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Westminster, "Show Dog," and the Battle Over Purebred Puppies

It's Westminster Week at [Madison](#) Square Garden, the time when Jeremy Lin cedes the floor to Pekingese, Syke Terriers, and Flat-Coated Retrievers, all battling for Best in Show. The Westminster Kennel Club dog show is America's chance to celebrate the purebred dog, to talk knowingly about pedigrees and conformation. This year, there's a little extra buzz, with [Martha Stewart](#)'s Chow Chow winning Best of Breed, and Josh Dean's newly released book *[Show Dogs: The Charmed Life and Trying Times of a Near-Perfect Purebred](#)*, which chronicled a year in the life of an Australian Shepherd.

But the rest of the year, the breeding establishment is under fire from those who cite the genetic problems with pure-bred dogs and further argue that it's irresponsible to continue to breed dogs when so many rescue dogs need homes.

"In [New York](#), the trendiest dog to own is a rescue," says Dean. "It's part of an urban, educated, progressive mindset and it's getting more and more fervent every year."

Animal advocates don't mince words on the subject. "Westminster and the dogbreeding industry it props up are directly responsible for the fate of many

of the dogs who end up in shelters and euthanized for lack of a home," writes [PETA Foundation staff writer Lindsay Pollard-Post](#)

Putting aside [puppy mills](#)—horrible places where pure-bred dogs are bred in massive numbers and under inhumane conditions for sale in pet stores—there are sound counter arguments for getting a pedigreed dog through a responsible breeder of the kind that show at Westminster and smaller shows throughout the country.

"They know the breed so well that they know what the puppies are going to turn out to be: Size, temperament, lifespan, how much they're going to shed," explains Dean. "They don't sugar coat it at all. They're very honest, because their worst fear is having an owner who's unhappy. If you go to a pound, you have no idea what you're going to end up with."

I'm in unique position to shed some light on this controversy, having lived with wonderful animals at both ends of the spectrum. Here's a tale of my two dogs: Alison, the brown rescue dog, and Tessie, the pedigreed golden retriever.

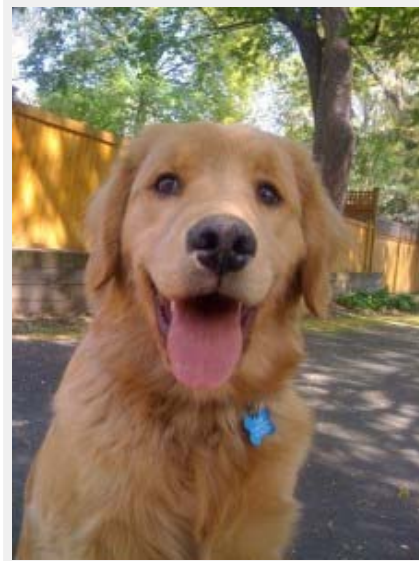
Alison: My wife and I had been married a couple of years and we were thinking about taking those scary steps into true adulthood: buying a house and having kids. We were smart, responsible people, but also prone to worry: How can we raise a child if we can't keep the houseplants alive?

So as a transitional step, we decided to get a dog.

We went to a few adoption events, and decided against a very personable, very large Rottweiler. We finally got serious and headed to a large animal shelter in [Newark](#).

It was exactly the kind of institutional, no-nonsense place you see in the movies, with rows of cages and dogs barking as we walked past.

We first gravitated toward this pretty, fluffy brown dog. When they took us all to another room, and it became clear that he liked the other dogs in his cage far more than he liked us. We felt bad putting him back, but he didn't mind at all.



Tessie, my golden retriever

In a nearby pen, this sweet medium-haired golden brown dog with floppy ears and a half-curly tail, jumped up and showed us her pink belly, and tried to lick our faces through the bars.

It was love at first sight.

She adopted us as surely as we adopted her.

This 50-pound dog was an extreme random bred, the very epitome of the kind of medium-size dog you get when you let dogs reproduce unsupervised. I looked at her paperwork. She had a name already—Alison—and a little note said “Do Not PTS.” I was about to ask what that meant, then I figured it out. There was no doubt about what we were rescuing Alison from.

Alison gave us some clues about her previous life. Two or three years old, she was already housebroken, leash trained, and knew how to sit. We would soon find out that she liked to roll in cat poop, but that’s another story.

Alison loved us. Other people? Not so much. When my sister went to pet her, she backed up in a panic and peed on the floor. She looked at pretty much everyone with a slightly wary glance. A couple of my friends got too friendly and she gave them a little warning nip.

We did the best we could to socialize Alison. She made friends with my sister, but she remained wary of strangers. We didn’t have that many people over, so we opted for a practical, safety-first solution: when we had company we’d put Alison in the spare bedroom with a bone.

