

Picking the Perfect Puppy

The key to finding the right hunting companion is to hire the best pup for the job.

Many waterfowlers are decoyed into buying premium shotguns and the latest camo patterns. Madison Avenue isn't stumping for what might be one of the greatest joys of the hunt, your canine hunting partner. As in life, the right companion can make or break your hunt.

Top business recruiters know how to identify those job skills and attitudes in the right candidates that can lead to their development as superstars, and you can use the same strategy to choose an eager partner to share your hunting blind.

What's the Job?

There are four basic job skills that every successful hunting retriever should possess: (1) the ability to "mark" or perceive and remember the area of a fallen bird; (2) the ability to use the wind to follow scent; (3) the desire to trail a cripple; and (4) a willingness to take direction from the handler.

The inherited trait that enables a dog to be trained to mark, scent and trail is called prey drive – the instinct to chase and subdue game. While the willingness to take direction from a handler is a pre-disposition in some dogs, in most, it is a product of training.

Talent Pool = Gene Pool

A pedigree is a pup's genetic resume. Working retriever pedigrees are made up of bloodlines and their respective field titles. Common titles include Field Champion, Master Hunting Retriever and Hunting Retriever Champion. Dogs holding these titles have shown through competitive testing that they are intelligent, trainable animals and possess high levels of prey drive – in other words, all the right stuff. The closer the working titles are to the parentage, the better, because the "blood" is less diluted. On the other hand, conformation or show titles (designated as "CH") carry much less weight because they have relatively nothing to do with a dog's working ability.

Candidates of this caliber are closely held within the retriever sport community and not typically advertised through more common venues, such as newspaper classifieds. Professional retriever trainers are among the best sources for advice on pedigrees and can often refer you to reputable breeders who possess the all-important blood you seek.

The Interview

Once you have found a promising pedigree, make an appointment with the breeder to “interview” the pups. Testing and subsequent selection of retriever pups is typically done when the pups are 7 weeks old. Just as we suffer the mid-day doldrums, so can puppies. Schedule your interview either early or late in the day and before they’ve eaten. It’s helpful to take a notebook to write down your observations. All puppies are cute, but selecting a pup that’s going to work for a living requires objectivity, not sentimentality. Be careful not to cloud your decision-making process with preconceived notions about sex or color. When looking for a working retriever, gender and color should be secondary to ability and talent.

Cut to the Chase

One of the most important evaluations you can make is how “birdy” the pups are. This is measured by observing the amount of prey drive they exhibit. One common test to determine birdiness requires an enclosed area and a live pigeon. Pigeons are commonly used for this test because they have game bird scent. A simple 10 x 10 foot pen can be made with a roll of chicken wire and t-posts. This size will allow adequate room for a puppy to chase the pigeon, and the pen can be set up and taken down quickly.

Prepare the pigeon by clipping its flight feathers along the length of its wings. You want it to be able to flap its wings in order to attract the pup’s attention, but not fly away. (This is a common practice and the flight feathers quickly grow back.) Put one pup at a time in the pen. Next, hold the pigeon at eye level with the puppy, gently teasing the pup by pulling the bird away. If necessary, use your voice to try to excite the pup. Now, step out of the pen and allow the pup to chase the bird. You’re looking for a bold, aggressive pup that shows no fear of the flapping wings and immediately chases and carries the bird. The pup that initially shows hesitation, as if he’s trying to figure out how best to grab the bird, but then goes after it, is acceptable, although obviously not as impressive. Needless to say, the pup that shies away from the bird, tries to hide between your feet, or shows no interest in the bird at all, is to be avoided.

Of equal importance is how “fetchy” the pups are. Fetchiness is another indicator of the strength of a pup’s prey drive. Trigger the pup’s prey drive by pulling a squeaky puppy toy away from it. As he begins to chase, flick the toy a short distance across the ground. Be careful not to throw the toy up in the air, or toss it too far away, because a puppy’s eyesight is not fully developed at this young age. What is most important to observe is the pup’s desire to actively chase and carry the toy. Don’t expect the pup to bring the toy back to you – that is trained behavior. What you are looking for, just as you did in the birdiness test, is the desire to chase and carry.

