

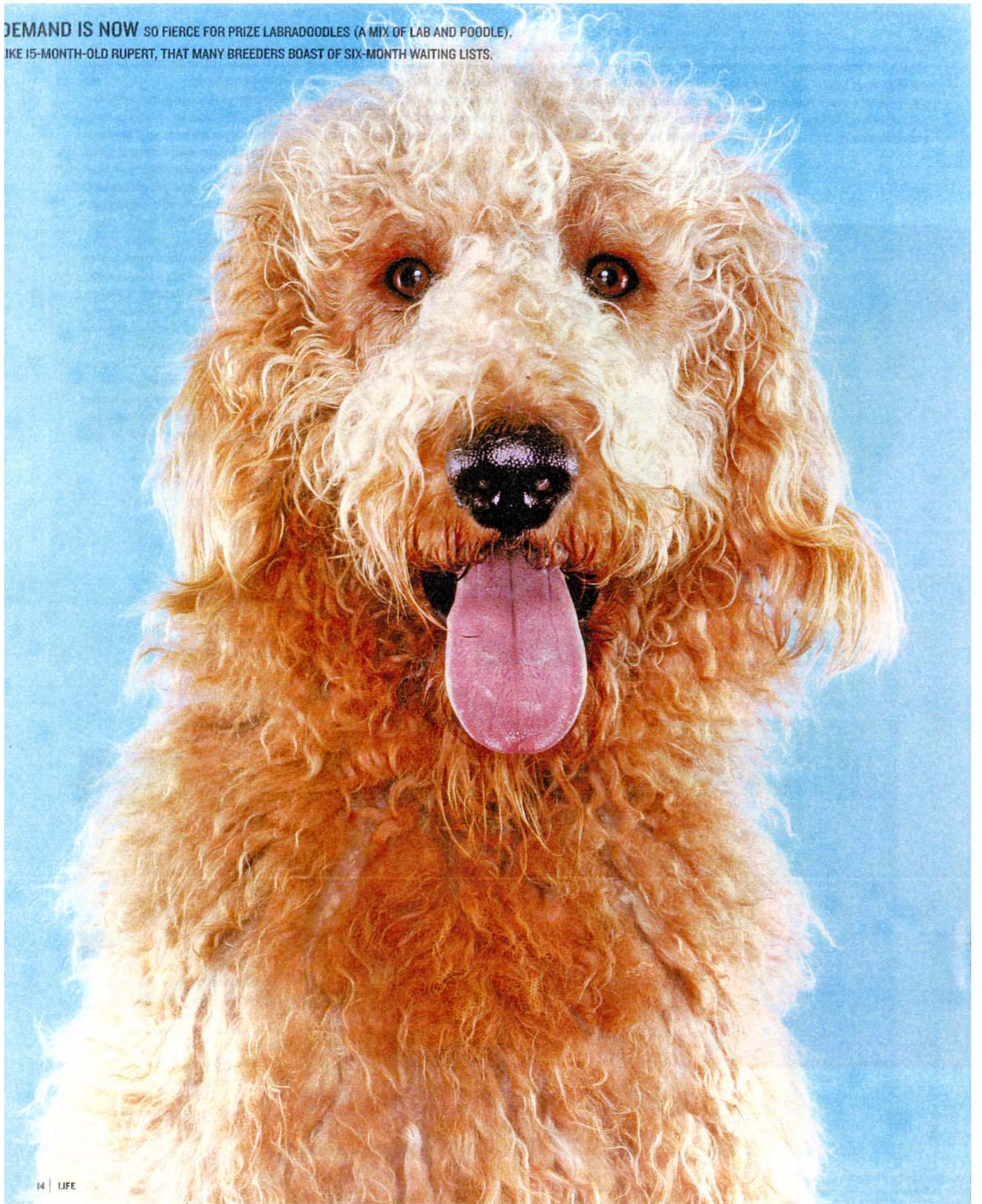
**MEET
THE DOODLES**
A NEW BREED
OF DOG IS
UNLEASHED IN
AMERICA

By KENNETH MILLER

WOOF!

Lucie Courtois is tougher than most 3-year-olds. Born with clouded corneas, she has endured three transplants and endless rounds of medication and physical therapy. But there's nothing stoic about the preschooler's reaction when her new puppy—a straw-colored tangle of long legs and floppy ears—knocks her to the floor and slathers her face with wet, sloppy kisses. Lucie giggles and grabs for her glasses. Pursuing the pup as he scampers across the room, she squeals "I love you!" with the ardor of a boy-band fan. • The moment is priceless, as a credit-card ad might put it, but the dog is a different matter: Before loading the pooch into the car, Lucie's mother writes a check for \$1,250 to the breeder (for the pup, shots, a health certificate, a warranty, and a

DEMAND IS NOW SO FIERCE FOR PRIZE LABRADOODLES (A MIX OF LAB AND POODLE),
LIKE 15-MONTH-OLD RUPERT, THAT MANY BREEDERS BOAST OF SIX-MONTH WAITING LISTS.





JOY DE LA REN of San Diego (above) was one of the first breeders of the giant schnoodle. "I considered getting a Labradoodle," she says, "but the giant schnauzer has better resistance to the heat than the Labrador—and I needed that in California." Another schnoodle talent: dancing. "Xena does about 18 different steps—and she's only 18 months old!"

