

## **Duck Hunters Know All About Puppy Love**

### **Selecting one that will become a retriever is an important decision**

This dog's gonna hunt. At least, that's the plan.

Gator is a 10-week-old black Labrador puppy. His owner is Steve Earwood of Midwest City, an avid waterfowler.

Earwood paid \$1,000 for Gator because he needs a good working dog. His present dog, Brook, is an 11-year-old lab and has gotten too old to cut the mustard.

So Earwood went to Deep Fork Retrievers in Choctaw, where he got Brook, in search of a new hunting companion. John Amico, owner of Deep Fork Retrievers, has been breeding hunting labs for more than 25 years.

Selecting the puppy that will become his retriever is perhaps the most important decision a duck hunter can make. Gator's parents are two field champions. That doesn't automatically mean Gator will be a good duck and pheasant dog, but it sure stacks the odds in his favor.

"If the pedigree is no good, there is no sense looking at the puppies," Amico said.

Gator was culled from a litter of eight. Gator was chosen because he has all the characteristics Amico looks for in evaluating a puppy.

Gator had a high level of prey drive, the instinct to want to chase birds. He seemed at ease then introduced to new environments and was attentive. Gator was willing to look you straight in the eye.

"You can't train a dog that won't look at you," Amico said.

Gator also appears to be athletic enough to perform the tasks required of a retriever. A wide chest indicates Gator should have the stamina to be a good swimmer; his legs were the proper proportion to his backbone and his ears weren't overly long.

Long ears may look cute, but retrievers must be swimmers. Labs with long ears are more prone to ear infections, Amico said.

For the same reason, the eyes should be almond-shaped and not too droopy, or they will collect matter more easily, he said. To sum it up, Gator passed all of the tests.

"He was real birdy. He likes to look at you. He wasn't scared when he was put into a new place. And he looked real good," Amico said.

Before formal training begins, Gator will enter a “puppy head start” program, the first step to becoming a hunting retriever. He will be introduced to swimming and jumping out of duck boats. He will be exposed to birds and gunfire.

In puppy preschool, Gator will “start developing the habits that you are going to train it to do later,” Amico said. In three months, we’ll check on Gator’s progress and see how he is doing.

Editor’s note: *The Oklahoman* will follow Gator and monitor his progress through training and his first duck hunt.

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