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INTRODUCING...

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The American Shelter Dog!

In most shelters across the United States the majority of dogs are mixed breeds of unknown parentage. Nevertheless, it is common practice for staff to guess a dog's breed based on appearance. This 'best guess' is used to identify the dog, although the actual pedigree is unknown. The problem is that breed identity elicits behavioral expectations on the part of the new owner, even though researchers have found enormous behavioral variability within all breeds. For instance, people who adopt large black dogs with floppy ears, identified as "Lab mixes," expect their dogs to swim and retrieve balls. Dogs with short legs and long bodies, labeled "Basset Hound crosses," are expected to bay and hunt with their noses. Blocky-headed, short-coated dogs are called "Pit-mixes" and, to their detriment, are expected to carry all the behavioral baggage unfairly associated with their brethren.

As described in the last issue of *Our Four Footed Friends*, we now have the ability through DNA testing to identify the actual genetic makeup of a mixed breed dog. With the help of researchers from Western University Veterinary School and the Animal Farm Foundation, the Center for Shelter Dogs at the ARL of Boston has collected DNA samples from more than 30 adopted shelter dogs. To our surprise, we found that our best guesses about breeds were often dead wrong! Many of the so-called "Lab mixes" we tested were really just black dogs with floppy ears and, while most of the "Pit mixes" in our sample had some American Staffordshire DNA, they also had DNA from a variety of other breeds.

In most shelters, cats are rarely identified by breed. Instead, they are labeled as Domestic short, medium or long hairs. So why not describe our dogs in a similar way? The ARL of Boston is piloting the idea of identifying dogs not by their assumed breeds but rather by their appearance and individual personalities. Instead of depending on inaccurate breed labels, we want people to choose their future companions based on accurate personality profiles. This new approach will enhance understanding and appreciation of dogs and is bound to benefit both dogs and owners alike. The Center for Shelter Dogs at the ARL of Boston is now working to develop a validated personality assessment to be used on all of our shelter dogs. The new American Shelter Dog name will help adopters make better, more informed choices and increase their odds of finding the best canine match.

So, instead of introducing you to a Pit mix, we will show you a brindle American Shelter Dog who is a bit introverted, but very playful. Or perhaps you would be interested in the medium-sized black American Shelter Dog with an agreeable and extroverted personality?

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