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AMERICAN
KENNEL CLUB



THE BODYGUARD

T

he instinct to protect runs strong in the blood of the Cane Corso. It's been infused over centuries, stretching back to the days when giant war dogs marched into battle alongside Roman legions.

But don't expect a great roaring display of fangs at the slightest threat. These dogs are subtle in their warnings, as breeder Janet Gigante observed when a man interested in buying a puppy came to her home in upstate New York.

Rocky, one of her favorites, took a shine to the visitor, and leaned against him, happy to be petted. "The guy was in heaven," Gigante recalls.

After a while, the 130-pound dog ambled over to another part of the room and settled down, apparently unaware of everything else in the world.

Rocky didn't seem to notice when the visitor stood up. And it looked as if he was snoozing as the man took a few steps toward five-foot two-inch Gigante.

All was fine, until the stranger began musing on his canine ideal.



"This guy was a big man, and he was talking with his hands, raising them over his head, describing how he likes the big dogs," Gigante says. "Rocky sees this out of the corner of his eye, and ran to me, then ran to the guy, and just started leaning on him a bit, and pushing him a little bit away, a little bit away. And the guy was like, *My God, look at this dog. He keeps wanting me to pet him.*"

Gigante almost didn't have the heart to tell him the truth. "I said, 'You don't know what happened. Rocky was watching from afar, and he saw you raise your hands, and he came back to protect me ... by pushing you away.'"

An understated air of cool competence, the kind of demeanor you'd expect from a professional bodyguard, is the breed's trademark. In fact, one way to translate the name is *bodyguard dog*, derived from the Latin words

canis (dog) and *cohors* (military guard).

This attitude is what draws many people to the Cane Corso, and it's impossible to understand unless you've seen the breed up close. Some of today's fanciers will readily admit that they had not given much thought to these dogs—until they had the chance to meet one face-to-face.

"I found him to be a very noble-looking animal," breeder Diane Connors says, describing Prince, the first Corso she saw back in the early 1990s at a rare-breed show. "He was very confident, approachable, and stable. Not a tail-wagging kind of howdy dog. ... Not the kind who's going to jump in your lap.

The dog was DiGuardia's Prince del Cerberus, one of the foundation studs in the U.S. One look was all it took for Connors, who had previously owned Rottweilers. In



LEFT AND TOP: COURTESY JANET GIGANTE; BOTTOM: COURTESY MICHAEL ERTASKIRAN

An ancient breed with a proud heritage, the Cane Corso will cut a powerful figure in the AKC Working Group ring. By Mara Bovsun



"The rectangular body gives a nice movement," breeder-handler Derek Matson says. "A Corso should move like a big cat."

1995, she got an 11-week-old puppy from one of Prince's litters—a brindle bitch whom she named Francesca—and has had Corsi ever since. Today Connors shares her home with 10 of them. "She was everything I ever wanted. She was wonderful—smart, sensitive, loved kids, a very kind heart, just a very kind-hearted dog."

Prince and Francesca exemplified the Cane Corso ideal, not surprising, because Prince was imported straight from the fountainhead. He came from the Cerberus Kennels in Italy, the land where these dogs originated centuries ago.

Flaming Oil, Sow's Ears

Italy's native mastiffs, the Neapolitan and the Cane Corso (pronounced KAH-neh-KOR-soh), descended from Roman

war dogs, the *canis pugnaces*. These dogs were thought to have come from the original mollosians, the giant dogs of the ancient Greek state of Epirus, in the geographic region known today as Albania, Cane Corso historian Michael S. Ertaskiran says. Ertaskiran is the president of the Cane Corso Association of America.

Roman troops brought the dogs back to their homeland during the Macedonian wars, and began the breeding that would eventually result in two unique warriors—the lighter Cane Corso and the Neapolitan. By all accounts, these canine soldiers were fearless. Many were used as *piriferi*, dogs who charged across enemy lines with buckets of flaming oil strapped to their backs.

Rome fell in A.D. 476, leaving all these fire-bearing fighting dogs with nothing much to do. Luckily, skills honed during

TOP AND LEFT: SHAUNA DE MOSS; FAR LEFT: BETTY CSING



empire-building translated well to peacetime. Cane Corsi carved out vital roles as guards, hunters, and all-around four-legged farmhands. No task was too difficult, dangerous, or even dull, whether it was guarding homes and livestock, chasing wild boar, flushing badger and porcupine, or hauling heavy carts.