Once you have screened the “birdiest” and “fetchiest” pups, you are ready to sort out the more subtle differences between the top candidates. Make a high-pitched sound and watch for the pup that looks at you with curiosity. This behavior should not be confused with that of the puppy who tries to solicit your attention by jumping and licking. The purpose of this test is to find a

puppy that shows a natural tendency to pay attention, an important attribute when trying to develop an animal that willingly takes direction from its owner.

Finally, take the pups that have successfully passed the previous tests and move them to a different place. Usually, pups are raised in a specific area, and that's all they are familiar with. Take a group of two or three pups at a time, set them down in a new environment, such as a field, and observe their initial reaction to their new surroundings. Do they cower fearfully or jump up immediately and start investigating? A pup that can cope and adapt to changes in its environment has confidence and heart.

At the conclusion of these tests, you should be confident about your pick of the litter. The pup you've selected has shown the all-important instinctual tendencies that will enable it to master the job requirements.

Career Development

Once your pup has been home for a couple of weeks and is responding to its name, it's time to start developing its potential. The first step is to create a proper training environment. Anything a pup picks up on his own can hamper your training goals; therefore, it's important that you control his surroundings so he doesn't learn anything you don't want him to. It is not advisable to let a pup be around other dogs at this stage in his life. No dog ever taught another dog anything you needed it to know.

A manipulative approach to training helps the pup mold a pliant temperament, maximize his memory and form a bond with you that will become the foundation for future teamwork. Use food treats, such as small pieces of hot dog, to manipulate the pup into performing the fundamental actions of retrieving: going away, coming back and sitting down. These actions are taught in the form of words – “fetch”, “here” and “sit”. Retrieving games enhance the pup's prey drive and eventually, when your pup responds to words because you'll let it fetch, food rewards can be phased out.

Along with the nuts and bolts of retrieving, the pup should be exposed to all different types of environments – the house, field, and duck blind. The pup needs to experience all these places and be happy there in order to maintain behavioral balance.

Tools of the Trade

Working retrievers also have to be exposed to the “tools of the trade” under retrieving conditions. Swimming, acclimation to gunfire and retrieving under all types of field conditions – land and water – must be taught. During warm weather, swimming should be taught in a pond with a gradual inclined entry. Start by tossing your fetch toy in an animated way so the pup will charge into the shallow water to retrieve it. Throw the toy a little farther each time until the pup has to swim a few strokes. The whole trick is to try to get the pup swimming without even realizing that he did it. This technique will develop a pup with a strong love of water, which is absolutely essential.

When becoming acclimated to gunfire, it is important that your pup learn to associate the sound with something pleasant, like a falling bird. This is accomplished by first having a helper stand 20 to 25 yards away and throw a bird into the air so that pup will begin to recognize the mark by seeing the arc of the fall. After several completed retrieves, when you see the pup develop a high interest in the bird's flight, have your helper fire a blank pistol as he throws the bird. As the pup becomes more accustomed to the sound, gradually have your helper move closer to you. Pups acclimated in this manner will revel at the sound of gunfire.

Now that your pup has learned to swim, can pick up simple marks thrown by your helper and is acclimated to gunfire, it is time to teach him how to mark on land and water. Teach beginning marks on easily negotiated terrain. The difficulty of terrain features and distance increase as the pup becomes more proficient. Marking lessons should be designed to push the pup, but not to discourage him from trying.

By the time your pup has matured into an adult, you'll have a hunting partner can trust – one who will ferret out cripples from the cattails and swim across icy currents to retrieve a duck floating belly up from a perfect shot.

Hiring the right pup for the job is as challenging as his job description. But taking the time to educate yourself and your retriever will reward you both with years of enjoyment... and the satisfaction of a job well done.

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