

# THE PROPER MASTIFF

A noble breed, from the inside  
out and the outside in

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When approached to write about the Mastiff, I asked myself: What part of the Mastiff would most interest me to write about, and what would a reader want?

Eventually I settled both questions. I would write about what I consider to be a “proper” Mastiff. When I say proper, I mean the Mastiff from the inside out and the outside in. What type of personality do the majority of Mastiffs have? What should a proper Mastiff look like? What makes the Mastiff the most distinctive breed on earth? What makes them so special to us, the uniqueness of them, what makes even their foibles endearing?

This proper Mastiff I am going to tell you about is coming from the perspective of a devoted fancier and breeder, an owner and exhibitor who has lived with them for more than half of my life ... and at one time shared my home with 19 of them, ranging from geriatrics to placeable-aged puppies.

I have lived with Mastiffs being free in my home and I have had kenneled Mastiffs. The Mastiff I want to tell you about, the one I want you to see here, is the one that is a family member, for it is in my opinion the only way you will every bring about all of their finest traits and it is the only way to truly appreciate their wonderfulness. The breed thrives on being a part of family life, a cherished member of your family. Not put away from you in a cage, which diminishes all that a Mastiff is meant to be. The Mastiff cannot flourish and he can never be what he is born to be if he is kept kenneled away from the family. Part of the nobleness of the breed comes from having the freedom to stretch his limits and boundaries as a family

member. I have had them both ways, and I have a good basis for comparison. Mastiffs should always be family members. They are not kennel dogs and they are not “yard” dogs.

In his home, the proper Mastiff is a great lump of a challenge, combining his inherent warmth, gentle spirit and blind trust and love for the family with equal parts of hard headedness, wilfulness, pushiness, courage and stubbornness. From puppy through teenager, a Mastiff is mostly as active as any dog of any other breed for short periods of time; then they will inevitably drop where they stand and rest until the next go around. They get into the same trouble, they test the same waters, and they react much the same as other breeds. The challenge is that from the get-go, the Mastiff is driven to be in charge. They want to run your home. They don't want to be put in another room if they can't see you. A baby gate where you can be seen on the other side may be acceptable, although failing their acceptance, baby gates can be eaten quickly. Sigh.



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**LAZY HILL LUATH:** This is my ideal of a Mastiff.  
He was a beloved family member at Ginny  
Bregman's, Lazy Hill Mastiffs.

The biggest part of the Mastiff challenge is that you must learn the knack of letting your Mastiff think he is in charge, while in fact you are still running the house and family. It is a tricky balance to achieve. Mastiffs have ego, and you can hurt theirs. They have long memories, which is sometimes inconvenient for us humans. Never get heavy handed with a Mastiff unless you want to lose him altogether; if you hurt him, you can damage him mentally and he may tune you out. You have to deal with them. They challenge you mentally. Try to force a Mastiff do something he doesn't want to do, and he will drop to the ground and double his weight, sit tight and turn blue. Or they have been known to be grumpy with you. It is not easy to deal with a great pile of Jell-O. You have to get in their head and make them want

to do what you want them to do. The challenge is staying one step ahead of your Mastiff. The rewards are great.

Mastiffs are sensitive, they are tuned in to your vibrations. If you feel uneasy in somebody's presence, they know it and it bothers them. A proper Mastiff will body-block you, pushing in front of you and assuming body language that is alert and ready. They may mutter low in the throat or “hum.” A proper Mastiff is



not quick triggered, but at the same time they are not reluctant to use force if they determine it is appropriate in the circumstances. Here again, they can make a unilateral decision if they feel you are threatened. Know your dog; they give off signals. It may be only a look in the eye, or it may be body language.

Mostly they are laid back and lazy, laying around and making you constantly step over them, unless you leave the room, and then they'll follow you and when you stop they'll lay back down and wait for the next move. The thinking is simple: You must always be accessible and in their view because you might need them and it's their job to be there for you. Their truest instinct is to watch over you and they can't do that from outside or in the next room. They don't want to be left at home when you go out, so a family Mastiff may even resort to blocking the doorway so you know his mind on the subject. Folks, that's what a proper Mastiff lives for – being your protector from all the monsters.

While a young Mastiff may show the quick flight response for something new, mostly a proper Mastiff will outgrow this with socialization and age. Some Mastiffs don't like change in their environment. You can easily test this: Put something in the middle of your yard that wasn't there yesterday. A young Mastiff may not trust it; he may bark, growl, circle it, sneak up on it, look out of the side of his head at it. If it wasn't there yesterday, it should not be there today (eye roll). The best way to handle this is to try to bring the Mastiff gently to the change, tease, and laugh.

Most Mastiffs have a sense of humor. They can do chagrined better than any breed I have ever known. If you can learn to tap into that, it will help you enormously in communicating with your pet. They can be funny, silly and fun and you can tickle them every bit as much as

they tickle you. Talk silly to a Mastiff and the majority will talk silly back to you.

