

Belgian Malinois owners, breeders concerned about impact of movie 'Max'



Alibi, shown here at 9 months old, was bred and owned by Woodburn resident Catherine Shields. *(Holly Howell)*



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A movie coming out this weekend about a military dog named Max has some owners, breeders and trainers concerned that the Belgian Malinois will be the new Dalmatian.



Chris Wojda and his 6-year-old Belgian Malinois, Clive, like to end training sessions with the 65-pound dog jumping straight into his arms and licking Wojda's face. "If you aren't ready for a dog that can instantly be in your face," Wojda says, "a Malinois isn't for you." (*Jeff Freeman*)

Families may like the protective nature and athletic ability of the dog they see in the movie without realizing how many hundreds of hours it took to train it.

The Belgian Malinois is a challenging dog with kinetic energy that must be channeled into daily training and exercise, or the dogs could become destructive and difficult.

"Then it's not a hero dog anymore, it's a problem dog, because the dog went to a family that probably shouldn't have had that kind of dog to begin with," Strum says.

The Warner Brothers film depicts the true story of a Belgian Malinois military dog serving in Afghanistan with his handler, U.S. Marine Kyle Wincott. When Wincott is killed in action, Max returns to the United States to live with his family.

"When a breed becomes popular through TV or the movies, people will say, 'I've never seen that breed before, I like how they're portrayed,' and want to go out and get them," says Chris Wojda of Lucid Dog Training in Lake Oswego.

It's sometimes referred to as the "101 Dalmatians effect." After that movie's popular 1996 remake, shelters throughout the country reported spikes in unwanted Dalmatians after people realized they could be more challenging than the cute, playful pets portrayed in the movies.

"I just worry about the 'hero dog complex' kind of thing," says San Diego resident Lise Ann Strum, a longtime Malinois owner who currently owns seven of them.

"My worry is that people will get them and they'll be too much and they'll just end up in the shelters."

About the Belgian Malinois

The Malinois was originally bred as a Belgian sheepherding dog, serving as a versatile farm dog that protected the family and farm and kept the sheep in line.

Because they're alert, intelligent, hard working and easily trained, they've become increasingly popular as police and military dogs. A Belgian Malinois named Cairo played a crucial role when Seal Team Six took down Osama bin Laden.

The Malinois that do police work are powerful dogs with very high energy and drive, says Shawn Gore, senior trainer for Portland Police Bureau's Canine Unit and a master trainer with the Oregon Police Canine Association.

What makes them ideal for the job?

"They're relatively easy to train, their athletic ability is easily exceptional, and their endurance, because they are so driven," Gore says. "Those are the kinds of things we are looking for in a working dog."

Active dogs require active owners

Yet the qualities Gore mentions may not be qualities that families are looking for in a companion dog. The Malinois are suitable only for that rare breed of owner willing to commit a significant amount of time and energy to training and exercising the dog daily, in what Wojda refers to as the "Malinois lifestyle."

"Being an experienced dog owner isn't enough," he says. "Malinois are for experienced dog owners that are also passionate and disciplined about training on a daily basis. Additionally, they must have the wherewithal and knowledge to train a dog that has lightning-fast reflexes and is extremely physical."

As a dog trainer by trade, Wojda delights in developing new games to do with his own 6-year-old Malinois, Clive.

On any given day, the two might go for a 45-minute run, play Frisbee for another 45 minutes and train for still another 45 minutes.

Back at home, Wojda and his partner, Katie Brower, incorporate training with Clive wherever possible.

"Training moments happen all day long for all dog owners," Wojda says, "but they must constantly be worked in when living with a Malinois. They truly desire to engage with you, even when you're doing something as mundane as walking up the steps."

They dogs are ideal for protection sports like French Ring Sport and Schutzhund, which test a dog's ability to protect itself and his handler, and many other athletic activities.

Strum's dog, Vhoebe, holds multiple world records in the sport of Dock Diving. Over the years, Strum and her dogs have also enjoyed obedience, flyball, Schutzhund, carting and trekking.

Woodburn resident Catherine Shields, a Malinois owner, breeder and former officer with the American Belgian Malinois Club, got her first one in 1993. She similarly dedicates much of her spare time to her dogs.

"I'm like most people; I have a fulltime job," she says, "but my hobby is the dog. A lot of my social time and free time will be going to classes, dog shows. They do best when they're a big priority and they have a lot of structure, mental stimulation and engagement."

If they're not provided with those things, they'll find something else to do – and it's unlikely that you will appreciate their creativity.

Their boundless energy can be destructive if not constantly channeled into training or exercise; Shields cautions a bored dog may choose to "redecorate your backyard."

Ultimately, those who love these dogs say they're a special breed for a special kind of owner.

"When you get a Malinois, you don't just adopt a dog," Wojda says. "You adopt a lifestyle that prioritizes dog training, exercise, constant education, and a really good sense of humor."

Things to consider before bringing home a Belgian Malinois:

Learn as much as you can about the breed – not only read about them, but meet the dogs and talk to owners.

"I can't stress enough that meeting the dogs and spending time around them is really the best thing people can do," says Woodburn resident Catherine Shields, a Malinois owner and breeder.

"You can do all the research you want but I don't think anything replaces spending time with the dogs and their owners to see what they're really like."

She suggests going to a dog show, such as the Mt. Bachelor Kennel Club Dog Show this weekend in Redmond, where you can see the breeds in action.

Join a group for Malinois owners on Facebook, such as West Coast Malinois.

If you buy from a breeder, check references first and ask lots of questions about the dog's socialization and health checks. Meet the dog in the breeder's home.

Be prepared for the breeder to screen you in return

"The buyer themselves should feel someone's taken the time to know the puppy's suitable for them" says Shields, who has also been involved in Malinois rescue.

She requires prospective buyers to fill out a 10-page questionnaire, surveying everything from what they plan to do with the dog to whether their yard has a fence.

The American Belgian Malinois Club website offers information about what a breeder should provide, how to determine whether a Malinois is right for your family, and other information.

Another resource is the Woof Project, a West Coast-based Belgian Malinois rescue, at woofproject.org.

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