

Ready for a Retriever?

Here's what you need to know before buying a duck dog

You are a serious duck hunter, and you have been thinking about buying a retriever. Before you jump into a long-term relationship with a dog, are you sure you are ready for one? Not everyone is.

It takes time, commitment, and money to train a hunting dog. People with busy schedules or tight budgets are probably better off without a dog. For others, the timing may not be right. That, at least, is what Mitch Skinner thought.

Skinner, an Oklahoma duck hunter for 30 years, has hunted over many retrievers, all belonging to someone else. That is a typical profile for first-time owners. Most want a dog because they've hunted over one before.

“You go through different stages of hunting,” Skinner says. “When you first start hunting, it's all about shooting ducks. Now I work my dog. That's where I get my pleasure out of duck hunting.”

Skinner realized he needed a game plan that included where he would buy the puppy and what he would do with it afterward. “Someone had recommended John and Beth Amico to me,” Skinner said. “They have a program that not only helps you train the dog, but they train you (www.deepforkretrievers.com).” Skinner bought a puppy from the Amicos, and since he had never trained a dog before, he enrolled it in their puppy school.

“I would take the dog back about every two or three weeks, and John and Beth would give me assignments to do with the puppy at home,” Skinner says. “We'd come home, work on the assignments, and then go back and spend another Saturday with the Amicos.” Over time, Skinner learned how to train. And there were other, less tangible benefits. “The biggest one was patience,” he says. “At first, you anticipate that the dog will do more than he's ready to do or is capable of doing, so you have to be patient and not get frustrated. A puppy is just like a child. You have to let it mature and be ready to be trained.”

Now for a reality check. If you are thinking of getting a dog, do you have the support of your family? Will your spouse, kids or significant other help you stick to the training schedule? Instilling basic obedience is the first step. And, remember, retrievers need regular exercise, which will also require more of your time. Then there is the expense. Be assured that over time the purchase price of the dog will be dwarfed by the maintenance costs. The tab for food, veterinarian bills, medications, boarding, and other considerations is not incidental. If you are certain that the necessary commitment and support are in place, then the paperwork begins.

“I would tell anyone: ‘Get a Lab out of good breeding, and you'll never get any other type of dog,’” says Ashley Bloodworth of Fort Valley, Georgia, who has been breeding and training Labs professionally for the last 15 years. “And good breeding,” she says, “starts on paper with the

pedigree.” Bloodworth also suggests hitting the books or instructional videos. There is plenty of material from which to choose, including information on retriever breeds.

“I usually tell people to read as much as they can and go get involved with a trainer,” Bloodworth says. “But the biggest thing is keeping the puppies on live birds.”

Bloodworth’s last point is important. Any new dog owner needs to have a certain amount of hardware on hand ahead of time. The basics would include an airline crate for housebreaking, a leash, collar, and puppy-sized training bumpers. But perhaps the most important “equipment” is to either own or have access to live birds. Options include raising your own pigeons, hooking up with someone who already has birds, or joining a gun dog club that has access to birds.

“You can throw a bumper that looks like a duck all day long, but they’re plastic,” Bloodworth says. “It’s not the same as a live bird.”

One good option is to do the initial training yourself and then let a pro finish the job. After Skinner had put his Lab, Dixie, through her puppy paces, he took her back to the Amicos for more advanced training. He was pleased with the results. In fact, Skinner’s only regret is that he waited so long to get a dog in the first place.

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