The cords. It's what everyone notices first when they look at a Puli—and not all of them will take the time to look past them. But subscribe to this judge-a-dog-by-its-coat mentality and you risk missing out on one of the funniest dogs in the show ring.

Sure, they're a serious herding breed with a history that may date back to a.d. 900 and a much-vaunted place in the hearts of Hungarians to this day. But the Puli is also, quite simply, a clown.

Puli Club of America president Barbe Pessina recalls once being in the ring with a Puli who wasn't paying attention. She rummaged in her pocket and found a rat toy she used with her Norwich Terriers. It would have to do. Pessina pulled out the toy, which she describes as "this shocking blue fuzzy thing." The Puli snatched it.

"I couldn't get it away from him," she says. "He was walking through the group ring going squeak, squeak, squeak. Everyone was cracking up—me, too!—and he knew it. And the more we laughed, the more he wouldn't give it up. They really do love to be funny."

Don Gold, who lost his beloved top-performing Puli, Barney, in May 2009, is full of funny stories about his old friend and the young female who has stepped into his shoes, L.E. She seems to understand what her role is now that Barney has gone. Says Gold: "She fills my life with laughter and joy as if she knows it's her job."

Ancient Roots

Of course, the Puli also has another occupation, the one they were bred to do. (Just like the best human comedians, most Pulik have a more serious side. But more on that in a minute.)

Most books on the breed trace the Puli to ancient communities in India, western China, and Tibet. The Cuman people were said to have brought the dogs—whose corded coat developed to protect them from both bitter frost and summer heat—to Hungary in the mid-13th century. There, they endured the tumult of Turkish invasion and Austrian occupation.

But in the 1800s, a calmer period for the breed and their people, the Puli we know today began to emerge. This oft-quoted phrase was found in a book from 1924: "The Puli used around sheep is always lower than the highest point of the shepherd's boots."

Shepherds prized their Pulik for their "quick intelligence, speed, and turn-on-a-dime agility," writes Susi Szerey in her history of the breed distributed by the PCA at judge's education seminars. This admiration lives on in Hungary today, where citizens still proudly claim, "It's not a dog, it's a Puli!"

That pride finally made its way Stateside in 1935, when the U.S. Department of Agriculture imported four purebred Pulik to help them with a conundrum: herding dogs who sometimes killed the animals they were meant to be guarding. During the experiment the Puli scored incredibly well compared to other dogs, and was said to have been crossed with other breeds including the GSD and the Chow Chow.

Results were never published, however, and when World War II broke out, the Pulik were sold to professional breeders. Those four dogs are thought to be the beginnings of the American Puli population today.

A new life in the U.S. did not mean all was perfect for the Puli yet, however.
“Back in the ’70s, they were very different temperament-wise than they are today,” says Pessina, who first spied a corded Puli at Westminster early in that decade. She shared a Hungarian background with the breed, and was smitten. Even if they still had what she calls a “working temperament.”

Smart. Crafty. A thinking dog. You hear these words often when you talk Puli. But Pessina was up for the challenge.

“My first Puli was this little five-pound puppy who came into my house and was more protective than my 90-pound German Shepherd Dog,” she says. “She saw her reflection in a mirror and would stand there and bark at it. But, you know, our standard does say, ‘sensibly suspicious of strangers!’ ”

Even though Pessina says the Puli is now much more social, the intelligence, protectiveness, and occasional aloofness remains.

At a judge’s ed seminar attended by the GAZETTE, Pessina tells the audience that this is not a dog who likes baby talk on the table. “They’re fine if you just approach and pet them, but if you talk to them in a goo-goo voice they might tense up and look at you as if you had three heads.” (A slide at the seminar reads: “Pulik have a sense of humor. They like jokes. But only if they tell them.”)

Patty Anspach, a longtime Puli breeder, former professional handler, and owner of the first AKC-titled herding dog in the breed, can attest to the Puli’s serious side. “When I was on the road a lot, my Jack would sleep between me and the door,” she says, “I was never worried. But then, he was always so silly with me, too. They’re so smart and so funny—it’s fascinating.”

“I sometimes think they’re smarter than we are,” Pessina says. “Or perhaps more intuitive.”

Anspach knows from an obedience experience that the Puli brain is not only whip-smart but super specific. She decided to

Coat Check

While there is nothing in the standard about how a Puli may or may not be groomed, Pessina says “If you want to compete at the group level, you need that corded coat to the ground.” Adds Anspach, “When you show in conformation, you pretty much pray over each cord.”

People are fascinated by the cords. Here are the answers to the breed’s FAQs:

* The Puli is not born corded.
* The undercoat starts to come in at around 9-10 months. Pessina calls it the “lumpy mattress” stage.
* Shedding and tangles form the cords.
* It can take five years to grow a full corded coat.
* Most pet owners clip the cords and keep their dogs in a puppy cut—or with cords that are just a few inches in length.
* The texture of the cords “is like a mop,” says Pessina. “If they get wet, they absorb the water. If you don’t dry them, they mildew. If they mildew, they rot—and they don’t smell good!”
* In Hungary, many Puli owners would shear their working dogs so they had cords only on their rear end.
* Bath time is a production: “It takes me about an hour and a half to go through the coat and separate the cords,” says Pessina. “Then about an hour in the tub—to bathe them, rinse them out, condition them. Then, most of mine are under two dryers for 10 to 12 hours for the rest of the day.” The upside? There is little grooming between shows.
try Cass, a bitch she'd had success with in both conformation and herding, in the obedience ring. After a couple of weeks training, "She was perfect in class," says Anspach. "But when I entered her? She was terrible. It took five of us, including some heavy-duty trainers, to figure it out. In the ring, I believe you honor your dog and honor your judge and you dress. So I had a long skirt on. Well—I had never trained her with a skirt on. The following week, I put on a pair of pants and we sailed through!"

