

WHERE TO GET YOUR NEXT PET

by Carole Williams, The Animal Mission

Whoever said you can't buy happiness has never brought home a new dog or cat! If you are thinking of adding a pet to your house, where will you go to get your next four-legged friend? The Columbia Animal Shelter, we hope! Americans own approximately 65 million dogs and 77 million cats compared to 12-15 million in the late 1950s. The pet industry projects that we will spend \$34 billion on our pets in 2005. Yet 6-8 million cats and dogs enter shelters each year with only 3-4 million adoptions. According to a HSUS survey, 55% of Americans think it's better to adopt an animal from a shelter than to purchase one from a breeder or pet store, but only 18% of dogs and cats with permanent homes were adopted from shelters. Just like the pet actors that have been "discovered" at shelters across the U.S., there are a variety of dogs and cats looking for a forever home with you. Right now a future agility champion, drug-detection or therapy pet is waiting to be found.

About 25% of dogs in shelters are purebred, the others are mixes and crosses (did you see the article in Life magazine - poodle crosses have become mainstream, but the "Benji" lovers of the world have known that for years). Crosses are usually 2 distinct breeds - i.e., schnauzer and poodle = schnoodle. Statistically, labs, goldens, shepherd crosses should be the most common because of the sheer numbers of these breeds being produced every year. In 2004, the American Kennel Club alone registered almost 1 million dogs; the top 5 registrations were:

- **Labradors** 146,692
- **Golden Retrievers** 52,550
- **German Shepherds** 46,046
- **Beagles** 44,555
- **Yorkshire Terriers** 43,522

If you do decide on a purebred, look at the shelter first, then if the breed you have chosen is not available, contact a rescue group for that breed. Every AKC breed has a rescue group that works just with their breed. These animals end up in rescue for a variety of reasons and usually the rescue groups have a good idea of the individual dogs' strengths, weaknesses and background. Breeders also have a form of "rescue" - their own dogs that didn't end up having a show quality coat/tail/etc. or one of their puppies that has been returned. Reputable breeders insist that if for any reason you can't keep their dog, you will return it to them. They believe that they caused this living creature to be here and they are ultimately responsible for it, for life. These special breeders will also have generations worth of testing (look for OFA, GDC, PENNhip, CERF and BAER) to show that the many genetic problems out there have not been found in your potential puppy's background.

Don't ever buy a puppy or kitten from a pet store or flea market unless they have been brought there to adopt from local shelters. Puppies and kittens sold at pet stores with AKC or CKC papers are really puppy/kitten mill animals. **NO** ethical breeder would sell their puppies/kittens to the unknown - good breeders will be as particular about you as you should be about them. "AKC papers" only mean that the litter was registered. No health or temperament certifications are required. AKC papers are needed if you are planning to compete in AKC-sponsored events such as conformation, obedience or agility, otherwise they are not necessary. Purebred dogs without papers can get an ILP number that enables you to compete in all AKC sports. In addition, buying from a pet store or flea market encourages the puppy mills to keep producing unhealthy animals and holding breeding stock in heartbreaking conditions.

Sigmund Freud told us that "thought is action in rehearsal." Your new companion will need you for many years, so think before you buy and use your head as well as your heart when you choose your new forever friend.