

BREED PROFILE: - THE FLAT-COATED RETRIEVER

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If you are lucky enough to happen upon a group of Flat-Coated Retrievers at a local hunting test or dog show, you'll make your introduction to an extremely happy, enthusiastic and energetic breed. Flat-Coats, with their characteristic wagging tail and sparkling eyes, have an exuberance matched by few breeds. The breed has remained much less common than other popular retrievers such as the Labrador and the Golden Retriever. Still, under the watchful eye of a small group of dedicated breeders, the Flat-Coated Retriever has remained a truly versatile, multi-purpose breed that is equally at home in the field, obedience or show ring.

The Breed:

The breed standard for the Flat-Coated Retriever describes a moderately sized dog, with a preferred height of between 23 to 24 1/2 inches at the withers for dogs and 22 to 23 1/2 inches at the withers for bitches. Flat-Coats should carry a moderate coat, with legs and tail well feathered. Coat color can be either black or liver. According to the breed standard, the Flat-Coat has traditionally been described as showing "Power without lumber and raciness without weediness." A Flat-Coat's weight should be proportional to the dog's size, ideally in hard working condition, free of excess weight.

One of the most distinctive features of the Flat-Coat is its elegant head that, when viewed from the side, should give the impression of a one-piece, molded head with minimal stop. The dog should have an alert and kind expression, dark almond-shaped eyes set widely apart, and a well filled in fore-face. An elegant breed, owners are sometimes asked if their dogs are a type of setter, or "black Golden", however the breed is distinct, predating their blonde cousins by at least half a century.

Breed Background:

The Flat-Coated Retriever was developed and fixed as a breed in the mid to late 1800's in Britain. Originally known as wavy-coated retrievers, the breed likely descended from the St. John's Newfoundland (a smaller dog than the present day Newfoundland, and the progenitor of the Labrador Retriever breed), crossed with a variety of other breeds such as Collies and Setters.

Stabilizing the breed is credited to Mr. Sewallis Evelyn Shirley (1844-1904) who, at age 29, also founded the Kennel Club in Britain and became its first President and Chairman. Mr. Shirley was a noted all-breed judge, and sought to improve the wavy-coated retrievers and distinguish them from the completely unrelated curly-coated retrievers.

The Flat-Coated Retriever became a popular breed among gamekeepers in Britain, due to their excellent working ability. However, registrations peaked in the early 1920's and experienced a steady decline until the 1950's. A variety of reasons have been cited, including a progressive dominance by Labradors in field trials, the increasing popularity of Golden Retrievers, and the unfortunate intercession of two World Wars. A very small group of dedicated fanciers struggled to keep the breed viable during the Second World War, and Stanley L. O'Neill painstakingly worked to salvage and advance the breed.

One of the earliest Flat-Coats imported into the United States was Pewcroft Prefect, sent to Homer Downing of Ohio by O'Neill in 1953. In 1955, Downing imported a liver colored Flat-Coat bitch Atherbram Stella. The total population of Flat-Coats in the United States increased to nine in 1956 and, with the advent of two litters, the numbers rose to twenty-two in 1957. The breed's parent club in the United States, the Flat-Coated Retriever Society of America, Inc. (FCRSA), was subsequently formed in 1960. Currently, Flat-Coated Retriever registrations are ranked 100 out of 137 breeds with 446 dogs registered in 1994.

The Working Connection:

One thing that distinguishes the Flat-Coated Retriever from many other sporting breeds has been the refusal of the dedicated breeders to allow a split into separate field versus show lines. Preserving and promoting the breed's working ability is considered one of the highest priorities by most of the breed's guardians. It is felt that the characteristics that make the breed special and distinct can best be evaluated and advanced by preserving the working traits that are fundamental to the breed, breeding for mental and physical soundness and longevity. The breed was developed as a working retriever. In order to preserve the dual nature of the Flat-Coat, the working abilities of breeding stock should be tested each generation. The Flat-Coated Retriever should be a tireless and willing worker, biddable in nature, with an unequalled ability to locate fallen game.

Flat-Coated Retrievers have very successfully competed in hunting tests, obedience trials, tracking tests and, more recently, agility competitions. Evidence of the breed's multi-purpose nature is apparent when reviewing the number of titles awarded to Flat-Coats despite their relatively low numbers. In 1994 American Kennel Club (AKC) competition, Flat-Coats earned 99 obedience titles (8 at the UD level), 14 tracking titles and 63 hunting titles (5 at the master hunter level). During the same time period, 125 Flat-Coats earned their conformation championship title (CH). Not bad for a breed that has registered only approximately 450 dogs per year over the last ten years.

Breed Character and Training Considerations:

The Flat-Coated Retriever should always be a cheerful and willing worker, however he can also present a challenge to novice dog owners. The breed has an innate sense of fun, sometimes to the embarrassment or distress of their owners. Dr. Nancy Laughton, in her book *A Review Of The Flat-Coated Retriever*, characterizes the Flat-Coat as a canine Peter Pan. A mental image of a Flat-Coated Retriever should include a happy wagging tail, coupled with an attitude of joviality.

Flat-Coats should be introduced to training early. Quick to test their limits, the dogs will exploit opportunities for fun should they present themselves. An exuberant breed, it is not uncommon for Flat-Coats to attempt to greet visitors by jumping up and trying for a quick nose lick. Although perhaps cute, this isn't always appreciated, and can be a problem in homes with small children. While a Flat-Coat would never purposely injure a young child, seventy pounds of

bouncing enthusiasm can present its own set of risks. Even their ever wagging tails have been known to bowl over a toddler.

