

Don't Buy A PON - Polish Lowland Sheepdog!

Revised by Carol Hales with permission from Pam Green

Interested in buying a Polish Lowland Sheepdog? They are so cute! You must be or you wouldn't be reading this article. You have already heard how wonderful they are. Well, I think you should also hear, before it's too late, that Polish Lowland Sheepdogs are not the perfect breed for everyone. As a breed they have a few features that some people find charming, but that some people find mildly unpleasant and some people find downright intolerable.

There are different breeds for different needs. There are over 400 purebred breeds of dogs in the world. Maybe you'd be better off with some other breed. Maybe you'd be better off with a different breed. Maybe a different pet would better fit your lifestyle. Fish, birds, small rodents, etc., don't demand as much of your time as a Polish Lowland Sheepdog or any dog for that matter. This is an important decision to make before you see that cute puppy and bring him home. The commitment to a Polish Lowland Sheepdog is not for everyone.

DON'T BUY A PON IF YOU ARE ATTRACTED TO THE BREED BY ITS APPEARANCE.

The appearance of the Polish Lowland Sheepdogs you may have seen in the show ring, in magazines and in books is the product of many hours of bathing and grooming. This carefully constructed beauty is fleeting: a few minutes of freedom, romping through the fields or strolling in the rain or digging in the yard restores the more natural look of the PON. The natural look of the PON is that of a shaggy farm dog, usually with some dirt clinging to the tousled coat. The PONs preference is the "natural look" and grooming is definitely not their favorite activity. Unless you are able to devote time to training your dog to accept being groomed on a regular basis you will not have the "show ring beauty contestant" to show off the majority of the time.

DON'T BUY A PON IF YOU ARE UNWILLING TO SHARE YOUR HOUSE AND YOUR LIFE WITH YOUR DOG.

PONs were bred to share in the work of the farm family and to spend most of their waking hours working with the family. They thrive on companionship and they want to be wherever you are. They are happiest living with you in your house and going with you when you go out. While they usually tolerate being left at home by themselves (preferably with a dog-door giving access to the fenced yard), they should not be relegated to the backyard or kennel. A puppy exiled from the house is likely to grow up to be unsociable, unruly and unhappy. He may well develop pastimes, such as digging or barking that will displease you and your neighbors. An adult so exiled will be miserable too. If you don't strongly prefer to have your dog's companionship as much as possible, enjoying having him sleep in your bedroom at night and sharing many of your activities by day, you should choose a breed less oriented to human companionship. Likewise, if your job or other obligations prevent you from spending much time with your dog. No dog is really happy without companionship, but the pack hounds are more tolerant of being kenneled so long as it is in groups of two or more. A better choice would be a cat, as they are solitary by nature.

DON'T BUY A PON IF YOU DON'T INTEND TO EDUCATE AND TRAIN YOUR DOG.

Basic obedience and household rules training is not an option for a happy PON and his owner. As an absolute minimum you must teach him to reliably respond to commands to come, to lie down, to stay and to walk at your side, on or off leash and regardless of temptations. You must also teach him to respect your household rules. Is he allowed on the furniture? Is he allowed to beg at the table? What you allow or forbid is up to you. But it is critical that you, not the dog, make the rules consistently. PONs without education tend to take over and make their own rules. You must commit yourself to attending a series of weekly lessons at a local obedience club or professional trainer and to doing one or two short homework

assignments each day. As commands are learned, they must be integrated into your daily life by being used whenever appropriate and enforced consistently. PON puppies and adults are easy to train. They are eager to please you, intelligent and calm natured with a relatively good attention span. Once a PON has learned something, he tends to retain it well. Your cute, sweet little PON puppy will grow up to be a dog with a highly assertive personality and the determination to get his way. If he has grown up respecting you and your rules, then all his physical and mental strength will work for you. But if he has grown up without rules and guidance from you, surely he will make his own rules and his physical and mental powers will often act in opposition to your needs and desires.

