

Pet Adoption Interviews

Better matches make stronger bonds

By Roxanne Hawn

Gay Routh's dog, Rustie, needed an older canine pal after her two packmates died. After a short search, Gay found Friskee, an 11-year-old coonhound-beagle mix who had been at Humane Society Silicon Valley for eight months. She figured he was the perfect match for Rustie, her 14-year-old golden retriever-springer spaniel mix.

However, when Gay introduced the dogs, Friskee got pushy with Rustie and adoption staff worried it was a bad match. The hiccup did not deter Gay, who arranged walks four days a week for three weeks so Friskee could get used to being around Rustie. An adoption counselor then approved a trial sleepover at Gay's home, and Friskee has lived there ever since. "Both of them are more or less independent," Gay says. "They don't exactly play, but they are happy that they're together, that they're not alone."

This is the face of open pet adoptions, where flexibility and collaboration override the old rules about who can and cannot adopt.

ADOPTIONS, THEN

Pet adoption screening began as a rigorous process—black and white, right or wrong. Sometimes great people got rejected. "It was more of what I considered—and I'm sure the adopters

considered—an inquisition: 'Prove to me that you're good enough' for this dog or this cat or this gerbil or whatever kind of animal it was," says Linda Shea, humane educator with Frederick County Animal Control in Maryland.

ADOPTIONS, NOW

Today, adoption screeners ask similar questions about current and past pets, lifestyle, and pet care beliefs, and they often hear similar answers, but Shea admits, "We're not as judgmental."

"There is still a wide range of screening," says Martha Smith, president of All Breed Rescue Network in Colorado. "But in general, the larger shelters and humane societies have become far more open. They have made their adoption process much more friendly."

A method referred to as "progressive adoption matching" seeks to help people clarify what they want in a pet by asking a dozen or more questions about expectations. For example: *When I'm at home, I want my dog/cat to be at my side ... all of the time, some of the time, little of the time.* Or, *I want my dog/cat to be enthusiastic in the way she shows love for people ... very, somewhat, not at all.* Based on these answers, adoption counselors determine the category into which you fall.

Behind the scenes before pets are put up for adoption, systematic screening

Family Seeks:

- Energetic young adult dog
- Medium to large sized
- Good with kids and other pets
- Walks well on a leash
- Preferably housetrained

produces categories of dog and cat personalities, activity levels, and needs. The theory is that this keeps people who are less active from going home with rocket dogs or jet-propelled cats. Such systems vary by location and affiliation, but they often use color-coding to make matches. Green goes with green, orange with orange.

"We remind adopters that they can fall in love with an animal outside their color category, but it means they're going to have to make certain accommodations," says Angi Baber, director of the adoption center at Richmond SPCA in Virginia. A good match, she stresses, is about setting realistic expectations.

Before you start searching for a new pet, schedule time to talk with your veterinarian. He or she can give you advice on what pet might be best suited to your particular situation.

LAX VERSUS STRICT

Some adoption policies are downright lax. When Sheri Moritz adopted a dog from the municipal shelter near her home in Raleigh, North Carolina, the form asked only for her name, address, phone number, and payment.

Sheri, a lifelong dog owner, did research and went through negotiations with her 11-year-old daughter for four months. Her daughter wanted a Lab, but Sheri wanted something smaller because she also has a toddler.

Their perfect match? Bailey, a Lab-beagle mix. She is a young adult, full grown, but she looks just like a Lab puppy—and always will.

On adoption day, Sheri saw another mother with small children go home with a puppy that would likely grow to be 75 pounds or more. "This family

had never had a dog before," she said, "and I thought, 'Oh, no! They're going to let her adopt this humongous dog.'"

Smith, a rescue veteran of 20 years, cringes at such stories. "It's an 'adopter beware' situation," she says. "It's better to err on the side of someone who makes adopting a bit difficult than someone who practically gives dogs away—for a price."