**Herd Mentality**

Don Gold was more interested in agility training with his dog Barney until he met herding judge Nancy Obermark, and she encouraged him to take the herding-instinct test. Gold was thrilled to learn that Barney didn't need much training at all once they knew he had the instinct. "Puli handlers, however, need a lot!" he jokes.

Gold recalls one herding trial in particular when the judge told him, "That was a beautiful outside flank back!" as he closed the gate. "I thanked her but realized it was all Barney's decision. When he saw we were in trouble, he acted instinctively and saved me."

On a trip to Hungary in the '90s, Pessina rented a car and stopped on the road by a farm when she spotted Pulik lying down in the field. "There were no fences and no humans around," she recalls. "The minute I got out of my car with my camera, the dogs jumped up and immediately started to move the sheep away from the road. The farmer was obviously having his lunch—he came out with his napkin tucked into his shirt but went back inside when he saw me. But it was so interesting that the dogs immediately saw me as someone who wasn't meant to be there and went to work to protect the sheep."

Even back in the States, where their temperaments have evolved to make them better-mannered pets, Pulik haven't lost that drive to work.
"I brought Cass home when she was about 8 weeks old," says Anspach of the first Puli she competed in herding with. "I had some friends with sheep so I took her out there. I held her in my arms but as soon as she saw the sheep, she started trembling. And it wasn't fear. It was, 'Let me at 'em!'"

After spending years commuting two hours each way to herding practice in Florida (a problem that limits participation in the sport, Pessina says), Anspach finally moved to northern Indiana. So she could buy sheep. For her dogs.

"I love it!" she says. "I have 10 acres, 10 Pulik, and five registered Texel sheep. They're a meat breed, and my nephew and I may go into the sheep business. Most of the dogs who leave here have been exposed to sheep and they could do it [herding], given the chance."

The breed's talent in herding also serves them well in agility. "Unlike many of the herding breeds, Pulik can turn very quickly and are good jumpers," says Jane Slade Exum, owner of the first MACH Puli. And in herding, also unlike other breeds, they do not use the 'eye' to control the stock, but this bouncy movement. The downside, however, is that "unlike Border Collies, they don't like to drill. They figure if they've done it twice, that should be enough. And they are very concerned about the safety of their person, so they are watchful of the judge."
No Joke

But that didn’t deter Slade Exum from reaching great heights with her Pulik. The first dog she thought might actually make it to the MACH title was Mouse, who was the number-one-ranked Puli for several years. She had all her double Q’s, and Slade Exum was working on her speed. Then tragedy struck: Mouse was diagnosed with lymphoma and died 14 months later. The other dog she had been running in agility, Scootie, was her “comic relief.”

“He was the dog who ran because he liked it but mostly to be near me and because I asked him to,” she says. After losing Mouse, she persevered with Scootie and they finally earned a Mouse the journey we’d been to the MACH title was Mouse, who was the number-one-ranked with her.

“I’ll always hold on to it as one of the most special memories I could ever have.”

The Puli Club of America has offered a Versatile Puli award for the past 10 years, with around six to eight dogs a year earning the title. But when analyzing the numbers of fanciers involved in non-conformation events, especially herding, it quickly becomes evident that there is one big hurdle: That coat.

“To keep your dog in show condition, you can’t go out and herd sheep,” says Pessina. Or, you can, says Anspach, if you decide on a game plan early on. In her experience, the best way is to finish the dogs young and then get into herding. That way, the long corded coat so prized in the show ring won’t become entangled with dirt and grass and anything else they can pick up in the field.

Doing it the other way around can lead to “interesting” moments, she warns. As a rank novice, Anspach decided that after earning her HX, she would put Cass on the table and make a champion out of her. “She was 5 years old, but in order to do the herding I had kept her hair maybe an inch long.” Being a professional handler, Anspach knew this was going to attract attention in the show ring. “I set her up there and I said to the judge, ‘This is a working, trailing sheepdog.’”

She got “looks,” she says, but was heartened to see the judge go back to the book. “Because the standard says that a young or working dog should not be penalized for lack of length of coat.” And Anspach has nothing but respect for the standard.

Take the first time she ever saw a Puli compete in herding: “I saw these dogs work and all of a sudden I understood why the standard was written the way it was,” she says. “Why we call for an agile dog. Why the dog has to be moderate to be able to move like that. To see a young Puli who has never seen sheep suddenly ‘turn on’ and do what they were bred to do? It gives you goosebumps.”

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life with dogs

24 Behavior & Training
Conditioning your dog to prevent injuries in agility

competitive canine

14 Show Shots
Morris & Essex, Montgomery County Kennel Clubs

18 Better Breeding
The breeder’s conundrum for the top-winning bitch

22 The Judge’s Eye
Expert tips on judging when the camera’s rolling

28 Future Fancy
Pro handler Angela Lloyd on apprenticeships

safe & sound

30 Healthy Dog
Vaccinating your dog

breed columns

49 Breed Columns Spotlight:
Italian Greyhounds

50 Breed Columns Index

50 Toy Group

60 Non-Sporting Group

69 Herding Group

departments

4 President’s Letter
Meet Great Pyrenees Cirra, an ambassador for purebred dogs

10 On All Fronts
Flying with Fido, and books for young fanciers

48 AKC Shopper

82 Classified Advertising

84 Dog People
Eugene W. Haupt, American hero