Training of your PON cannot be delegated to someone else, e.g., by sending the dog away to obedience school. The relationship or respect and obedience are personal between the dog and the individual who does the training. This is true of all dogs to greater or lesser degrees, but definitely to a very great degree in PONs. While you may definitely want the help of an experienced trainer to teach you how to train your dog, you yourself must actually train your PON. As each lesson is learned, then the rest of the household (except young children) must also work with the dog, insisting he obey them as well.

If you don't intend to educate your dog, preferably during puppyhood, you would be better off with a breed that is both small and socially submissive, e.g. a Shetland Sheepdog. Such a dog does require training, but a little bit goes further than with a PON. In the opposite direction, if your goals in obedience training are oriented towards success at high level competition (HIT, OTCH and Gaines), please realize that the PON is not among the half dozen breeds best suited to such highly polished performance. PONs can certainly excel at such working competitions as agility, obedience, herding, flyball, therapy dogs. As a herding dog they must be able to think, to reason and to make some decisions independently. That decision may not be a long down for five minutes with their owner out of site.

DON'T BUY A PON IF YOU DON'T HAVE A LEADERSHIP (SELF-ASSERTIVE) PERSONALITY.

Dogs do not believe in social equality. They live in a social hierarchy led by a pack-leader (King Alpha). The alpha dog is generally benevolent, affectionate, and non-bullying towards his subordinates; but there is never any doubt in his mind or in theirs that the alpha is the boss and makes the rules. Whatever the breed, if you do not assume the leadership, the dog will do so sooner or later and with more or less unpleasant consequences for the abdicating owner. Like the untrained dog, the pack-leader dog makes his own rules and enforces them against other members of the household by means of a dominant physical posture and a hard-eyed stare, followed by a snarl, then a knockdown blow or a bite. Breeds differ in tendencies towards social dominance: and individuals within a breed differ considerably. PONs as a breed tend to be of a socially dominant personality. You really cannot afford to let a PON become your boss. You do not have to have the personality of a Marine Boot Camp Sergeant, but you do have to have the calm, quiet self-assurance and self-assertion of the successful parent ("Because I'm your parent, that's why.") or successful grade-school teacher. If you think you might have difficulty asserting yourself calmly and confidently to exercise leadership, then choose a breed known for its socially subordinate disposition, such as a Golden Retriever or a Shetland Sheepdog. Be sure to ask the breeder to select one of the more submissive pups in the litter for you. If the whole idea of "being the boss" frightens or repels you, don't get a dog at all. Cats don't expect leadership. A caged bird or a hamster, or fish doesn't need leadership or household rules.

Leadership and training are inextricably intertwined: leadership personality enables you to train your dog, and being trained by you reinforces your dog's perception of you as the alpha.

DON'T BUY A PON IF YOU DON'T VALUE LAID BACK COMPANIONSHIP AND CALM AFFECTION.

A PON becomes deeply attached and devoted to his own family, but he doesn't "wear his heart on his sleeve." Some are noticeably reserved, others are more outgoing, but few adults are usually exuberantly demonstrative of their affections. They like to be near you, usually in the same room, preferably on a comfortable pad or cushion in a corner or under a table, just "keeping you company." They enjoy conversation, petting and cuddling when you offer it, but they are moderate and not overbearing in coming to you to demand much attention. They are emotionally sensitive to their favorite people: when

you are joyful, proud, angry or grief-stricken, your PON will immediately perceive and will believe himself to be the cause. The relationship can be one of great mellows, depth and subtlety: it is a relationship on an adult to adult level, although certainly not one devoid of playfulness. As puppies, of course, they will be more dependent, more playful and more demonstrative. In summary, PONs tends to be sober and thoughtful, rather than giddy clowns or sycophants.

DON'T BUY A PON IF YOU ARE FASTIDIOUS ABOUT THE NEATNESS OF YOUR HOME.

