

3. Phase III: The Litter Evaluation Using Tools Like Litter Interaction Observations, Puppy Testing, and Conformation Evaluations to Increase Your Odds of a Good Match



For me this is the most fun of the four phases, and it is also the most critical to ensuring that I find the right puppy. I studied human temperament testing (I am qualified to administer the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator also known as the MBTI and used it during my consulting career along with other temperament indicator tools). It gave me an advantage in that I know how well human temperament information can be applied (in the right hands and with the proper understanding), so it was not much of a logic leap to apply the same principles to canines. Once one has grasped the basics, it is a matter of A) finding a good test and qualified tester, B) establishing a set of criteria and C) applying sound principles to the interpretation of the test results.

Litter Evaluations

- 3.1. The Litter Evaluation (LE) Process
- 3.2. Puppy Temperament Tests
- 3.3. Conformation Evaluations
- 3.4. Litter Interaction
- 3.5. Making It Work—Establishing Critical Criteria



3.1: The Litter Evaluation (LE) Process: For some breeders, the LE is nothing more than a marketing tool—it sounds good, looks good on paper, and it brings in customers who think they are getting something special. Ethical breeders know the value of a properly conducted LE, and they understand how to interpret the results in order to help their customers make a good match. Questions to ask: Can you attend? If you cannot attend due to logistics, can someone you trust attend for you or can it be video taped? Who will be conducting the LE? What tests/evaluations will be used. Can you get a copy of them prior to the LE date? As you have seen, many things and a great deal of data go into making a good decision when it comes to buying a puppy. The LE is all about establishing critical criteria, collecting data, and analyzing data to help you make a good decision. A good LE consists of a puppy temperament test and a conformation evaluation. I like to see a litter

interaction evaluation as well—it gives me a chance to evaluate the puppy in a group setting as well as individually. Make sure you will receive the results of your puppy's LE in writing. And if possible, ask to see copies of the TT, conformation form, and if there is one, the litter interaction form, ahead of time so you can familiarize yourself with the tests and terms. I score each puppy myself and make notes—this comes in very handy later on when I am tired and all the results (and puppies) tend to run together in my head.

3.2 Puppy Temperament Tests: I believe the important thing to remember about puppy testing is that it shows potential (good and bad)—it does not guarantee anything. In addition, nerves and thresholds in young puppies are difficult if not impossible to assess. The brain is not fully developed at 8 weeks and although genetics play a strong role, environment influences brain development as well. I do believe there are some indicators that show the potential for weak nerves and low thresholds just as there are indicators for retrieve drive, prey drive, good nose, etc. For example, the puppy that is very shy, avoids humans, and lacks confidence and/or the puppy that is sound sensitive is going to have degrees of these traits as an adult. On the other hand, puppies that demonstrate no sound sensitivity at 8 weeks sometimes grow up to sound sensitive adults. Weak nerves and low thresholds cannot be cured but they can be “worked” to make them manageable depending on your goals for the dog. And this is crucial to a good match—if you need a dog with strong nerves and thresholds for your goals, do not pick a puppy that displays indicators to the contrary. I have learned over the years that “different strokes for different folks” has meaning for puppy selection as well. Some people want a needy puppy, some people want a very soft, dependent, puppy because



that is what they want in a dog. And some people want just the opposite. As we say in human temperament testing—not good or bad, just different. That is one reason I do not list certain responses as “good or bad” in the PPE. I believe “good or bad” depends on the criteria of the buyer.

Having said that, I will also state that I believe stability as defined for our breed in the breed standard under “Character” denotes puppies that are happy; friendly; and curious; they like people; are interested in things around them, brave enough to check out the ‘unknown;” and will walk towards or look for the source of a strange sound, not run from it. Puppies that do not sit and cry in a maze—they either jump over or find their way out. Puppies who when confronted by a problem, look for ways to work it or get around it. The good news is that Shiloh litters seem to run the gamut when it comes to temperaments—from very soft to hard, from needy and dependent to confident and independent, some with working traits and some without and anywhere in between. It is up to the buyer to determine what he or she needs and/or wants and to go about selecting the puppy that shows the most potential to live up to his or her expectations. Puppy testing can help.



