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THE PET PLACE

More than a mutt

Finding out about your mixed breed

BY VERA LAWLOR

What breed is your dog? That's a familiar enough question to those of us lucky enough to share our homes with wonderful mutts. My dog Lucy is 75 pounds with a long-haired black-and-tan coat, a bushy tail, floppy ears and small eyes. She was adopted from Bloomingdale Animal Shelter where her records listed her as a shepherd mix. At the vet's office she's registered as a rottweiler mix. At training, meanwhile, she was suspected to have some Leonberger in her.

Needless to say when my vet told me about a new blood test that helps determine the lineage of mixed breed dogs, I jumped at the opportunity to get some insight into Lucy's background. The Wisdom Panel MX Mixed Breed Analysis test is offered through veterinary hospitals and involves sending a blood sample to the Mars Veterinary Company. According to this company, its Wisdom Panel MX will detect 157 breeds that may be present in a mutt with a claimed accuracy rate of 99 percent.

In just a few weeks, the result of Lucy's test was back. Turns out, according to this test, that her ancestry "contains a significant amount of rottweiler with some German shepherd, and it also includes distant traces of bull mastiff." Apparently, Lucy's DNA also shows faint signals of other breeds that are not strong enough to identify. Results like Lucy's, the report reads, are found in about 70 percent of mixed breed dogs in the U.S.

Dr. James Zgoda, owner and direc-

tor of Otterkill Animal Hospital in Orange County, N.Y., where I take Lucy, has been monitoring with interest the results of the analysis done on a number of the mixed breed dogs at his hospital. Just how reliable are the findings?

"Right now, we don't really know the reliability and we have to believe they are doing what they say," says Zgoda. "This testing is not regulated and there's no FDA oversight. DNA testing on animals, just like genetic testing on people, is so new we don't quite know what to do with the information. We're really seeing the beginning of this technology. For now, this breed analysis is a fun way of looking at it but I'm sure the next level will be screening for diseases."

Breed analysis, if accurate, will help veterinarians and owners to stay ahead of possible medical issues. Because certain breeds are predisposed to certain problems, knowing the breed lineage of a mixed breed dog can alert veterinarians to be on the lookout for certain problems, says Zgoda.

Mars Veterinary is just one company that offers DNA testing for mixed breed dogs. Earlier last year MMI Genomics, a subsidiary of the life science group MetaMorphix, Inc., launched the Canine Heritage, a DNA-based diagnostic test that also genetically determines the breed heritage of mixed breed dogs. The company provides a kit for DNA collection that involves collecting a cheek swab that is then returned to the company. Pet owners can collect and return the sample without the assistance of a veterinarian.

When dog trainer Holly Santana



Lucy is a mutt no more. Owner Vera Lawlor now knows her dog is a combination of rottweiler, German shepherd, bull mastiff (and some other breeds).

adopted her mixed breed, Indiana, the only background she had was that he came from a farm down South. "Based on that you assume there's a herding dog or maybe a retriever or a hound – a breed that would be farm-worthy," says Santana, who teaches classes at Canine Kindergarten in Westchester County, N.Y. "When we adopted him as a puppy he was fuzzy and yellow and absolutely looked like a golden retriever."

That changed as he got older and Santana jumped at the opportunity to get some answers when the Canine Heritage DNA-based tests became available. She was disappointed when the results came back inconclusive with only two breeds – golden retriever and English setter – positively identi-

fied as part of Indiana's heritage.

"The English setter didn't seem to fit, but you couldn't say he's absolutely not that because he is a medium-

Resources:

- For more information about the **Wisdom Panel MX Mixed Breed Analysis** test offered by Mars Veterinary, check www.wisdompanel.com.
- For more information about the **Canine Heritage Breed test** offered by the MetaMorphix Inc., check www.mmigenomics.com.
- For more information about the **BioPet DNA Breed Identification Test** (collected via cheek swab), visit www.biopetvetlab.com.

“When owners know their dog’s ancestry then they can start looking at certain behavior traits as normal.”

Holly Santana, dog trainer

sized dog with a little fringy hair,” says Santana.

While she wasn’t thrilled with the test results for her own dog, Santana definitely sees the training benefits of knowing your dog’s heritage.

“When owners know their dog’s ancestry then they can start looking at certain behavior traits as normal for a particular breed type, rather than seeing these behaviors as flaws in their dog,” she says. In addition, she says, once a trainer knows where a particular behavior – like herding or nipping – is coming from, it’s easier to work with that dog to either eliminate or re-direct that behavior. Knowing a dog’s heritage also helps in designing a training program.

“If clients found out that their dog had a guarding breed like a rottweiler in the mix and they were looking for a family pet, then I would tell them to up the socialization 200 percent more than I would normally recommend,” says Santana.

Dr. Sharon Capone of Cassidy Animal Care Mobile Veterinary Service, with a home base in Pompton Plains, is fascinated with the results of the Wisdom Panel MX test for her mixed breeds, who were both adopted from Associated Humane Societies in Newark.

“Eli was off the street, completely green, and we had no idea of his

test on her second dog, Serena, who looks like a small black hound mix. Serena’s breed analysis found that she has one quarter (grandparents’ level) golden retriever with corgi, basenji and some shepherd also in the mix.

“We don’t see a bit of golden retriever in her – either in her behaviors or her looks,” says Capone, who donates all profits from DNA tests administered through her practice to either Bloomingdale Regional Animal Shelter Society or Associated Humane Societies in Newark. “The basenji I can believe because they can be very testy and that’s more the way Serena is. I can also believe the German shepherd because every stray in Newark has German shepherd in it.”

While many owners are skeptical of the DNA test results when their dogs look nothing like the breeds listed, Capone says she expected surprises. Having worked with shelters and rescue groups, the veterinarian says she came across many mixes where the puppies looked nothing like their parents.

“There was one couple who bred a golden retriever with a Jack Russell terrier, the pups were adorable but didn’t look like either of those two breeds – they looked more like border collies,” says Capone. “If I didn’t have the owners of the dam and sire