

Cat People vs. Dog People A Look at the Great Pet Debate *by Jessica Beganski*

When it comes to pets, America is a divided country. On one side are those who think their cat is smarter than any dog; on the other side are those who think cats might be smart but their dogs are more fun. Although there are many mixed households, individuals tend to self-identify as either cat people or dog people. And to know whether someone is a dog person or cat person is to know a great deal about them.

With an estimated 82 million cats and 72 million dogs in the United States, cats and dogs are a part of our daily lives, as important to many of us as our friends and family. How did the relationship between humans and dogs, and humans and cats begin? And what is it about our personalities that allow us to relate more deeply to a cat or dog? What do cat people think about dog people? Is this a rivalry or can cats, dogs, and all of their people get along?

A Brief History of Dogs and Cats

Stanley Coren's *The Modern Dog* traces the origin of the human-dog relationship back 14,000 years. Early fossil records show it's likely that humans and dogs co-evolved. Dogs gravitated towards human settlements where they scavenged for food. And as dogs inhabited the outer boundaries of these settlements, they acted as an early warning system alerting humans to potential threats. Coren further suggests that dogs developed a superior ability to respond to human forms of communication, even subtle or non-verbal cues, a hereditary trait that even wolves raised from birth by humans do not possess.

Although the dog has long been considered to be a parasite, manipulating humans to love and feed them, humans have clearly benefited from this relationship. The dog has been extremely adaptable to what humans want: hunting, guarding, sniffing everything from bombs to drugs, providing therapy, rescue, war and family protection. In addition to their vast and varied job skills, dogs excel at human companionship.

The cat's relationship to humans is relatively newer and somewhat more complex. It's commonly believed that approximately 3,000 years ago, wild cats were attracted to rodents that fed off of Egyptian stores of grain. Although it's unclear exactly when, how and why, Egyptians allowed cats into their homes and began to worship them as gods. However, throughout history, cats have been simultaneously revered as human companions and despised as nuisances.

Humans' ambiguity toward cats reflects the nature of cats themselves. Throughout history the cat has remained largely unchanged. Physically and behaviorally, the domestic cat is very similar to wild cats--mysterious, changeful, wild and independent. For this reason, Juliet Clutton-Brock in *A Natural History of Mammals* calls the cat an "exploited captive" rather than domesticated. Cats are the least tame of our household pets but uniquely successful for a species that retains so much of its wildness.

Dogs Have Family. Cats Have Staff.

Dogs and cats have both endured and benefited from the human tendency to anthropomorphize, or to attribute human qualities to things or beings not human. While dogs and cats aren't pint-sized humans, they do share the same primary emotions as humans-- fear, anger, surprise, sadness, disgust and joy. Although scientists may disagree, most pet owners would tell you that their pets are also capable of more complex feelings, or secondary emotions, like empathy, loneliness and vengefulness. What pet owner hasn't returned home late to find a "surprise" waiting for them, such as a shredded curtain or overturned garbage pail? When we're picking up the mess, it certainly feels like our pet was being vengeful.

What are the qualities about dogs most admired by people?

Loyalty, honesty, friendliness, faithfulness, helpfulness and playfulness. We asked several Our Companions' volunteers and staff to tell us what they liked most about dogs:

"A dog draws you out. They are social and they force you to be social as well."

"Cats seem to be rude. Dogs are generally friendly and they try to please you. Cats couldn't care less."

"Dogs are grateful. Cats just expect."

What are the qualities about cats most admired by people?

Grace, subtlety, independence, intelligence, and mysteriousness. Several Our Companions' volunteers and staff told us what they liked about cats: "Cats have integrity. You have to earn their trust and respect. They can't be bribed for a treat or pat."

"Cats have a clear, confident, sense of self. Cats don't work the room, they let the room work them."

"Cats don't get into the trash, they don't track mud all over my house, they don't pant loudly, they don't take up too much room on the bed and they don't urinate on the floor."

"A dog will love whoever is the newest person in the room. With cats you have to earn it and nurture them to build a bond."

In a 2008 study by Ball State University, pet owners were surveyed about their personalities and their pets. The results showed that pet owners saw themselves as having personalities similar to their pets. Cat owners saw themselves as being more independent while dog owners described themselves as being friendly.

The difference in dog people and cat people can also be illustrated by how people relate to and interact with their pets. Dog people tend to relish the physical activities they share with their dog – walking or playing. On the other hand, cat people tend to enjoy quiet time with their cats – cuddling or sleeping. In *The Feline Mystique*, Clea Simon writes, “Dog people...seem to enjoy being taken out of their lives by their pets; cat owners instead welcome (their) pets into the fabric of (their) lives.”

There are other considerations to our pet selection, such as where we live, with whom we live, finances and allergies; but how we view ourselves greatly determines whether we consider ourselves to be a cat person or dog person. Similar to our human relationships, we tend to pick our pets based on the personality traits we have or admire.

Cat People and Dog People - Fighting Like Cats and Dogs?

The idiom “to fight like cats and dogs” is used to describe a monumental battle, where two sides struggle against each other to permanently eradicate the other side. While the exact origin of the idiom is unknown, it is based on the assumption that cats and dogs are exact opposites and therefore doomed to fight it out for all of eternity. Popular culture has supported this, often showing dogs and cats on opposing sides.

A recent study revealed, however, that a majority of pet owners with both a dog and cat report that their pets get along. The term “to fight like cats and dogs” is more likely a result of the very natural human tendency to create binary opposites as a way of understanding. The theory, as applied to cats, dogs, cat people and dog people, is that to understand something, we need to understand what it is not.

We asked Our Companions’ volunteers and staff to tell us what they think about cat people and dog people.

What do dog people think about cat people?

“Cat people seem more reserved while dog people seem to be more outgoing.”

“People who own a cat seem to own more than one because one cat is not interesting enough. Cat people need a few cats to amuse themselves.”

“Cat people tend to be more introverted and seem to prefer to be indoors. Maybe it’s because they can’t walk their cat?”

What do cat people think about dog people?

“People who own dogs need constant reassurance that their pet loves them.”

“Dog people like a lot of attention. To own a dog is to get to show it off and draw attention to yourself. When you own a cat, it’s more private because you don’t get to show it off at the local park.”

“You have to have a good sense of humor to own dogs.”

Even though we may stereotype each other based on our preference for a pet or make fun of each other for our quirks, most people do not “fight like cats and dogs” over which pet makes a better companion. The founders of Our Companions are a perfect example. When cat-person Susan Linker and dog-person Marie Joyner formed Our Companions, it was with a common mission - to help better the lives of people and their companion animals.

Staff and volunteers can unite around the common cause of helping all animals because we appreciate the gifts our animals offer us - companionship, unconditional love, responsibility and trust. That’s one thing we can all agree on.