

MUST LOVE DOGS

DEBBI ROTENBERG BREEDS (AND NEEDS)
PORTUGUESE WATER DOGS

After living in her Newtown home for twenty-five years after her two sons were grown, Debbi Rotenberg finally decided to get a pool. For the dogs. Rotenberg and her husband have five Portuguese Water Dogs. “We tried not to,” she said. “But, they’re like potato chips.” She couldn’t stop at just one.

It started eleven years ago. Rotenberg had two dogs that died. She thought, “Phew, now we’re all done with dogs!” That was until her youngest son, then thirteen, said he wanted a black Pug. But when a friend’s dog had a litter of Portuguese Water Dogs, Rotenberg and her son went to visit them. There were four brown puppies and one black one. Rotenberg’s son relented, saying that perhaps one black puppy was as good as another. And so, because her son wanted a dog, and because he reluctantly agreed to accept the black ball of fur in the litter that day, Rotenberg’s history with Portuguese Water Dogs began.



The first was Roscoe, who grew into a gorgeous specimen with a winning personality to match. “People would stop us on the street because he was so beautiful, so well behaved, so wonderful,” said Rotenberg. “They kept asking us if he was a show dog.” So, Rotenberg and her husband decided to try it. “We found a handler, and she would take him out there, and the bugger would win,” laughed Rotenberg. “He would just win. It was nothing we ever planned on.”

A few years later, Rotenberg got Roscoe a friend – a Portuguese Water Dog named Gabby. Then she got another one named Abby. By then, Rotenberg was learning about dog breeding and allowed Roscoe and Gabby to have a litter. “From the first litter, you have to keep something,” smiled Rotenberg. So there was Dazzle. Then there was another litter, and along came Dozer. And then there were five.

While the breed can come in black, black and white, brown, or even patchwork patterned, Rotenberg’s are all black, with a few random white paws and bibs. They are shiny and spirited, with dark, gentle eyes. When they greet a visitor, en masse, it is like a whirlwind of black fur and curious paws and eager faces. Like a friendly, fleecy tornado. They are all beautiful. To prove it, Rotenberg



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has a thick photo album full of blue ribbon days, snapshots of all of her dogs winning various shows in Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and Virginia. Rotenberg showed her dogs for seven years, until a double knee replacement sidelined her. Yet she said she hopes to get back into the ring soon.

Meanwhile, Rotenberg continues to breed her prizewinning dogs. It's a complicated process. Breeders must examine bloodlines and know details such as don't breed a curly-haired Portuguese Water Dog with another curly-haired one, or you'll end up with a genetic disorder that causes hair loss. Dogs and puppies must undergo rigorous health evaluations to meet the standards of the Portuguese Water Dog Club of America. Rotenberg is listed as an official breeder there, and screens all of her potential clients to approve (or reject) their applications for one of her puppies. Rotenberg sells puppies to deserving families for \$2,500. Yet the dogs often visit her for grooming and boarding, since she makes her clients promise to never put one of her puppies in a kennel. She is very protective of them. "They're my babies," she said.

So, why the love affair with Portuguese Water Dogs? Could it have been Dalmatians or poodles or collies? Perhaps, but Rotenberg is smitten with this breed. "They are funny, smart and easy to housebreak and train," she said of her furry favorites, who historically were used by Portuguese fishermen to work on boats. "They will do anything to please, and do best with training, training and more training. They need exercise, like to play, work and swim." Rotenberg also added that the dogs don't shed or smell.

Perhaps it is these qualities that drew the First Family to adopt a Portuguese Water Dog when they moved into the White House. It drew a lot of attention to the breed. "I was getting thirty-five to forty-five phone calls a day," said Rotenberg. "It was horrible. Now, it's funny, I get the calls saying, 'I don't want one because the Obamas have one, I've just always wanted one.'" Yet during the Obama craze, Rotenberg did get one welcome surprise. One of the puppies she bred, Porter, looked exactly like the puppy the Obamas adopted, so he made the rounds, appearing on World News Tonight, Martha Stewart and Jimmy Kimmel Live! It was a definite thrill for Rotenberg.

Yet something that brings her more joy is the volunteer work her dogs do at St. Mary's Medical Center in Langhorne, Pa. Paws for a Cause is an organization run by Rotenberg's husband, David Craig, that brings dogs to visit hospital patients. "We bring all five dogs, and they love it," said Rotenberg. Her husband was able to see the healing power firsthand, when he underwent treatment for bladder cancer. Rotenberg asked if she could bring Roscoe to visit him at the hospital. "David would be walking with the IV on one side and Roscoe on the other," she said. "They started visiting other patients, and people would light up. By the time he left, he said, 'There's something to this. It helps you heal.'" Paws for a Cause now has about fifteen volunteer dogs that visit the hospital.

After spending eleven years with Portuguese Water Dogs, Rotenberg is grateful for the turn of events that brought them into her life. She still has five dogs. Roscoe has passed away, and they now have four-month-old Susi. Rotenberg is also preparing for a new litter. "When there's new litter, it's a 24-hour-a-day job," said Rotenberg. "I sleep on an Aerobed with my head in the whelping box for six weeks. It's nuts."

Indeed, at Rotenberg's home, there is an air of controlled canine chaos. Yet for Rotenberg, it's all a grand adventure. "It's a madhouse, but it's a fun madhouse," she says. Her life, full of five furry children, twenty galloping paws, ten entreating eyes and five wagging tails is very, very full. Yet she wouldn't want it any other way. "It is a circus; it truly is," she said. "But, it's entertaining, all day, every day." ❧

For information about Portuguese Water Dogs or Paws for a Cause contact Debbi Rotenberg at baywatchpwd@verizon.net.

Story by Lauren Eckstein