He’s been deathly afraid of dogs and this just completely helped him turn the corner,’ ” she recalls.

To the Heights

The fact that Labs are so approachable is a benefit as guide dogs, according to Trevor Thomas, aka The Blind Hiker. He noted the first guide dogs were German Shepherd Dogs, but that led to further isolation because some people were wary of the breed.

“Having a Lab makes blindness—makes me—

more approachable because everybody loves Labs,” he says.

Thomas, the world’s only professional blind long-distance hiker, partnered with Tennille, a black Lab trained by Guide Dogs for the Blind, in 2013. They have hiked over 13,000 miles together, including a solo hike of the Colorado Trail—nearly 500 miles through the Rocky Mountains. Thomas became the first blind person to hike it without a human guide, and Tennille became the first guide dog to complete it.

Tennille has helped Thomas locate trail markers

and alerted him to bears. She climbed down an unexpected ladder and stayed calm when Thomas had to tie her around his neck and shoulders to climb down a cliff. She knows around 600 words.

When Tennille retired, he wondered if she was a fluke. But then he partnered with a yellow Lab named Lulu, who is proving adept at trail work and, like Tennille, can locate brand-name items in grocery stores by seeing a logo and even overhearing it in conversation.

“I think the sky’s the limit

for what they can do and what they can learn,” he said. “Labs are absolutely the perfect breed.” **FD**

Jen Reeder narrowed her focus as a journalist to pets over a decade ago thanks to her Lab, Rio. She is former president of the Dog Writers Association of America.

For more information, visit the Labrador Retriever Club: thelabradorclub.com

TOP: COURTESY THE LABRADOR RETRIEVER CLUB; BOTTOM LEFT: COURTESY JANE BERNARD AND BREEDER; SHORELINE LABRADOR AND ASSISTANCE DOGS OF THE WEST; BOTTOM RIGHT: SUSAN PIETRICOLA