There are many different puppy temperament tests available. Conducted and interpreted properly, most have something to offer. Some are specialized, for example the PAWS Test (<http://www.malinut.com/write/paws.shtml>) is designed to test for working traits. Some like the Volhard (<http://www.volhard.com/puppy/pat.htm>) are designed to evaluate good pet temperaments). For myself, I wanted both aspects covered so I ended up compiling my own set of tests called the Puppy Potential Evaluation (PPE) (see attachments 1 and 2 in Phase IV) and I use the PAWS as a “double check.” Briefly, I review the TT results of the litter I am interested in, and I narrow down my choices based on scores related to my critical criteria and the conformation evaluation (if breeding or showing is important to me, I weight the conformation accordingly). Then I ask for the PAWS test to be conducted on puppies that show potential for working dogs. There should be a rest period between the TT and the PAWS. I like to see the TT done on a pup, then the conformation evaluation, and then take a break for lunch and come back and do the PAWS on the puppies “qualified” to take it (show an aptitude for working during the TT). This gives me a second chance to evaluate specific working traits in a pup and to ensure the first response was not a “fluke.”



3.3 Conformation Evaluation: I do not know whether structure follows form or form follows structure. What I do know is that structure as described in the breed standard is important not only for showing but for working as well. Temperament is more important to me than looks, but I value good structure. Our breed was developed for a purpose—as all breeds are. Our dogs are expected to be able to perform certain functions (even if not called upon to do so), and they must have the proper structure to accomplish this. I have always had a hard time evaluating structure on my own. That is one of the reasons I created the *Shiloh Puppy Conformation Form* (see attachment 3)—it helps me keep track of what I should be looking for in a puppy, and helps me understand what the evaluator is saying as he or she assesses the puppy.

3.4 Litter Interaction: As I was developing my process for selecting puppies, I realized there was a missing piece of data for me—a way to evaluate the puppies in a group setting. Countless times I have heard breeders say “I am so surprised the puppy tested like that—I have never seen him/her do that before” or “I never would have expected that result.” What many people do not understand is that puppies, just like humans, will often respond differently in a group setting than they do when they are alone. This is one of the reasons temperament tests are designed to assess an individual puppy, in a strange place, and the tests are conducted by someone who has had no contact with the puppies prior to the testing. It is the best way to assess a puppy’s reaction to stimuli without bias. I value a breeder’s input, but I also understand that his or her impressions of the puppies stem mainly from seeing them in a “litter environment,” and I take that into account. The Litter Interaction Observation form (see attachments 4 and 5) helps me to better assess the puppy by taking into account his or her responses to stimuli in a group setting. I match this against what the breeder has shared with me as well. This is also good information for anyone who is bringing a puppy into an existing pack. There is a copy of my *Litter Interaction Observation* form attached. The form is based on easily observed reactions and developed for use by anyone.



3.5 Making It Work—Establishing Critical Criteria: Do you know what you want in a puppy (if you cannot articulate it, how can the breeder help you find it)? Do you want a puppy that has play drive or could care less about toys? Do you want a puppy that will grow up into a dog that can compete in obedience, do therapy work, go on hikes, or one that is happy to lay around, has no prey drive, or has a low pain tolerance? There is nothing more wonderful than a puppy that is a good match—there is nothing so sad as a bad match. And although nothing is full proof and there is always a risk when you are purchasing a puppy, knowing what you want and testing for it can minimize your risk.

What I find helpful is to set up the test sheets ahead of time (the conformation sheet basically does this for you because it does not rely on preferences—it is based on the breed standard). Whereas temperament testing, for the most part, relies on the individual preferences (there are some exceptions) expressed by the potential buyer. I highlight my “ideal” response to each test response in one color, but I use a different color for what I consider to be “critical criteria” responses. Finally I record the actual responses in a third color. This makes it easier for me to compare and contrast puppies when I sit down to review the test and conformation results.