The PONs thick shaggy coat and his love of playing in water and mud combine to make him a highly efficient transporter of dirt into your home, depositing same on your floors and rugs and possibly also on your furniture and clothes. One PON coming in from a few minutes outdoors on a rainy day can turn an immaculate house into an instant disaster. His full beard soaks up water every time he takes a drink, then releases same, dripping across your floor or sopping into your lap. (Sorry for the poetic license but these words best describe the phenomenon). (It is of course possible to cut the beard off and to keep the feet clean-shaven year round to reduce the mess) Although it is technically true that PONs do not shed, you will find that the grooming process usually results in balls of pulled out hair tumbleweeding their way about house, unless you deposit same directly from comb into the trash basket. I don't mean to imply that you must be a slob or slattern to live happily with a PON, but you do have to have the attitude that your dog's company means more to you than does neatness and you do have to be comfortable with less than an immaculate house.

While all dogs, like our children, create a greater or lesser degree of household mess, almost all other breeds of dog are less troublesome than the PON to groom and keep clean. The Basenji is perhaps the cleanest, due to its cat-like habits, but cats are cleaner yet, and goldfish hardly ever mess up the house.

WHAT'S THAT SMELL? OR DON'T BUY A PON IF YOU ARE FASTIDIOUS ABOUT UNPLEASANT ODORS.

All dogs have flatulence, like people, but enough said about that and you can always blame it on the dog. The PON coat can have an odor if not kept groomed and bathed. This could be the origin of odors especially when wet. Some people consider the PON beard to have a noticeably unpleasant odor even when dry, as it tends to retain particles of food, which soon become offensive if the beard is not frequently washed.

Almost all of the shorthaired breeds, other than hound breeds or a field-bred (oily coated) Chesapeake, are less likely to offend the nose through general coat/body odor.

DON'T BUY A PON IF YOU DISLIKE DOING REGULAR GROOMING.

The thick shaggy PON coat demands regular grooming, not merely to look tolerably nice, but also to preserve the health of skin underneath and to detect and remove ticks, foxtails, and other dangerous invaders. For "pet" grooming, you should expect to spend several hours a week with your charge keeping the undercoat combed out and cleanliness updated. Of course anytime your PON gets into cockleburs, filigree, or other coat-adhering vegetation, you are likely to be in for an hour or more of remedial work. During "foxtail" season (in western U.S.), you must inspect feet and other vulnerable areas daily. In Lyme disease areas during tick season, you will need to inspect for ticks daily. "Pet" grooming does not require a great deal of skill, but does require time and regularity. Keeping the dog in a short or semi-short working clip substantially reduces grooming time, but does not eliminate the need for regularity. "Show" (beauty contest) grooming requires a great deal of skill and considerably more time, effort and patience.

In other breeds with similar long double coats the dogs rescued by Breed club rescue committees almost always show the effects of month of non-grooming, resulting in massive matting and horrendous filthiness, sometimes with urine and feces cemented into the rear portions of the coat. It appears an unwillingness to keep up the coat care is a primary cause of abandonment. Many other breeds of dog require less grooming. Short-coated breeds require very little grooming. Think about it!!! Your friends may not believe your excuse of having to groom the dog forever.

DON'T BUY A PON IF YOU DISLIKE DAILY PHYSICAL EXERCISE.

PONs need exercise to maintain the health of heart and lungs and to maintain muscle tone. Because of his mellow, laid-back, sometimes lazy, disposition, your PON will not give himself enough exercise unless you accompany him or play with him. An adult PON should have a morning outing of 15-20 minutes of exercise and a similar outing in the evening. For puppies shorter and more frequent outings are preferred for exercise and housebreaking.

All dogs need daily exercise of a greater or lesser length and vigor. If providing this exercise is beyond you, physically or temperamentally, then choose one of the many small and energetic breeds than can exercise itself within your fenced yard. Most of the Toy and Terriers fit into this description, but don't be surprised if a terrier is inclined to dig in the earth since digging out critters is the job that they were bred to do. Cats can be exercised indoors with a mouse on a string toy. Hamsters will exercise themselves on a wire wheel. House plants don't need exercise.

DON'T BUY A PON IS YOU BELIEVE THAT DOGS SHOULD RUN "FREE."