The Corso did it all, including some difficult animal-husbandry tasks. Sows are known to hide in thickets when giving birth and, like all mothers, become fiercely protective of their offspring. The Corso's job was to distract the sow by grabbing her snout or ear, giving the farmer a chance to sneak in and gather up the piglets.

As the centuries passed, the Cane Corso settled into life on the farm, as much a part of the landscape as the indomitable olive trees that dot the Italian landscape. And like olives, the Corso evolved into several regional varieties, and became an essential part of Italy's identity.

Then they vanished.

It's not clear what happened, but changes in farming practices in the 19th and early 20th centuries pushed them out of work. Two world wars hastened their decline, and by the middle of the century the Cane Corso was all but extinct.

Back From the Brink

There were, however, places where these dogs lived on—the hearts and memories of children who had grown up in areas

where Cane Corsi continued to perform centuries-old tasks in the days before the wars. In the 1970s, a small group of these men decided to revive the dogs of their ancestors. One of them, Vito Indiveri, was a traveling salesman, who came from a family of carters and horse merchants, occupations where these strong, agile mastiffs were essential—until machines took over.

"The first time I rediscovered them was on a farm ... back in '77 or '78. ... I recognized them and was surprised: They were really them, my grandfather's dogs," Indiveri said in an interview with Ertaskiran.

Indiveri's work took him to dairy farms all over Italy. "As a traveling salesman, I never went into the cities, but I always traveled through the countryside, in the most remote areas of all of Puglia, Molise, Calabria, Lucania, and all the way to Sicily, Umbria, and Abruzzo. I began to realize, as I worked, that many of my clients had Corsi."

Around the same time, other Italians, most notably Giovanni Bonnetti, Dr. Paolo Breber, and Stefano Gandolfi, had started an active effort to bring the Cane Corso back. In 1980, the Malavasi brothers, German Shepherd Dog breeders in Mantova, bred the litter that would produce the model for the first standard—Basir and Babak. By 1983, Italy had its first club—Society Amatori Cane Corso (Society of Cane Corso Lovers)—and 13 years later the breed had FCI recognition.

Colors are black, blue, fawn, and red, with brindling acceptable in any color. Pig, sheep, and goat herders preferred black and dark brindle because it made the dogs stand out against the pale-hued flocks, CCAA president Mike Ertaskiran says. Italian cowboys also favored the darker shades because they blended in with the terrain, making it easier to surprise predators and horse thieves. Fawn was prized for the nocturnal activity of badger hunting.

RIGHT: SHAUNA DIMOSS; FAR RIGHT: TARA DARLING



A Sicilian wedding was the first step in their journey to America. One of the guests was Michael Sottile, a Neapolitan Mastiff aficionado from the States. In a scene worthy of Fellini, Sottile was on his way to the ceremony, dressed in a tux, when he noticed a large, athletic dog herding cows along a back road. Formal wear notwithstanding, Sottile got out to talk dogs with the farmer. That conversation led to the importation, in 1988, of the first Cane Corsi to America.

Basic Training

Ed Hodas, of BelMonte's Cane Corso, in upstate New York, was one of the people who took notice as soon as these dogs set foot on U.S. soil. It was at a dog show in New Jersey, and the dog was Sottile's Cocomo, one of the top early dogs and a significant influence on the breed today. Much to Hodas's delight and surprise, Sottile later sold Cocomo to him, and he established a line of top dogs under the BelMonte prefix.

A competitive kick boxer, Hodas believes that a Cane Corso must be active and disciplined, like a fighter,

he says. "I trained them in much the same way as I trained myself."

That regimen includes swimming upstream in the Delaware River and eating a "bodybuilder's diet": meat, cottage cheese, vitamins, and some dried dog food.

To build up the muscles in their hindquarters, Hodas runs them up a mountain. "It's a mile straight up. Their back legs get ripped," he says. "I call it 'Champion Hill.'"

Well-trained and -conditioned, a Cane Corso is up to most tasks, and fanciers agree that they are capable of excelling in any sport—agility, obedience, rally, carting, and schutzhund. Some have become police and SAR dogs, and others have been certified as therapy dogs, exhibiting great skill at comforting the sick.

