

# THE BRIARD

## *Oh, What a Character!*

By: ELLEN JO MYERS

**A** while back, a successful American breeder remarked: “I love the Briard. I just wish I could change its character.” I wish I could say that hers was a one-off comment, spoken in a moment of frustration, but in the eighteen years that I’ve been breeding these marvelous canines, I’ve heard others express that same opinion. The obvious explanation is that such people have never encountered a true representative of the breed: a fast-moving, fast-responding, fearless animal of superior intelligence whose unparalleled loyalty and devotion to its master, indefatigable work ethic, and exuberant spirit places it in a league of its own.



Photo by: ELLEN JO MYERS

Why is Briard character so often misunderstood? On one level, there’s the fact that we’re dealing with an ancient French sheepdog of complex temperament. If the breeder doesn’t have a deep understanding of that temperament (as outlined in the standard), he or she is unlikely to select for such qualities as stamina, resilience, bravery, wisdom, and all the other intangibles that are the hallmarks of the breed. And this breeder ignorance has in turn given rise to a vogue for Briards that don’t act like Briards.

Let’s look at a few of the practices that have fed this phenomenon. Some breeders, for example, routinely dodge the business of character by focusing on conformation qualities because those are easier to assess. Others, looking to produce dogs with high prey drive and having little notion of how much is too much, routinely produce stubborn, aggressive animals. And at the far end of the spectrum we find breeders who seek to reproduce the ‘sensitive’ aspect of the dog’s character, ending up with fearful, reactive Briards. Lastly, there are the people pleasers, who in an effort to make easy sales, “soften” their line to such an extent that their Briards have the personality of lap dogs (a terrible shame, since a well-bred Briard is a creature of great sweetness, intelligence, and uncommon insight). One such breeder, when asked why she worked in this manner, replied, “I like ‘em soft because then I don’t worry what kind of home they go into.” When I pressed her a bit, suggesting that she might be better off breeding a dog that was naturally ‘soft’, a breed whose standard defines the proper temperament as such, she humor as the Briard. People fall in love with briards because no other breed exhibits the same the loyalty and devotion and sense of exuberant joy of devotion for its owner.

At a Briard club dinner, in France, about ten years ago, I sat back and listened as two Frenchmen engaged in heated discussion on the topic. Here’s a paraphrase of their conversation:

Frenchy Number One (speaking in an ironic tone of voice): “Look. We can turn the Briard into the kind of dog who goes wiggling up to everybody, just to say hello. I mean, after all, since he doesn’t herd sheep anymore, he’s got little reason to remain on guard against poachers and thieves —”

Frenchy Number Two: “....Or we can continue to breed a dog who’s loyal and devoted to his keepers, mindful of his flock, and leery of strangers. Personally, I side with tradition and prefer the latter. But we can’t have it both ways.”

When reflecting on character, it’s worth recalling that the Briard was originally bred to control and protect massive flocks of sheep. (Here I should point out that the old-timers used to distinguish between “sheep dogs” and “shepherds”. The first protected the sheep but they didn’t “work” them. The second rounded up the flock. The Briard, however, was able to perform both tasks, one reason why its psychology is more complex.) Obviously, the job description called for a dog with real initiative, for not only did he have to keep those sheep moving, but also he was required to keep predators at bay. For this he needed vast reserves of energy and stamina. He also had to be sensible (‘sage’), prudent, and steady while at the same time displaying courage in the face of danger. These seemingly opposing traits weren’t developed overnight; on the contrary, they were selected and refined over the course of centuries, and they can be found today in the best examples of the breed.

Whether working animal or companion dog, a true Briard is a thinking dog, a problem-solver who wants to be perceived as sure-footed, attentive, and alert. He is a proud dog, and that sage and pride can be seen in his expression. Yet he’s also got a wild prankster streak. (On an obedience note, one needs to treat him with an even hand. Discipline him too harshly, and he’ll shut down. However, he’s attracted to and is responsive to strength and firmness. To this end, unless you offer him good clear instruction, he’ll have his way with you.) The French have a saying about the training of a briard. It translates roughly this way, “An iron fist in a velvet glove.”

So what other qualities can we expect to find in true-to-type Briard? Built into its DNA is a certain amount of prey-drive; however, the Briard was never a fighting dog nor was it first and foremost a guard dog. Thus, while he’s accustomed to keeping an eye out for alleged strangers who might trespass on ‘his’ property (or steal his sheep!), he’ll retreat at a word from his master. By the same token, he’ll keep close watch over the children. And when guests come to visit, he’ll be gracious and polite, but he won’t cuddle up to them. My first Briard, Daisy, exemplified this easy courtesy. Time and again, visitors would remark how she straddled that line between friendly and over-friendly with real dignity, allowing herself to be petted while making clear that she was my dog.

Indeed, the Briard’s tendency to bond quickly and deeply with its owner is one of its most endearing qualities. Consider, for instance, the following story:

In 1867, a Briard fancier named Eugene Gayot told of a French doctor who, in response to a request from the Emperor of Russia, detailed his own beloved Briard to drive his flock of Merinos all the way to Russia. Convinced he’d seen the last of his dog, the doctor was consumed by despair. Months passed and one day a Briard appeared at his door. The poor creature was in terrible shape – he was practically crawling and making low muffled sounds. The doctor started to shoo him

away, but then he decided to examine the wretched animal. As soon as he did, he realized that his dog had come back to him! Gayot tells us that when the dog heard his name, he leaped up ‘with joyous abandonment,’ before collapsing from hunger and fatigue. Over time, the doctor nursed him back to health and the bond between the two grew even deeper than before. Imagine the strength of character of a dog who, having fulfilled his duties, made the arduous cross-continental journey home, guided only by instinct, love and loyalty to his master!

Likewise, on more than one occasion, I’ve seen a handler’s mouth drop at the sight of my dog greeting me in a frenzy of excitement following an absence of as long as a year. Such devotion and passion! Such a delightful character! I wouldn’t change a thing about it, not for anything in the world.

*At just six weeks, the Briard puppy can display the expression that conveys the character of the breed, a sage, focused, fearless, steady pride, manifesting with a kind thoughtful gaze.*



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