Breed-specific rescue groups are often significantly stricter. Smith understands that such stringent measures—including requiring veterinarian and personal references, proven backup plans for elderly or military adopters, long conversations, and

home visits—can be off-putting, but some rescue groups face limitations: The pets they shelter have washed out of the mainstream adoption system, often for behavioral reasons, and it's difficult logistically to take animals back in a small foster-home network.

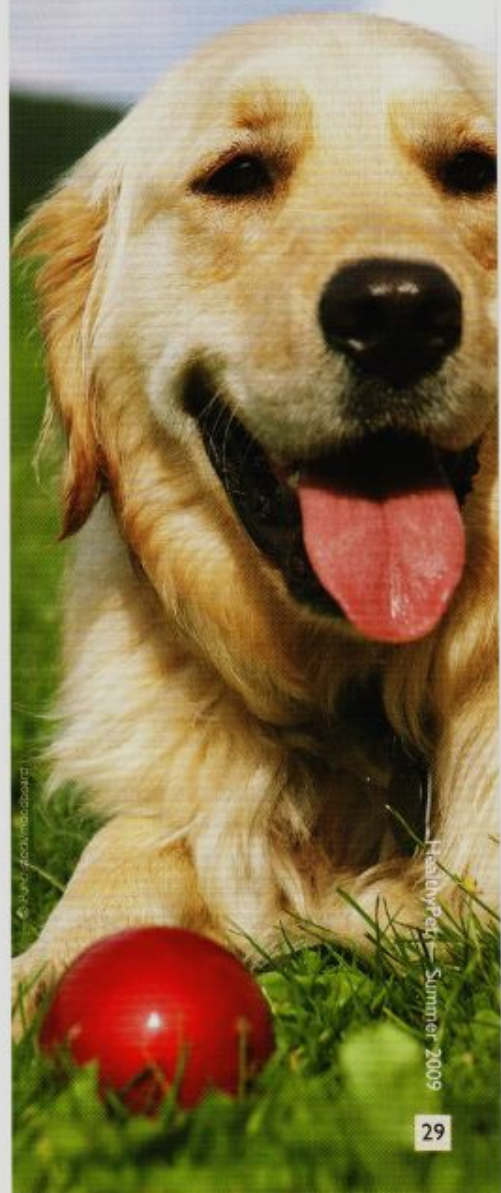
"We try to get it right the first time," Smith says. "The intent is to make sure the pet's next home is its last home."

KNOW THYSELF AND THY POTENTIAL PET

It's important to take the time to figure out what you're looking for in a pet. Denise Herman, founder and head trainer of Empire of the Dog Training and Consulting, suggests making a list of qualities you'd like in a pet and a list of things that are nonnegotiable. "If I already know I need a certain behav-

Dog Seeks:

- Warm, loving family
- Active kids to hang out with
- A big backyard
- Lots of opportunities to run and play
- Other pets OK

