

Is the fila the dog for you
By Maggie bob
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The Fila Brasileiro (Brazilian Fila) is not a dog for everyone. It is tough, protective, agile, and alert - and its great intelligence can make it a handful for the inexperienced owner.

But if you are a special type of person - and if you want a dog whose faithfulness is proverbial, whose devotion to its family is overwhelming - a Fila may be the dog for you.

The Fila is a tough working guard dog of strong temperament. It is the only guarding breed developed on the American continent.

Like the Rottweiler and Doberman, it requires training and commitment from its owners. It is not the right type of dog for the first time dog owner, but rather suitable for someone who has previously owned one of the Working breeds. Its devotion and loyalty to its owner are unsurpassed, its natural guarding instincts so strong that it does not require training to protect its family and territory but rather training for control.

The Fila at present is very rare in the U.S. - the challenge of owning and helping to introduce a rare breed will appeal to many people as it does to me. However, it does mean that most people will know nothing about the breed, and more importantly, be unqualified to offer advice. That is one reason that it is so important to communicate through the Fila Brasileiro Club of America where the knowledgeable people can be found (FBCA Box 649 Manchester, GA 31816). ****1****

Since this breed is so rare, one way to describe it is to note similarities and differences from the better known breeds.

The Fila comes from the Mastiff family (molossoid), being basically a combination of the English Mastiff, Bloodhound, and 16th Century Bulldog (a bull-baiting dog more like the modern Staffordshire than the modern Bulldog). Also included in unknown proportions were miscellaneous European big-game hunting breeds which the Portuguese conquerors brought to Brazil.

The Fila was developed in Brazil for hunting jaguars, guarding and serving as a catch dog for cattle, and as a guard on estates (where in the 18th and 19th Centuries one of its tasks was pursuing and detaining - without seriously injuring - runaway slaves). Its loose skin and melancholy expression (and sometimes its vocalizations) recall the Bloodhound ancestry, while its massiveness and adoration of its master echo the Mastiff side.

This Mastiff character can be seen in its absolute devotion to its family; "faithful as a Fila" is an old Brazilian proverb. Like a Mastiff, a Fila wants to follow you around, lay its huge head in your lap, sleep at your feet, or preferably on your feet. Its personality can never be described as "aloof" like some other guard dogs.

The Fila at its maximum height is equal to the minimum height for a Mastiff; thus some Filas will be as tall as some Mastiffs, although the bone will not be as heavy. (Males 25 1/2 inches to 27 1/2 inches; bitches 23 inches to 27 1/2 inches; common weight for good size Filas 150 and 125 pounds respectively.) ****2**** Most common colors - in order - are brindle, red and fawn with some white on chest, feet and tail (white elsewhere is frowned on or disqualifying if excessive).

The Fila, however, is lighter than and 100 times more agile than a Mastiff of comparative height. It is also, being a relatively natural dog, generally healthier and more long-lived than other Molossoid breeds (we saw many Filas over ten years old in excellent health in Brazil). It is generally not plagued with infertility problems. Fila bitches routinely have huge litters of seven to twelve pups in Brazil with minimal veterinary attention.

Along with the Fila's great devotion to its family goes an extreme possessiveness and territoriality. Also, the Fila's hunting instincts are extremely well-developed.

From the time it is a puppy, the Fila will chase anything you throw for it. However, its natural instinct is to then run off with its new possession to take it to its own "nest". Like a pack rat, the pup will collect objects from all over and put them in its territory, or bed. It will also guard its hoard, and the owner must make it clear from earliest days that he has the right to take objects from the puppy and rule over its possessions.

Because of its interest in pleasing its owner and quick intelligence, the Fila is an excellent dog for obedience competition, and can be easily taught to retrieve. Just remember, it usually will not bring things back instinctively, but must be taught to fetch. In agility it is unsurpassed, leaping and jumping naturally, being in both agility and alertness the Doberman's equal.

