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On the scent of the bloodhound

Award-winning Knotty is a winner in dog show circles and at home

By Kyra Kirkwood, Correspondent

Ever since I saw the drawing Trusty in "Lady and the Tramp," I've been smitten with wrinkly, sad-eyed, velvet-eared, ground-sniffing bloodhounds.

They are big, rather dopey looking yet regal at the same time. I was thrilled when one of these hounds not only earned the title of 2005 AKC/ Eukanuba National Champion, but also won the Hound Group at the famed Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show earlier this year. This winning canine is from Southern California: Topanga, to be exact.

Meet Knock on Wood. Or, to his friends, Knotty. This 125-pound lump of love is a liver-and-tan bloodhound, a rare and stunning russet color. He is so perfect, he could be a dog prototype. Lyn Sherman is Knotty's "mom" and a bloodhound expert; she's been involved with the breed since 1963 and currently has three bloodhound boys at home.

"They're noble and dignified, yet sensitive and loyal," said Sherman of the breed.

And they're characters. Knotty adores being the center of attention and is thus the consummate showman. The more people clap and cheer for him, the more he throws out his chest and struts around the ring, waving his tail like a flag, said Sherman.

But Knotty enjoys his downtime, too. During one hot July day, he decided to cool down by sleeping in an empty bathtub. On his back. That brought a whole new meaning to the term "dog day afternoon."

Knotty, unlike his brothers, chances the house rules by sleeping on the couch. His toys bring him joy, and he's not that interested in food.



Staff photos by Tina Burch

Knotty the bloodhound guards the gate at home.

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In addition to his titles, this 5-year-old is ranked the No. 1 Bloodhound in the country, the No. 1 hound in the country and the No. 5 dog of all breeds in the country.

That's some resume, yet all he wants is a decent nap on the sofa. Or a Greenie chew treat to throw in the air, hide in his huge lips and munch on in private.

Knotty has a sensitive side typical of bloodhounds. They may be stubborn, highly intelligent and independent by nature, but so too are they thirsty for love.

"Knotty will be brokenhearted if I reprimand him harshly," said Sherman.

Of course, if that solid mass of wrinkles so much as blinked at me, I'd be at his mercy. He'd soon discover, just as my two dogs have long since known. I am puppy putty.

Sherman began showing dogs about 10 years ago with her champion, Munch, which is probably the best name for a bloodhound I've ever heard. When Sherman got Knotty at six months, she knew he possessed that "it" factor.

"If it's not there, you can't make it," she said.

In just three months of showing, Knotty finished his championship (in a very complex point-awarding system that all dog-show people understand, and is nothing but Greek to us pedestrians. But trust me: this is a huge deal). Winning the AKC/Eukanuba Invitational National Championship -- where 2,451 top dogs in every AKC-recognized breed and variety, including dogs from 16 different countries, compete -- is a once-in-a-lifetime achievement and brings Sherman a rush of pride.

"He always had special star quality," she said. "I'm a proud mama."

Not to mention a loving one. While waiting for the Best In Show category at Westminster, the pressure from the crowd and press became overwhelming. Sherman, dressed in a long beaded evening dress, curled up with Knotty in his crate for 30 minutes of quality "down time" before Knotty went back into the ring to show off his stuff.

Bloodhound wrinkles are what attracted me to the breed. Knotty's rolls cascade over his face when he's walking down stairs, causing him to stop and, in true diva fashion, flip his skin like Cindy Crawford tosses back her hair. But these ginormous ears and taffy-like flesh have a purpose: the folds trap scent, helping the dogs track it.

"Bloodhounds are obsessed with their noses," Sherman said.

This trait sentences them to a life of fences. Because once a blood catches whiff of something interesting, he's off. One time, Sherman's gate was accidentally left open, and one of her bloodhound boys decided a passing biker might be fun to follow. For 32 miles. Oblivious, he stuck his nose to the ground and didn't come up for air, so to speak, until he was in the biker's garage. A call to Sherman let her know her dog was safe and sound, and in need of a lift home.

DROP CAP Here are some basics about bloodhounds. They are the largest of the scent hounds, measuring anywhere from 24 inches to 28 inches at the shoulder and topping the scales at up to 125 pounds. The three standard colors are black/tan, liver/tan (like Knotty) and red, according to the American Bloodhound Club.

A deep chest, low-hanging ears and a long neck are also trademarks of the breed. And, of course, lots of wrinkling skin.

Don't forget about the bloodhound's size. They get huge. Sherman, who is 5 feet, 9 inches tall, often enjoys face-to-face chats with her bloodhounds, their paws on her shoulders.

That cute, wrinkled-up pup that weighs 20 pounds will very shortly top the scales in triple digits, with an independent spirit to boot, Sherman said.

Bloodhounds from puppy mills (which too often wind up in pet stores) can have exacerbated health problems: dysplasia, eye ailments, thyroid issues. In addition, backyard breeding can produce off-kilter and even aggressive bloods.

The best bet if you want one? Research the breed on such Web sites as the American Kennel Club and the American Bloodhound Club (<http://www.bloodhounds.org/>) where you can find a qualified breeder.

Knotty is certified as extremely healthy and free from many of the breed's common ailments. He has had his sperm collected and frozen. Healthy pups have resulted, too. And the price? About \$1,000-\$1,800 per dog.

Sherman is selective about who gets Knotty's sperm; there have been only three litters so far. No backyard breeding for her.

Perhaps one day I'll open up my household for one of these big, slobbering lugs with an independent streak. Until then, I'll be in the cheering section, rooting for the Topanga Bloodhound to bring home the gold. Or Greenies. Whatever serves as reward for being top dog. Which, in Knotty's case, is probably his own sofa cushion or an extra-long bathtub.

-- Kyra Kirkwood is based in Orange County.

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