Whether you live in town or the country, no dog can safely be left to run "free" outside your fenced property and without your direct supervision and control. The price of such "freedom" is inevitably injury or death: from dog fights, from cars, from the Pound/Shelter or from justifiably irate neighbors. Even though PONs are home-loving and less inclined to roam than most breeds, an unfenced PON is destined for disaster. Like other breeds developed for livestock herding, most PONs have inherited a substantial amount of "herding instinct." Which is a strengthened and slightly modified instinct to chase and capture suitable prey. The unfenced country-living PON will sooner or later discover the neighbor's livestock (sheep, cattle, horses, poultry) and respond to his genetic urge to chase and harass such stock. State law almost always gives the livestock owner the legal right to kill any dog chasing or "worrying" his stock and almost all livestock owners are quick to act on this. The unfenced city PON is likely to exercise his inherited herding instinct on joggers, bicyclists, and cars. A thoroughly obedience-trained PON can enjoy the limited and supervised freedom of off-leash walks with you in appropriately chosen environments.

If you don't want the responsibility of confining and supervising your pet, then no breed of dog is suitable for you. A neutered cat will survive such irresponsibly given "freedom" somewhat longer than a dog, but will eventually come to grief. A better answer for those who crave a "free" pet is to set out feeding stations from some of the indigenous wildlife, such as raccoons, which will visit for handouts and which may eventually tolerate your close observation.

DON'T BUY A PON IF YOU CAN'T AFFORD TO BUY, FEED, AND PROVIDE HEALTHCARE FOR ONE.

Polish Lowland Sheepdogs are not a cheap breed to buy, as running a careful breeding program, with due regard for temperament, trainability, and physical soundness (hips and eyes especially) cannot be done cheaply. The time the breeder should put into each puppy's "pre-school" and socialization is also costly. The "bargain" puppy from a "back-yard breeder" who unselectively mates any two PONs who happen to be of the opposite sex may well prove to be extremely costly in terms of temperament, health and lack of socialization.

Whatever the initial cost of your PON, the upkeep will not be cheap. Food is not the only cost of maintaining your PON. Veterinarian costs add up for those routine yearly checkups. Spaying and neutering is another cost that should be calculated. PONs are routinely checked for two conditions, genetic eye diseases and hip dysplasia. Your best insurance against dysplasia is to buy only from a litter bred from OFA Certified and/or Penn-Hip tested parents and, if possible, grandparents. Yes, this generally means paying more. Professional grooming, if you use it, is expensive. Professional tools for use at home adds up to a tidy sum, but once purchased will last many dog-lifetimes. Finally, the modest fee for participation in a series of basic obedience training classes is an essential investment in harmonious living with your dog. Fees are the same for any breed. The modest annual outlays for

immunizations and for local licensing are generally the same for all breeds, though some counties have a lower license fee for spayed/neutered dogs. All dogs, of whatever breed and however cheaply acquired, require significant upkeep costs, and all are subject to expensive veterinary emergencies.

DON'T BUY A PON IF YOU ARE NOT WILLING TO COMMIT YOURSELF FOR THE DOG'S ENTIRE LIFETIME.

No dog deserves to be cast out because his owners want to move to a no-pet apartment or because he is no longer a cute puppy or didn't grow up to be a beauty contest winner, or because his owners (through lack of leadership and training) have allowed him to become an unruly juvenile delinquent with a repertoire of undesirable behaviors. The prospects of a responsible and affectionate second home for a "used" dog are never very bright, but they are especially dim for a shaggy, poorly mannered dog.

IN CONCLUSION

If all the preceding "bad news" about PONs hasn't turned you away from the breed, then by all means do get a Polish Lowland Sheepdog. They are every bit as wonderful as you have heard!

If buying a puppy, be sure to shop carefully for a responsible and knowledgeable breeder who places high priority on breeding for sound temperament and trainability and good health in all matings. Such a breeder will interrogate and educate potential buyers carefully. Such a breeder will continue to be available for advice and consultation for the rest of the dog's life and will insist on receiving the dog back if ever you are unable to keep it.

However as an alternative to buying a PON puppy, you may want to give some serious consideration to adopting an older PON in need of a new home. We have some very famous "rehomed" PONs in the breed history. Contact the Polish Lowland Sheepdog Club of America, website (www.plsca.org) and look under PON Guardians for more information.