

Picking a Puppy

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In the 20 years we have been professionally training retrievers, one of the most common problems we encounter is poorly selected and started pups. People assume that any dog called a retriever will invariably perform the job. This is not always so. You wouldn't buy the first car you looked at. A hunting dog, like a vehicle, is an investment of time and dollars that will last many years, so why not go about purchasing a pup using the same step by step, logical process you would use, selecting the family car?

First decide which breed of retriever you want. Labrador Retrievers come in black, yellow and chocolate color. I like to put birdiness, training ability, and natural ability, at the top of my list of requirements, and color as secondary. The more you narrow down your requirements, as to size, color and sex, the longer it will take, to fill the bill. There are numerous black Labrador field champions, and therefore a very large gene pool to draw from, to produce good field dogs. There are less yellow field champions and very few chocolates. Therefore as breeders we often must compromise on field ability to get a particular color. If color is your first priority, it may take a little longer and be more difficult, to locate a litter with good field ability.

To acquire my first Labrador, I wrote seventeen letters stating my requirements, to people associated with field trial dogs. My research paid off. I received one reply in the form of a phone call from a breeder near by. They had a litter of eight-week-old blacks, and the lady helped me select a bitch pup. I didn't know anything about bloodlines at the time, but the breeder was very informative and the pedigree contained many field champions. I lucked out!

The bitch went on to become a Canadian Field Champion and Amateur Field Champion. I am still field trialing, breeding, and hunting over her descendants today! Look for a breeder that hunts the parent dogs or competes them in field trials, or hunting tests. The chances of a pup from such a litter becoming a successful bird dog are much greater. The costs of rearing a good dog are the same as for a poor one. Beware of unusually cheap puppies or good deals! Bargains are rare, in quality, field bred retrievers. Hunting and sporting dog magazines, the internet and recommendations from friends, are good sources to help you begin your search, for a reputable breeder. You may be able to attend a dog club event such as a retriever hunt test or field trial, to meet owners and breeders.

Write or telephone the breeders you have located and ask them to send you information such as pedigree, guarantee and whelping dates of upcoming litters. Ask about the conformation, temperament, field abilities and accomplishments of the parent dogs. Both parents of the litter should be verified free of hip dysplasia and hereditary eye disease by a veterinarian or

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certification by a national registry such as C.E.R.F. (Canine Eye Registration Foundation) and O.F.A. (Orthopedic Foundation for Animals). Most breeders will guarantee their puppies to be free of these hereditary disorders and to be healthy at the time of delivery, and for a short time after. Discuss the terms of the guarantee. Many breeders will not refund your money, and instead will replace the puppy, at another time with a pup from a different litter.

A knowledgeable breeder should be able to answer all your questions and supply the information you request. If they can't, keep looking. I wouldn't consider selecting a pup without first studying the pedigree. I wouldn't even consider breeding two dogs together without looking at their pedigrees. This would be like trying to bake a really great cake without a recipe. What are your chances of success? All American Kennel Club pedigrees will show the names of the dogs with the field titles they have earned, ie. FCH-AFCH (Field Champion - Amateur Field Champion) before the name, MH, SH, or JH, (Master Hunter, Senior Hunter, or Junior Hunter) after the name. The closer the field titled dogs occur on the pedigree, to the prospective pup ie. immediate parents or grandparents, the better. The breeder should be able to explain the entire pedigree to you. After all, he or she must have had a good reason for selecting these two particular dogs to breed together.

I would only consider a pup from a litter where both parents are fully trained, working, bird dogs, as well as having strong field pedigrees. A dog may have a wonderful pedigree but be a poor example of the breed himself, unable to be trained, and lacking in retrieving desire. It is therefore important, that the parents of the litter have both a strong field pedigree, and good abilities in the field themselves.

When you have located a prospective litter that meets your criteria, try to visit the kennel and meet the breeder, if they are in driving distance. You may be able to see the parent dogs and the litter, if it is born. The kennel facilities should be clean and the dogs healthy, and well conditioned. It is customary to put down a deposit to reserve a pup until it is ready to pick up. This can be done by phone or mail if the kennel is a long distance away. The breeder can ship the pup to you via air freight, when it is ready.

Picking an individual pup from the litter is the least important part of the whole purchase process. There has been much written on extensive, complicated testing procedures to determine the "pick of the litter"! I personally haven't found a puppy's reactions and behavior at six or seven weeks of age, to be of much significance in predicting future behavior.

I have even had people ask me to teach them how to pick the best pup out of a litter. The truth is, I haven't figured out a reliable way to do it, and probably never will! I once kept a bitch pup for myself because a bird feather drifted by her kennel gate and she barked and carried on to get it. I sold her litter mate, who slept through all her carrying on. The bitch was completely untrainable and her docile litter mate turned out to be a Field Champion. I get many letters telling me how well the last pick puppy turned out.

Do your research, and don't get in a rush. A dog is a long term investment. A quality pup, from a litter selected for good conformation, temperament, and field ability, is worth waiting for. Impulse buying, and hastily made decisions may be costly and frustrating in the long run. Find a breeder that is knowledgeable, reputable and has been in business for awhile. Put down a deposit, and the rest is up to a little luck and plenty of training.