For the Fila, you and the family who lives permanently in your house are part of its possessions. It will be extremely possessive and as it gets older will guard its family from all intrusions. The intruders - in the Fila's mind - include visiting plumbers, house guests and even children, relatives, etc. This means anyone who has not always been a permanent resident (or permanent daily help) in your house. Unless deliberately trained and socialized otherwise, the Fila will react aggressively to the intrusion of anybody onto its territory, and to any "menace" to its people. However, outside its territory and with its owner, the same Fila can be petted by anyone and be examined by show judges. ****3****

In Brazil, as we saw many times, the Fila is considered the super guard for the family's children. People will go out at night leaving the children in the house and a Fila loose in the fenced in yard, and have no fears of crime. The children can climb all over the Fila and he will take any abuse from them. An eight year old girl won first in Junior Handling with her family's Fila recently at an international show in Puerto Rico. The 130 lb dog was completely responsive to the young girl, who really did not have the physical strength to control him had he wished to rebel. ****4****

The smallest sound is sufficient to put the Fila on full alert, trotting off to investigate any unusual noise. From early puppy hood (three to four months) they will bark at strange noises and investigate them without fear. A Fila with good temperament should show - from puppy hood complete fearlessness of anything strange and a willingness to go out and investigate anything new. ****5**** As a puppy, it will be friendly to strangers when in a neutral environment, although it may show aggression if a stranger approaches its "nest", its family or itself with too much familiarity.

A Fila should never show nervousness or fear - dogs with these traits, combined with the natural aggression, will be dangerous. The Fila should always act from self-confidence. A nervous dog which tends to see threats where they do not exist does not have correct Fila temperament and may become aggressive in inappropriate situations; these dogs should be put down. ****6****

Because of its unusual body structure, with hind legs longer than the front and a very flexible spine, the Fila in spite of its greater mass is easily as agile as a Doberman. It jumps and bounds with ease, flies over obstacles, and can turn back on itself to touch its head to the base of the tail with the greatest ease. It can do that standing up, practically bending its body in two without losing its balance.

In a rural setting, the Fila retains its natural hunting instincts. Particularly it loves to tree cats and stand on its hind legs at the base of the tree barking for the cat to come down - this was exactly the behavior used when it hunted jaguars in packs in Brazil. It seems to be instinctive behavior similar to that of the American Coonhounds. Unlike other Mastiff breeds, the Fila is built to stand easily and comfortably on its hind legs. Your Fila pup will want to stand on its hind legs and put its paws on you. Remember that as an adult of 125 or 150 pounds it will stand up and put its paws on your shoulders and look right into your face to greet you. So, don't let it do this as a pup unless you will be pleased with the adult custom.

As basically pack hunters, Filas should get along well with any dogs they are raised with which they have grown up with, and are not generally quarrelsome (except for normal rivalries between two males). They definitely are not fighting dogs by temperament.

All Filas should have elementary obedience training as puppies. Be very cautious about giving the dog agitation or guard training unless you are quite expert. Normally the Fila's natural instincts will be more than sufficient to have it defend any fenced in territory it considers home.

The Fila's strong temperament, as we said at the beginning, is not for everyone. But if absolute devotion and love, secure family protection, interest in obedience, or Schutzhund, and entertainment by a complex, agile, eager-to-please dog are among your priorities, a Fila might just be the dog for you.

I haven't mentioned its good looks - the short smooth shiny coat; sleek functional body conformation; agile antics; loose skin and melancholy expression; dark, loving, attentive eyes. If the Fila takes possession of you, once you have owned one, you will never be able to fall in love with another breed again.

1. Note by Outrageous Shadow Filas....FBCA information updated to reflect current contact address -

FBCA P O Box 233 Lascassas TN 37185

2. Note by Outrageous Shadow Filas....These are the current FCI Males 27 inches to 29.52 inches; bitches 24 inches to 27.56 inches

3. Note by Outrageous Shadow Filas....We do not agree with the statement this statement. We uphold the standard as written in the FCI and do not recommend that you go out in public with the mistaken impression that as long as your fila is on leash with you...it will tolerate petting from anyone. We do uphold the belief that with proper training a fila can be made to stand for an exam (ie: veterinarian) but do not encourage casual petting.

4. Note by Outrageous Shadow Filas....In the interest of responsible ownership...we do

not recommend that children be allowed to take your fila outside the home.

5. Note from Outrageous Shadow Filas....It is quite common for Fila pups to go through “lack of confidence” stages as they mature and do not indicate a lack of appropriate temperament in your puppy.

6. Note from Outrageous Shadow Filas....This determination should be made by a professional / expert within the world of Filas after proper medical and temperament exams have been performed.