A few have even given flyball a whirl, with surprisingly fast times, says Karin Long. Her Cane Corso, Maximus, achieved a flyball title in 2004, at age 2½, although Long had to come up with alternative ways to maneuver the course.

"The flyball box is designed for Border Collies, and he was 120 pounds. I had to teach him some spe-

Questions of Health

Like many large breeds, hip dysplasia and bloat can be a concern. Cane Corsi also have a tendency toward eyelid abnormalities, such as entropion, ectropion, and cherry eye. Most Corsi have a life span of about a decade, with some reaching 12 or 13.



Ears should be set well above the cheekbones and may be cropped or uncropped. If cropped, they should be in an equilateral triangle.

COURTESY MISTY BARKER

cial skills, so that he could turn off the box," she says, adding that he could run the course in a "stunning 5.2 seconds."

Long especially enjoyed the reactions of some of her competitors, many of whom had never seen a Corso. During one run, she recalls, two Border Collies noticed the massive, well-muscled Maximus barreling toward them.

"One froze in his tracks," Long recalls, "and the other ran away."

A Question of Type

Although small by molossus standards—males reach just about 140 pounds, and bitches, around 110—the breed should appear imposing and powerful.

"This dog has to tell the world, *I'm a Cane Corso*," AKC judge and handler James R. Deppen says. But exactly which physical traits send that message are a matter of some debate.

"I think the judges are going to have some difficulty, because of the different styles," breeder and handler Derek Matson says. "There are three or four distinct looks."

Some fanciers favor a lighter version, but Matson says the ideal Corso should be a "large dog with a decent amount of bone. ... The breed is still evolving. It shouldn't become a small breed." Three different bites are acceptable—undershot, level, and scissors—so judges are advised to consider the jaw before looking inside.

Physical variations aside, there's one area where there is no debate. From an early age, Corsi need one thing: socialization, socialization, and more socialization. They must be at ease with the world.

"With these guardian-type dogs, when they're little you have to get out there and you have to socialize them. You have to give them as much exposure as you would your own children," Deppen says. "They have to understand the dif-



Devoted beyond a fault to their owners, Corsi are highly protective of those who are small or frail.

ference between a threat and a person who has been invited into your space."

When judges approach the Corso for an examination, Deppen advises that they be confident, but "respectful of the space that you're entering into. They are very aloof that way, and very attuned to humans. They pick up on things. They pick up on fear quicker than anything, and they will play on that."

What kind of person can handle this dog? It's a question that Corso breeders wrestle with all the time, because the dogs are attractive to the wrong kinds of people, who want them for all the wrong reasons.

Gigante estimates that she gets an inquiry a day about buying one of her pups. "I turn down 95 percent

of them," she says. She's especially leery of men who may want to use the dog to enhance a weak personal image. "People want these big, tough dogs, because they think it'll make them tough themselves," says Gigante, who lives with 15 Corsi and two Yorkies, all in harmony.

As an example, she points to a family friend, a diminutive dentist who asked to bring Rocky to work with him.

"He works in a rough neighborhood, and he wanted to walk around with my dog to look tough," she recalls. "I said no. I want to protect my breed."

Gigante and other breeders stress that the decision to bring a Cane Corso into a family should be carefully considered, and only after seeing these dogs up close.

Quality breeders insist that prospective owners visit, including every member of the home, and they look for reactions that would suggest that

this is too much dog for an individual or family.

"I watch their eyes, for any sign of fear," Deppen says. Like the dogs themselves, the ideal Corso owner must be confident and in charge.

"This is a breed that will push you around," he says. "It's a very assertive breed, very confident."

He says that they have a natural tendency to look after the weaker members of their families, and develop an intense devotion to their owners. They do not fare well as kennel dogs, or in situations where they are not allowed to be with their people. They thrive on human contact, socialization, and training.

But for those who put in the time and effort, the rewards are extraordinary.

"The personalities are above any other dog we've ever had," Gigante, whose previous breed was Great Danes, says. "When you have a well-bred Cane Corso, you have a perfect dog." **QZ**

For more information, and to read the standard, visit the website of the Cane Corso Association of America, canecorso.org.

