



The Oregonian

'Meet Your Match' in your next cat

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Rouge is one gorgeous kitty. This brown tabby, who's at the Cat Adoption Team in Sherwood awaiting a home, has a leonine mane and intelligent eyes that follow you.

But Rouge isn't one of a kind. His sister, Aurora, has the same luxurious coat, the same intense yellow eyes, the same grace.

These cats seem like two peas in a pod. Under the fur, though, they are very different. Rouge is a cautious cat who takes time to warm up to new places and people; Aurora is a lap cat who will happily follow people anywhere.

Until now, it would have been hard for anyone except the most experienced cat owner to see the difference. At the Cat Adoption Team, that changed last month.

The shelter has adopted the "Meet Your Match" program of the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. It matches humans with the perfect feline family member through personality assessments. The group is the only shelter in the Portland area using the system.

"I've worked in animal welfare for 15 years. This is the most exciting thing I've seen," says Rhonda Weiss, operations manager for the Cat Adoption Team.

Defining "feline-ality"

Trained testers at the Cat Adoption Team assess each cat when it's admitted, as long as it is older than 9 months -- testing isn't accurate on kittens.

Among other procedures, the tester uses a stopwatch to see how much time the cat interacts socially, scores the cat on how it responds to petting, rates the animal on how it deals with a gentle hug and evaluates how the cat plays with different toys.

The assessment, which takes about 15 minutes, determines the cat's interest in interacting with people, its boldness in new situations and its style of play.

Based on its score, each cat is put in one of three groups defined by color: "Green" cats are highly social and adventurous; "orange" cats are the easygoing, middle-of-the-road cats; "purple" cats tend to be quiet and warm up more slowly to new situations.

Within each color category, there are three "feline-ality" types. For example, Rouge is a "private investigator" -- one of the "purple" categories. Here's how a "private investigator" operates:

"I'm working undercover to keep an eye on you and your household. You may not even know you're under surveillance. I can vanish into thin air if anyone or anything interferes with my investigation. If you need a cat who knows how to stay out of trouble and will always keep your secrets, I just might take your case."

Aurora, on the other hand, rates as an "orange" cat, with the feline-ality of a "personal assistant." Here's her worldview:

"You're working on the computer? Let me press the keys. Reading the paper? I'll hold the pages down for you. Watching TV? I'll just plop in your lap so you can pet me. I love an orderly household, don't you? I'll help you with all your chores, and I'll help you relax when we're done. You'll wonder how you ever managed without me."

Rating the adopter

Understanding the cat's feline-ality is only half of the process. The other half is understanding what kind of cat fits best into a certain home.

The Cat Adoption Team now requires all adopters to answer 15 key questions. For example:

I am comfortable with a cat that likes to play "chase my ankles" and similar games: ___ No ___ Somewhat ___ Yes

When I am at home, I want my cat to be by my side or in my lap: ___ Little of the time ___ Some of the time ___ All of the time

My cat needs to be able to adjust to new situations quickly: ___ Not important ___ Sometimes ___ Yes

Based on their answers, people also are rated as green, orange or purple and are encouraged to look for a kitty with a matching color.

Interestingly, each color category has about the same percentage of people and cats. There really is a match for everyone.

The information helps adopters sort through what can seem to be an overwhelming process.

"We have 441 cats in the Cat Adoption Team's care," Kathy Covey, the organization's public relations and marketing director, says. Meet Your Match helps adopters narrow that to a manageable number -- and all the cats they see will be a fit for their household. "This tool pretty much ensures that the cats will, after a little adjustment, meet the expectations the adopters had in their heads."

Of course, sometimes love just happens. A purple person may see a green cat and become hopelessly smitten. That's OK -- in that case, the Meet Your Match information can help the prospective owner understand the cat's nature.

For adopters willing to take home two cats -- such as Aurora and Rouge, who would do best staying together -- the Meet Your Match system gives the chance for an adopter who loves more than one kind of feline-ality to understand the needs of each cat.

Information is power

The more specific information an adopter has, the more likely the placement is to last, Covey says.

"The biggest reason an animal gets returned to the shelter is that it does something outside the expectation of the owner. They don't understand why their new cat always hides under the bed," she says.

The ASPCA says shelters using Meet Your Match have seen a 40 to 45 percent increase in adoptions and a 45 to 50 percent decrease in returns and euthanasia.

"Cats will go home with people who are going to love them for who they are. That's what excites me the most," the Cat Adoption Team's Weiss says.

For more information on Meet Your Match, go to www.catadoptionteam.org and click on "adopt" and then on "meet your match." You can also call 503-925-8903.

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