We loved Alison and she lived a long and happy life in our home. She reached an accommodation with our then-very young children, but she died of age-related natural causes before we could see how she would react to a couple of toddlers. We also know that not every owner would have been as patient with her issues as we were.

Tessie: Peter King who writes for *Sports Illustrated*, used to live across the street from us. He had a dog named [Woody, a big old golden retriever](#). Totally self-possessed, Woody was a truly exceptional dog—he did the things that most dogs do, like fetch and stay.



He would also dump on command. Really. I watched Peter say "Woody, dump" and, well, he did. Amazing.

So when it came time to bring another dog into our household with active, older kids, our thoughts naturally gravitated to Woody. Alison was a great dog for a different stage in our lives. But with an noisy house full of kids and friends and toys and video games, we needed a different, more sociable dog that wouldn't be fazed by our domestic hustle and bustle.

Our first instinct was to call a local golden retriever rescue. They rejected our application out of hand when they read that my daughter had mild asthma, although no dog allergies. At some level, we felt bad about not going the rescue route, but our first concern was finding a dog that would integrate easily and fully into our family.

As I started to do research, I learned about the horrors of the puppy mills that feed to pet stores, and about how to find a responsible breeder: calling a local breed club and asking for recommendations is the easy first step.

I started calling golden retriever breeders. Some of them were clearly marketing to me, the kind of soft sell you might get from a luxury car dealer. A friend with a wonderful dog named Jester, gave me the name of her breeder in upstate New York who only bred a litter or two a year. She could be a little difficult to deal with, I was warned, but her dogs were amazing.

When I filled out her puppy questionnaire, followed up by a barrage of e-mails, it became clear that *she* was interviewing *me*. Did I have kids? Did we have another dog? What happened to that dog? Have you ever surrendered a dog to a pound?

She made it clear from the get-go: If for any reason we could no longer care for the dog, we would be contractually obligated to return it to her.

We talked about her upcoming litter from two first-time parents. They were both beautiful specimens—two of our puppy's great grandfathers had won best of Breed in Westminster, one on each side of the pedigree. More to the point, both dogs were sweet and patient and energetic but not *too* energetic. And finally they



also had medical clearances for hips, eyes and hearts, to minimize the chance that they would pass these problems along to our puppy. We had a deal.

The litter of seven tiny Goldens was born the day before Halloween, and we would be able to take our little girl home around the holidays, although the breeder made it crystal clear that these were *not* impulse-buy Christmas puppies. We knew. We had been waiting for six months.

We had pick of the litter and I made it clear what we wanted: The soundest, most social dog we could find.

We discovered that a major part of a responsible breeder's job is socializing the puppies. Puppies are very impressionable, so it's important that they're exposed to normal things—like people, other dogs, cars, and leashes—as well as things that dogs find frightening, from Halloween costumes to the vacuum cleaner. It's likely that Alison's wariness came from a lack of this kind of socialization, if not actual abuse.

As the pups matured, the breeder did a series of behavioral tests. Probably the most-telling exercise was something called a "down." Flip the puppy over on its back and see how it responds. Most of the puppies wriggled nervously. A couple started nipping. One just closed its eyes tight and stuck its tiny paws out in mortal terror.

Our pup? She laid back and made eye contact with the breeder, as if to say "Could you rub my belly while you're at it?" When the other puppies nipped the breeder in the whelping room, our pup would come over and lick her wounds, and whimper whenever she left.

We had found our puppy, [Tessie, aka Comment Full of Love](#) after the Red Sox fight song.

Tessie has been everything we hoped for and more. She's an almost robotic fetching machine—she's a retriever, remember—but with a reliable off switch. She carries shoes around in celebration when one of her pack member comes home, but without chewing them—another retriever trait—and when she's off leash, the retriever in her instinctively draws her back to us. She shares ancestors with the Golden that won Best in Breed at Westminster, but as close as she'll ever get to a dog show is sniffing our new flat-screen during the USA Network telecast.

More importantly, Tessie's literally never met anyone she didn't like. Her only behavioral fault is sometimes saying "Please please please pet me" in an overly insistent manner. Big kids, little kids, other dogs, cats, cars, trains,

thunderstorms, nothing seems to bother her. Curled up on the couch across from me, the three-year-old Tessie is a virtual poster child for canine companionship.



Now, don't read too much into this smallest of samples. I know people whose pound puppies are amazingly friendly, social animals, and dogs from breeders who've had physical or behavioral problems. Dogs are living things and they don't come with guarantees.

We loved both Alison and Tessie with all our hearts and treated them like they were members of our family. There's a great feeling that comes from rescuing a dog like Alison from a shelter. But it also comes with a life-long commitment to all that's wonderful—and not-so-wonderful—about that dog. With Tessie, we knew what our family needed, and our breeder gave us that and so much more. Rub her belly and you'll find out.

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