



In Search Of The Genius Dog

SOME GIFTED POOCHES ARE EXCEPTIONAL AT LEARNING WORDS.

BY MARY BATES, PH.D.

EVERY DOG IS A GOOD BOY OR GIRL, BUT A FEW MAY also be geniuses. A study shows that some extraordinarily gifted dogs can learn the names of up to 12 new toys in just one week and that they remember the names for at least two months.

The project started when Claudia Fugazza and Ádám Miklósi, at Eötvös Loránd University in Hungary, met a dog named Whisky from Norway; her owner claimed she knew the names of her toys. Although skeptical at first, the researchers tested Whisky, and she demonstrated an impressive vocabulary.

This inspired the researchers to attempt to train dogs to learn the names of objects. Although the team spent three months training 36 dogs, they had very little success. Even after intensive training, most dogs were not able to learn multiple object names.

For the new study, the research team searched for dogs with an exist-



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ing vocabulary. In addition to Whisky, they found five more dogs, from Hungary, Brazil, the Netherlands, the United States, and Spain. These six dogs each knew the names of more than 28 toys, with some knowing more than 100. They demonstrated this knowledge by successfully retrieving each toy upon the owner's request when the toy was placed in a different room, out of the owner's view, among other named toys. Interestingly, all six of the dogs are border collies. The team has since identified a handful of other "genius" dogs. Border collies are well-represented in this group, but it also includes a German shepherd, a Pekinese, a mini Australian shepherd, and a few mutts. Overall, it seems that the ability to learn object names is rare in dogs and occurs only in a few gifted individuals.

Dogs appear to be much better at understanding human communication signals than other animals, including great apes and wolves. The domestication process, in which humans specifically selected dogs for their ability to understand human communication, has likely contributed to their superior abilities. ■

Mary Bates, Ph.D., researched bat echolocation at Brown University. Her writing has appeared in *National Geographic News*, *New Scientist*, and *Muse*, among others.