Around the time of the second birthday, your Mastiff becomes **A Mastiff**. They become formidable. They begin to demonstrate what their breeding always dictated would happen – they become the gentle giant, the king of dogdom, a monstrous-sized creature that commands attention and respect – and, at home, a gentle love who is still a big baby. He becomes aware of his strength, size and power, and he knows instinctively how to use it. A Mastiff never has to be taught how to be a giant, never has to be “gentled” because of his size; it was all hardwired, there from birth. He was always big. Where previously he played rough and tumble with you, now he may still play rough but only with Dad. With Mom and the kids, he will back off. He is more gentle, more cautious, softer and more tender, with a deliberate effort on his part not to overwhelm women and children. This is a remarkable trait that runs through the breed.

A 200-plus pound Mastiff can move like a cat, especially in the dark of night. At any unusual sound, while you are deeply asleep and dreaming, your Mastiff is on duty. He may routinely do a house check, going slowly from room to room, making sure all is well. If bedroom doors are open, your Mastiff will check on you and the kids, listen to your breathing, assure himself you are okay, and then move on to the next sleeping occupant. It is his job. He was born for this.

Remember that the Mastiff you have at home is not necessarily the Mastiff people will meet away from home. At home, he is in charge of his life. Away from home, he must relinquish control to you, and for him to successfully do this, he must be socialized, reliable and confident. He has to go out and about with you and learn the world outside of his safe environment. He must meet people, enough of

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them so that he can distinguish non-threatening people and events from those that may be threats. Mastiffs do not trust easily; people have to earn their trust. They simply have to be introduced to enough outside stimulus to be comfortable. The natural instinct to distrust is easily overcome if you do your job well. It is your responsibility to see to this, not his.

As much as any other breed known in the world today, the Mastiff is in equal jeopardy. We do not live in a dog-friendly climate. The animal-rights fanatics do not want you and me to have any purebred dog, far less a great threatening hulk (in their opinion) of a dog like our Mastiffs. **We must guard our guardians.** We must protect our protectors. They are more vulnerable than they have ever been before in history. They spend their entire lives devoted to us and protecting us, and we must repay them by ensuring they are trained, socialized, healthy, reliable and have the ability to go out in public and make a firmly good impression. We must present to the world a proper Mastiff. Poorly bred Mastiffs are selling every day, breeders who do not check hips, elbows, eyes, hearts for healthy status. A dog in pain can snap and cause an unthinkable chain of events. In a crisis situation, nobody asks who bred the dog. They only yell from the rafters that a Mastiff is guilty.

I too love young Mastiffs, watching them mature and reach potential. But the adult, three to five years of age, that is the proper Mastiff. Prior to three years old, a Mastiff has not yet shown what he will fully become; you see only hints now and again. Those all-breed judges still love the flash, they like that fast moving, sleek youngster with reach and drive and that clever handler who can offset tiny faults, and that happy wagging fool of a dog who is showing off.

What judges should be looking to reward is the mature Mastiff that survived all the pit falls of maturing, the one who in full maturity shines in good health, strength, type, length, depth, substance and head. You know the one, that one that moves with power, strength and determination. He's the one that makes the ground shake under your feet. Not the one that skims over the earth like a ballerina. The proper Mastiff is longer than he is tall, but at a glance he may look almost square because he is so deep set. The proper Mastiff

has good, matching angulation front and rear. He is not forced to move on tip toe for lack of angulation. A proper Mastiff may not take your breath away when he moves, but you will stand in awe of his power. Think of a glorious sailboat (an Afghan Hound) opposed to an aircraft carrier.

The head on our proper Mastiff can look like a bowling ball at home when he is relaxed, but let him become alert, and that same head looks nearly square. It sets up with wrinkles that are distinctive to his mental state, those ears pop up, and the dog's entire demeanor sort of quivers. A proper Mastiff does not "drip" in wrinkle all the time, the eyes do not droop with red. The eyes should be clean, dark with no puddling. An overdone head and eye are not proper, they are just overdone. There is nothing on earth more beautiful than the old Havengore Mastiff head; it is still to be aimed for today in the breed. If you can get the proper head with a good bite, that is fine; if not, please do not penalize a Mastiff with underbite. It is in his pedigree to be there, it was part of his hereditary function, ergo it is part of his form today. A young Mastiff may well have an overbite; since the head continues to grow until about three years it is most unlikely that overbite will survive to maturity – so don't fault it in a teen.

A proper Mastiff is not a bully, however, he can have his moments. Sometimes when a Mastiff senses somebody is afraid of him, his chest and neck may grow larger; they like to impress that person especially. That is still part of the ego thing. In general, a proper Mastiff is sweet, generous, and loving, and he will do his very best to do whatever you ask of him because he wants you to be happy. And because he loves you so deeply.

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

dee dee Andersson has spent more than half her life owning, breeding, raising and exhibiting Mastiffs. A member of the Mastiff Club of America since 1982 and an honorary lifetime member of the Mastiff Association (UK), she is produced and/or owned more than 40 champions. At one time 19 Mastiffs lived with her. Today her home is shared by Baby, a Dogue de Bordeaux bitch, and Fearghus, an Irish Wolfhound dog.

dee dee Andersson's book, "*Mastiff, Aristocratic Guardian*," is considered the bible for Mastiffs, and although out of print it is still much sought after by Mastiff enthusiasts. She is involved in a new writing project at this time and still writes articles about the breed she loves. But she considers her most important responsibility these days being president of the Old English Mastiff Trust Foundation (OEMTF), which gives back to and protects the breed.