

Myths and Misconceptions About Retrievers

By John Dahl

The Retriever Journal, August/September 1997

Most "common knowledge" concerning retrievers, their abilities, and attributes, has come from books (old and new), hearsay, and lore handed down from generation to generation. The majority of these information sources have slim basis in practical experience. Fact has become mixed with fiction, so that much of what is heard, while possibly entertaining, is of little practical value in working with your own dog. Two sorts of unfortunate consequences commonly result from mistaking retriever mythology for retriever fact. Owners are led by unrealistic assumptions to expect more of their dogs than any dog can be reasonably expected to accomplish. The result is disappointment, frustration, and sometimes embarrassment (if they were so blithe as to brag to their hunting buddies). Worse, in many instances the results have been serious abuse resulting in a ruined dog, sometimes even in the dog's death from training abuse or from hazards or exposure while hunting.

While this article is sufficient to address only a few of the many common misconceptions, my real intention is to make you a skeptic with respect to statements you hear or read about retrievers. I strongly suggest you refuse to apply anything you hear or read to YOUR dog without thinking it through and checking other sources.

First, don't expect your retriever to be *super dog*. The "Rin Tin Tin" image, for those of you whose memory of dog-hero movies goes back that far, often subtly works on the minds and expectations of dog owners, and they begin to believe in super dogs that can do everything but answer the phone. Belief is bolstered by tales of bloodhounds following a three-week-old human scent trail through New York City, and by knowing that your dog's own pedigree includes three-time National Field Trial Champion and Dual Champion Shed of Arden (probably true of *all* American Labradors). Extraordinary feats performed by dogs of any breed are rare, and the tales of them often exaggerated. Sure, those of us who have spent a lifetime with hundreds of dogs have seen a handful of unbelievable performances by spectacular individuals, but these occurrences are far from what we expect in the ordinary course of events.

When holding your retriever up against the dog heroes of legend and folklore, consider the stunningly wonderful piece of dog-handler teamwork which is a well-executed retrieve....and recognize that the dog never lived who could retrieve perfectly, every time, under all conditions. A really good dog comes to you with tractability, affection, courage, drive, and a small amount of built-in instinctual behavior which can be developed and refined by hard work and repetition by dog and trainer.

The reference to *natural retrievers* is often used by the less knowledgeable people in the sport. For all practical purposes, there are no natural retrievers, some just come to you with a better starting point, i.e. better mouth, nose, water-going traits, bird interest, and so forth. In 25 years of professional training, I have had only two out of hundreds of retrievers that retrieved naturally —

Myths and Misconceptions About Retrievers

and kept doing it. Many puppies will retrieve naturally for a short time but quickly realize other activities are more interesting. Those that retrieve well, naturally, into adolescence soon start dropping dummies, refusing to go, taking a deviated route back, etc. when the pressure to do things right is applied. Therefore, almost all dogs must be force-fetched — a procedure that will take anywhere from ten days to a couple of months depending on the aptitude of the individual.

There is little question that, in order to arrive at the desired goal with a retriever, you must embark upon, and continue, a sensible, regular program of careful training. When you see a dog perform beautifully, and consistently, you can bet that he wasn't born that way, nor was it an accident. It takes more time than many people think or are willing to invest. Not only must a dog learn what to do, he needs to practice to become proficient...and then he must practice more to establish the habit of doing it correctly despite all of the distractions and temptations he will face when hunting. Fred Woodall, of early Chesapeake fame, wrote me years ago, in response to the many ignorant questions I asked him about the ability of his dogs, that "these dogs are *exactly* what you make of them."

Another phrase we often hear is *soft mouth*. The issue of soft mouth is to a large extent a false one in the respect that almost all retrievers have an acceptably soft mouth. Many retriever mouths are gentle to a fault, the dogs being neither aggressive enough in their pick-up nor firm enough in their hold.

More desirable is a dog with a good, solid, confident mouth and eagerness to grab and hold things. In my life as a trainer I have had only a small handful of bird-mashers that could not be taught to handle a bird properly. These truly hard-mouthed dogs are so rare and easily identified that the problem does not deserve a lot of attention. If you get really unlucky and get one of these outlaws, and persist in training it, I wish you luck because it rarely works.

I wouldn't like to go too far making generalization about the quality of mouths in the different breeds of retriever, but some variation can be observed. Labs used to come with a good aggressive, firm mouth as a rule, Goldens with a slightly flawed soft mouth, and Chesapeakes with a tendency to hard mouth. At present, Lab mouths have slipped some to an unpredictable level, possibly because the advanced force fetching methods of today make rigorous breeding practices for good mouth unnecessary. Goldens seem to come by and large with a good, happy-medium mouth -- firm, fairly quick pick-up and easy to force fetch. Chesapeakes, on the other hand have become somewhat loose in the mouth with lots of bird-dropping and readjusting. My experience is that the looser the mouth, the more difficult and time-consuming the force-fetch procedure is.

