

The Portuguese Water Dog

The Portuguese Water Dog is a breed with an ancient history filled with amazing feats of bravery. This breed developed in Portugal is believed to have originated in 1297 and took a complicated path through Europe towards popularity. The Spanish, French and Germans all attempted to take credit for the existence of the breed. Early on there were references to the Irish Water Spaniel, the Kerry Blue Terrier and the Curly Coated Retriever, each with a bit of resemblance to the PWD. These references addressed the robust character of the breed in as much as any physical attributes. Portuguese Water Dogs were among sailors as stories were told of their life saving feats. One tale told by a monk was that of a dying sailor who was rescued by a black dog with a wavy coat, white feet, white nose and a bit of white on the tuft of his tail. The description also includes what we would now call today a lion clip. The concept of hair cutting water dogs in the lion cut has to do with allowing the chest and legs of the dog to have enough hair to keep them warm in the water. The dog's hocks (ankles) also have hair to keep his joints warm and a tuft of hair on the tail. Poodles also sport this sort of cut for the same reasons. The Cao De Agua's (Portuguese Water Dog) also worked to catch fish that fisherman lost off their lines. These hardy dogs would jump into the water and catch the fish and return to the boat with the fish in its mouth. The dogs were said to have worked as hard as any fisherman. In fact the dogs' earned in rations that equal to the men.

Dr. Manuel Fernandes Marques who was a veterinary medical professor wrote the breed standard in 1938. Dr. Marquez published an article called "The Water Dog" in the Magazine of Veterinary Medicine, Lisbon, 1938. In this article Dr. Marquez discussed the breeds broad skull conformation as it has been maintained over the years as well as the breeds high level of intelligence. It is interesting that with all its positive qualities, the water dog almost disappeared. In 1960, only 50 dogs were believed to remain. A Connecticut breeder named Deyanne Miller is credited with the introduction of the PWD (Portuguese Water Dog) in to the United States, which very well may have saved the breed from disappearance. In 1984 the breed was granted full AKC registration having been recognized at that point by several European countries. In 1994 there were 386 Cao De Agua's registered in Portugal making them the ninth most popular breed. Physically, the breed weighs in at 35-55 pounds and measures 16-22 inches at the shoulder. The PWD comes in solid black, white and liver colors with or without white markings on the chest and feet. The texture of the hypoallergenic coat is loosely curled and wavy or thick with tight curls, the coat is shiny. The tail curls over the back especially when aroused. Considered medium sized the PWD fits into most situations. One can imagine that a very large dog would not do well in a small fishing vessel. The temperament also suits the fact that one would have to have an amenable character in a small boat. The PWD is highly trainable and generally shows an enormous degree of willingness to comply with their handler. I have been lucky to have many wonderful PWD's come through my training facility over the past 10-15 years. My experience has been nothing short of amazing when teaching these dogs obedience. I have witnessed Porty's learn a behavior in one or two repetitions, which is not common in many breeds. I truly believe that there are no jobs too tough for the PWD; they appear to excel at all tasks. Part of my luck with this

breed has to do with the proximity of a few talented breeders. Jane Harding of Connecticut and Karen Miller of Westchester have been in the breed for many years and should be credited with raising the bar on great breeding programs. These local breeders have influenced the entire dog world with respect to genetic issues such as storage disease and being involved with the Genome project, mapping out potential inherent problems in dogs. Christine Meyers, owner of Wags and Whiskers in Chappaqua has also been influential in the breed locally. I had the great pleasure of training entire Porty puppy kindergarten classes on more than one occasion with incredible results. Karen Miller once stated that my shortcoming was that I did not have a pool in my facility for her progeny to learn water work. I wish I did have a pool, as I'm sure the pups would have enjoyed it.

While I am a huge fan of the PWD, I will say that they may not be the best breed for everyone. Anecdotally I have noticed that they have a hard mouth as puppies and novice dog owners usually have trouble waiting for the mouth to soften, which generally occurs soon after teething subsides. The breed is strong and clever making it challenging for the first time dog owner. I had a friend once call me from the beach in Portugal and ask me if I was familiar with the breed, I asked why he wanted to know and he responded because I am watching them jump straight out of the water and grasp sea gulls from the air. What more can be said of athleticism. Owners have a bit of coat care to deal with and while it is not too difficult to handle it needs some attention 2-3 times weekly to maintain its luster and health. Many of the PWD's that I had contact with were fed raw diets and I found it difficult to guess their age, they always looked young and healthy. I have selectively recommended the PWD to potential owners and never had a single complaint. In short, they are just lovely, energetic and happy dogs. If you are interested in this breed, research them thoroughly before diving in head first, that is the dogs job.

Steve Diller