Training a Flat-Coat can be somewhat of a paradox. The breed is extremely intelligent, yet somewhat soft in nature. Flat-Coats respond best to positive training methods and can become shy and fearful if overly harsh methods are used. Puppies should be introduced to the basics of come, sit, stay, and down at a young age.

Flat-Coats maintain their independent, happy-go-lucky attitude throughout their lives. They should show both an aptitude and a willingness to work. They should have a kind, intelligent and stable temperament, and although they will likely announce visitors with a deep bark, they should show no signs of aggression towards strangers.

Health and Welfare:

The Flat-Coated Retriever is considered by many to be a generally healthy breed. While susceptible to the same diseases and infirmities as other breeds, dedicated breeders place the breed's health and soundness as the foremost consideration when planning their litters. The FCRSA recommends that all breeding stock be checked for hip dysplasia by the Orthopedic Foundation of America (OFA), a clearinghouse for hip and elbow disease, and that eyes be cleared annually by a board certified veterinary ophthalmologist.

Another potential orthopedic disease is patellar luxation. This is a condition where the kneecap slips off to the side of the femur. The severity of patellar luxation can range from mild to severe, with severe cases being potentially crippling to the dog. Breeders are encouraged to have all puppies examined for patellar luxation before being placed in new homes.

Cancer has also presented some challenges to Flat-Coat fanciers. As a group, breeders have become concerned over an apparent increase in the incidence of cancer. More research is needed to try to understand factors that may contribute to or exacerbate the onset of cancer. Towards that end, the FCRSA members have generously contributed to a research program with the goal of a greater understanding of cancer in Flat-Coats.

Finally, all Flat-Coats should receive regular veterinary care. Dogs that are active in the field can be exposed to ticks carrying lyme disease, and many breeders recommend precautionary vaccination against lyme disease. Heartworm medication should be taken as recommended.

Flat-Coats As Pets:

Properly trained and socialized, Flat-Coats are unparalleled as family pets. They have a perpetually cheery disposition, an undying loyalty, and are extremely affectionate. They have terrific temperaments, are excellent with children, and live to do things with their human families. Grooming requirements are low to moderate. The dogs are pretty much 'wash and wear', however, regular shedding is to be expected. Regular brushing, tidying of the feet and ears and an occasional bath are the only routine grooming that's necessary.

Flat-Coats are intelligent, exuberant and creative. Without proper outlets for their considerable energy, bored Flat-Coats may resort to digging in gardens, chewing, or nuisance barking. Flat-Coats do best in households that provide sufficient activities to challenge his considerable intellect. Ideally all Flat-Coats would have frequent excursions with their owners on hiking and hunting trips, but that is not always possible. Tracking, obedience, agility and fly-ball are other activities at which Flat-Coats have excelled. Flat-Coats thrive in environments where they are afforded a great deal of interaction with their human families. They are less happy when they are relegated to kennels. They can become excitable, frustrated, noisy or damaging including damage to themselves, and thus not a breed well suited to large numbers raised in kennel environments.

Above all, owners of Flat-Coats must possess a sense of humor as Flat-Coats delight in finding fun in all of their activities. If a potential owner expects blind obedience and unfailing precision each and every time, a Flat-Coat will not be their ideal choice. However, if the owner can maintain the same cheery attitude and optimistic outlook on life as their Flat-Coat, then the owner and breed are ideally matched.

Finding A Flat-Coat:

As with any breed, one of the most important things you can do when searching for a new puppy is to locate a breeder you like and trust. A breeder should become a source of information and support for the life of your dog. The FCRSA maintains a list of breeders who are willing to talk with prospective new owners about Flat-Coats. It's a good practice to talk with several breeders to discuss the objectives and goals in their breeding practice, but don't be surprised when the breeders ask you as many questions as you ask them. Breeders of Flat-Coated Retrievers are vitally interested in the life long welfare of their dogs.

Do not be surprised to experience some degree of difficulty in locating a Flat-Coat puppy. Since the breed is not well known, and advertising cannot guarantee puppy buyers, most breeders develop a waiting list before planning a breeding. Most good breeders spend considerable time in planning their litters, and frequently have entire litters placed in prospective homes even prior to undertaking the breeding.

Typically, a prospective puppy buyer will locate a breeder who is planning a future litter, and be interviewed for inclusion on their list of prospective new owners. Breeders will take an active interest in the plans you have for your puppy. Dedicated to preserving the working talents of the breed, and critically aware of the mischief a bored Flat-Coat can get into, breeders encourage, cajole and support new owners in introducing their Flat-Coats to a wide variety of activities. One recent puppy purchaser commented that they "started out in pursuit of a puppy and ended up acquiring a new lifestyle." However, it's a lifestyle unparalleled in love and devotion.

THE FLAT-COATED RETRIEVER IN BRIEF

Country of Origin:
England.

AKC Group:
Sporting.

Life Span:
10 -- 12 years

Color:
Solid Black or Solid Liver

Grooming:
Regular brushing, with occasional bathing
and trimming of ears and feet.

Size:
23 to 24 1/2 inches at the withers for dogs,
22 to 23 1/2 inches at the withers for bitches.

Activity Level:
Moderate to High.

Intelligence:
High.

Trainability:
Excellent, but early training important.

Good with children:
Yes, but breed can be very exuberant

Good with other pets:
Yes

Temperament:
Extremely friendly, enjoys life to the fullest.

Club:
The Flat-Coated Retriever Society of America, Inc.