Much controversy and many misconceptions surround the use of *electric training collars*. Many people assume that all "collar trainers" grind their dogs down to the point where they move extremely slowly and appear to be working in fear. This was indeed a common observation 25 years ago. While such results may still be seen today, a greater number of highly-skilled amateur and professional trainers have figured out how to use modern collars to teach obedience and advanced work while maintaining style, speed, and the dog's love of retrieving.

Myths and Misconceptions About Retrievers

At the same time, however, "the collar" is not any kind of cure-all. Many of us have grown accustomed to push-button convenience, but a dog is still a dog and to expect instant control is to court disaster. It can't hurt to repeat that careless or uninformed use of an electric collar can ruin a dog in short order.

There are many misconceptions concerning the *length of time* it takes to train a retriever. The best answer to the question, "How long does it take to train a retriever?" might be, "a lifetime." Most appropriate responses to this question are questions themselves, such as: how old is the dog? What has he learned to date? How does he respond to praise and correction? What are his natural abilities? And what would you like him to be able to do? Rough outlines of time schedules can be given, but they are just that -- rough approximations. There are too many variables. And once the formal lessons have been accomplished, a lifetime of frequent workouts of increasing difficulty is necessary to maintain and improve your working companion.

We see only a handful of truly exceptional retrievers, and no perfect ones, in a lifetime of dog work. Each individual embarks on a training career with faults that must be overcome. In most cases, making a dog into a finished retriever means identifying and developing the dog's strengths so as to compensate for its flaws--*not* bemoaning its weaknesses.

True, a dog with too many serious flaws is going to be more trouble to train than the product would justify. This is a call that the individual owner must make -- if the result makes you happy, and you and your dog enjoyed doing it, then it was worth doing. Sadly, many "cute" puppies fall into the sub-marginal class, and it is good to be able to identify these candidates quickly so as to reduce frustration on the part of the dog and trainer.

A commonly overlooked feature of training is that once trained, a retriever doesn't necessarily stay trained. Gradually, and often quickly, trained behavior will slip away if not maintained in a consistent manner. Your best bet is to develop the habit of working your dog regularly throughout the year. Keep in mind, too, that the transition from the training grounds to the hunting field is a dramatic step, and few dogs perform really well until they have a few days' experience hunting. Much of what a gun dog must know can only be learned afield. Be patient with your dog as he learns to generalize what you've taught him to this new situation! Eventually, your careful attention to basic training will pay off.

The *nature of retrievers*, particularly with respect to toughness, is often misrepresented, exaggerated, and poorly understood. Among the most colorful myths surrounding retriever work are the stories of Chesapeakes braving the icy surf retrieving hundreds of ducks in a day for the early market hunters. It is true that many Chesapeakes are very tough water dogs, as are a lot of Labs and Golden Retrievers, but none of them is immune to cold. It is a bad idea to expose a retriever to long hours of standing in, or doing an excessive number of retrieves in, extremely cold water. A simple expedient on those long, cold days in the blind is to buy one of the highly insulated coats or wetsuits that can either be worn throughout the day or slipped on and off for the retrieves. No matter how tough the books say they are, dogs get cold, and when they get cold, it hurts!

A really good retriever of any breed is endowed with an almost insatiable desire to work. Good judgment is required in order to avoid such disasters as hypothermia, heat stroke, and general

Myths and Misconceptions About Retrievers

fatigue, both physical and psychological. All breeds and all dogs have limits, and, especially with individuals of excess desire, the owner must know when enough is enough.

The final generally-held belief that I would like to attempt to dispel is the notion that the three breeds, Lab, Golden, and Chesapeake, have distinctive characteristics that more or less breed true. In fact, the individuals within the breeds often *do not* have a very high level of adherence to their publicized traits. And fads occur in which certain celebrated traits of one or another breed cause a surge in popularity--and production of many individuals lacking in those traits. Generalities concerning breed traits have only a loose application to the problem of securing a first-rate individual for your own training and use. Each dog is an individual, and will come to you with a unique set of characteristics not to be found in an identical combination in any other dog.

Picking up the Sunday paper and perusing the want ads for a puppy is probably a poor way to make a selection. It is a good idea to have a well-defined idea of what you want, based on actual observations of retrievers at work. Find individuals of the breed that adhere closely to the characteristics that you seek in a dog and wait for however long it takes to buy a puppy of that breeding. Try not to let someone else's idea of a "good dog" color your opinion of what you want. Human taste varies greatly, and what will satisfy another's taste and personality may be entirely wrong for you.

The worst errors you can make with your retriever generally proceed from applying someone else's standards to your dog. The retriever owners having the most fun are those who use their dogs within the range of the dogs' abilities, are realistic about those abilities and, when out hunting, concentrate on what the dog does right. Perpetual frustration is the lot of those who constantly seek someone else's standards to compare their dogs to. I hope this look at popular misconceptions helps you stay squarely in the former category. Happy hunting.