GIANT SCHNOODLES (PART GIANT SCHNAUZER, PART POODLE) ARE A RECENT DOODLE ADDITION. AMONG XENA'S BEST QUALITIES: INTUITIVENESS, EXUBERANCE, AND CRAZY BLACK HAIR.

subcutaneous ID microchip, should he get lost). Once upon a time, a dog like this—a mix of Labrador retriever and standard poodle—would have been classified as a mutt and, though adorable, assigned a market value of precisely zero. But these dogs have moved up significantly in the world: Now known as a Labradoodle, a prize specimen can fetch up to \$3,000. Although no one keeps track of the total numbers sold, demand is so fierce that many U.S. breeders boast six-month waiting lists, while a Google search for "Labradoodle" displays more than 30,000 hits. Nipping at the Labradoodle's heels is the goldendoodle, a golden retriever-poodle cross. Those covetous of more exotic blends can order a schnoodle (part schnauzer), shepadoodle (part German shepherd), Pekepoo (part Pekingese), Maltipoo (part Maltese), Yorkiepoo (part Yorkshire terrier), or half a dozen other varieties with similarly cartoonish names.

Though the names could hardly be goofier, there's nothing silly about the Labradoodle's origins. In 1989, Patricia Blum, a partially blind woman living in Hawaii, contacted the renowned Royal Guide Dog Association in Kew, Australia, to request a service dog that wouldn't make her husband sneeze. It fell to Royal Guide Dog breeding manager Wally Conron to find a solution: He knew that for a tractable, affectionate service dog, a Lab or a golden retriever was tough to beat, but dander made those breeds off-limits to allergy sufferers. Poodles were a reasonable alternative: They're more intelligent, just as companionable, and non-shedding, and they produce less dander. But they've long been hobbled by the froufrou factor. Few men, say breeders, want to be seen parading down

the street with one. That's when Conron hit upon his big idea: Why not cross a poodle with a Lab and call it a Labradoodle? "He thought, 'That will prick people's ears up,'" says Australian Labradoodle breeder Beverley Manners, president of the International Labradoodle Association.

It did more than that: Dog-lovers were instantly smitten. Labradoodles, breeders say, embody the best aspects of their two bloodlines, tending to be smarter than the average Lab but mellower and easier to groom than a poodle. Some breeders claim that a phenomenon called "hybrid vigor" makes them healthier than their purebred forebears, many of which were at risk for a host of genetic disorders, from eye disease to heart problems. When Labradoodles first reached the U.S. in the 1990s, rising asthma and allergy rates created an instant market. (The Courtois family chose their dog, in part, so that little Lucie could have a pup without

risking eye infections caused by dander.) It was easy to see the commercial potential in a blend of America's most beloved dog and a pooch that left no fur on the furniture.

"The Labradoodle is just the inevitable next step in our view of dogs as home accessories," says Jon Katz, author of *The Dogs of Bedlam Farm*, a just-released nonfiction book. "Now instead of having to put up with smelly, messy, unpredictable dogs, we can order the dog we want and have a high expectation of getting it. The good news," he adds, "is that Labradoodles are nice and smart. The bad news is, one would hate to see a world in which all dogs were engineered to be nice and smart."

For such nice, smart dogs, Doodles have their share of detractors. Allan Reznik, editor in chief of *Dog World* and *Dog Fancy*, says, "They are a million-dollar scam. Marketing types have decided that if we give mixed breeds a

fanciful name, make them sound like purebreds, you can charge whatever the market will bear." He argues that hybridization doesn't wipe out disorders shared by Labs and poodles—hip dysplasia, for instance. And, he points out, not all such dogs are non-shedding (especially among first-generation Labradoodles, confirm breeders). People with allergies, Reznik notes, can choose among several pure breeds, from the tiny bichon frise to the large Irish water spaniel. For non-allergy sufferers, animal shelters are bursting with mixed breeds that are available for free.

Doodle aficionados, meanwhile, argue that purebred-breeding practices which emphasize appearance over personality have resulted in dogs that can be ill-tempered, prone to illness, or the canine equivalent of dumb blondes. Responsible Doodle breeders (some of whom you'll find listed on www.ilainc.com) perform genetic testing on their dogs and monitor

successing generations to ensure that Doodles don't go the way of many purebreds. "Lots of breeds have had the brains bred right out of them," says Sharon Merriam, owner of DaeShar's Designer Doodles in Deer Park, Washington.

These dogfights aside, the Doodle may simply be the latest chapter in the continuing evolution of man's best friend. Rather than being bred for hunting or herding, dogs are now selected for traits that make them lovable members of the family—who don't cause sneezing fits. But when we tinker with living things, the results are never predictable. The biggest surprise about Doodles, many owners report, is just how closely they resemble us. "I've been working with dogs for 40-plus years, and Labradoodles are different," says Manners. "They have eyes like human beings. They look right into your soul." ■

"LABRADOODLES [SUCH AS BELLE] MARK A TURNING POINT," SAYS AUTHOR JON KATZ. "THEY'RE BRED TO BE SMART, NICE, AND NON-SHEDDING. THIS IS THE MAINSTREAMING OF THE DESIGNER DOG."



BELLE'S OWNER, Tracy Olsen, attempts to get her miniature Labradoodle airborne... to no avail. "This dog had the most human features of the ones we shot," says photographer Jeff Minton. "Belle would look at you and you'd want to say 'Hey, how's it going?'"