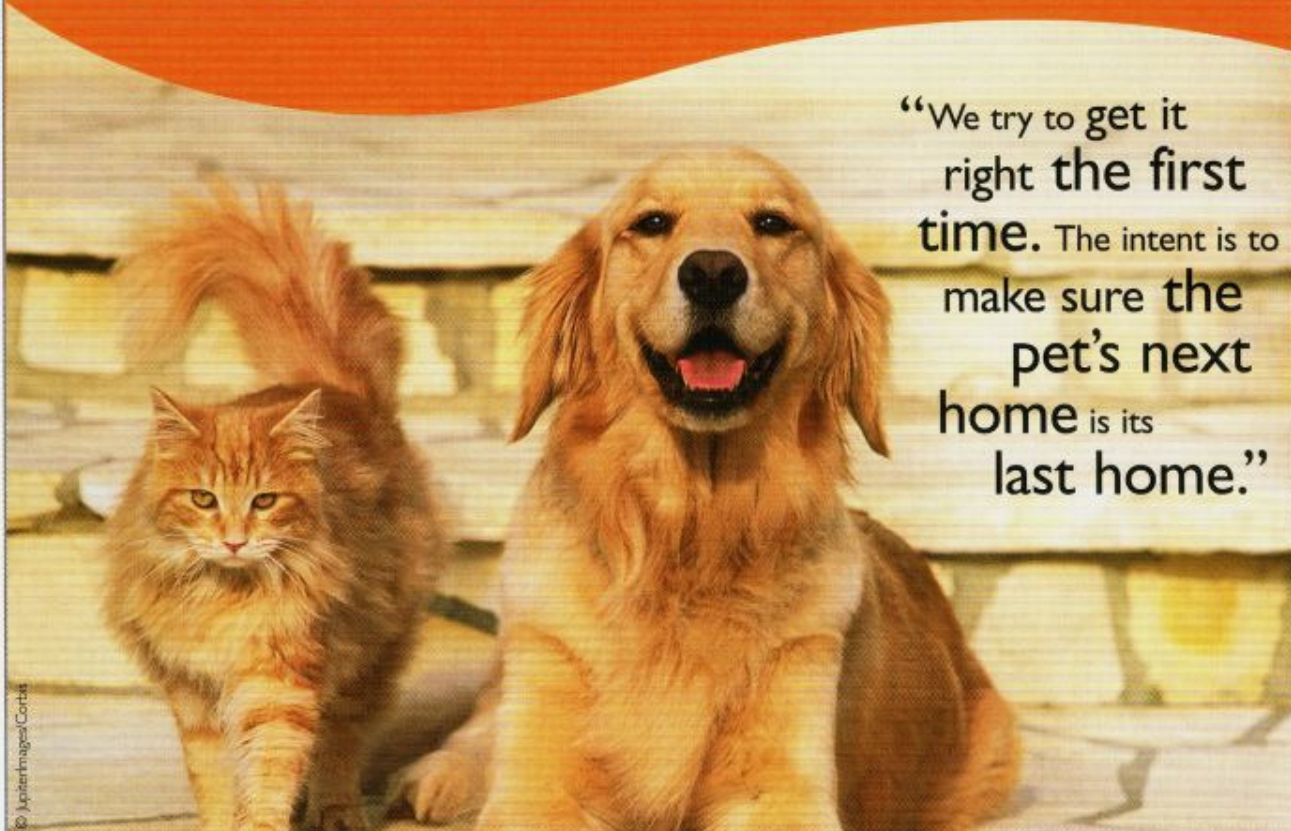


Veterinary-Assisted Adoptions

Anna Worth, VMD, president of the American Animal Hospital Association, points out that veterinarians can offer valuable input to those looking for a new pet:

- Perspectives on what kinds of pets are a good fit for your human family and existing pets
- Insights into personality and medical characteristics of various breeds
- Estimates on potential pet care costs specific to species and breed
- Suggestions for financial plans to cover the care a new pet requires, such as a separate savings account, a credit card or special medical credit card, or pet insurance

Although the human–animal bond is packed with emotion, it is also rooted in responsible decisions that provide a foundation for lifelong enrichment, on both sides.



“We try to get it right the first time. The intent is to make sure the pet’s next home is its last home.”

ioral characteristic in a dog, then it’s better to pick one that already has that capacity, rather than hoping to retrain the animal,” she explains.

If you want a full-time, take-everywhere pet, a poorly socialized and fearful animal isn’t a good match. But if you live and work at home and have few visitors, a less gregarious pet may be just fine. A good trainer can counsel you, Herman says, “on what sort of

things can be modified greatly by training and what sort of things can only be modified slightly by training.”

Then you have to ask yourself how much time you’re willing to spend on such efforts. If the answer is none, then Herman says your search requires patience to find those Lassie-like dogs in every breed. Shelter staff use terms such as “bombproof” or “bulletproof” to describe such pets.

Keep in mind, though, it’s not just what a pet can do for your life but what you can offer in return. Some pets need lifelong patience and training. Some merely want to sit in the sun. Others go everywhere and do everything you ask. Yet all of them are perfect for someone. They’re just waiting for the right match. **HP**

Roxanne Hawn is a freelance writer. She spends loads of time training her adopted border collie, Lilly Elizabeth.