

JUDGING THE FLAT-COATED RETRIEVER

By Kurt Anderson

The first impression a judge may get when judging the Flat-Coated Retriever is a ring full of exuberant dogs, all with tails wagging furiously. If judging a puppy class, the “happy and active demeanor” cited in the standard might often be perceived to be taken to new heights. It is the happy-go-lucky attitude of the Flat-Coat that many find so engaging and very much characteristic of the breed.

In judging, as in breeding, the breed standard should be the blue print for evaluation, and by necessity and design, many of the words in this article appear in the breed standard. The breed standard sets out the priorities for the breed: “The distinctive and most important features of the Flat-Coat are the silhouette (both moving and standing), smooth effortless movement, head type, coat and character.” This is preceded by the oft-cited

phrase “power without lumber and raciness without weediness”. Together, these two excerpts should form the basis for judging the Flat-Coat.

The Flat-Coat is very much still a working retriever and should be evaluated in that context. The dog should be fit and give the overall impression of a dog that could efficiently do a days work picking up in the field. As with most breeds,

first impressions are very important. As you stand across the ring and survey your class of Flat-Coats, you want to see dogs that have good substance without being coarse, and elegance

without being too fine, lacking in body or bone. Crucial to the overall appearance of the Flat-Coat is the distinctive “one-piece” head, which we will touch on in more detail later on. The ideal Flat-Coat would have a moderately long neck flowing into a level topline, a deep chest, reaching down to the elbows, well laid back shoulders, a



Female Heads



prominent brow and a long rib cage creating an underline with moderate tuck up. The Flat-Coat should never appear to be barrel chested nor should they have the extreme tuck up seen in some of the hound breeds. The tail should be carried happily and fairly straight as an extension from the topline. A “gay” or high tail carriage is to be faulted. A Flat-Coat that carries its tail down or tucked is non-typical and may be symptomatic of a temperament problem that should equally be faulted.

The Flat-Coat standard pays particular attention to the head, a critical component of breed type. Once again, in judging the breed, one must keep in mind the working heritage and purpose of the breed. The “adequate in size and strength to retrieve a large pheasant, duck or hare” describes a head needing sufficient length, depth and breadth of muzzle, including sufficient under jaw. Flat-Coats should never appear “snipey”. The Flat-Coat head should appear to be molded as “one-



piece", constructed with flat planes, without chiseling or dips between or beneath the eyes. A Flat-Coat should have a barely perceptible stop, a very slight rise between the eyes, though they should have enough of a slope to avoid the appearance of being "down-faced". Flat-Coats have what has been referred to as an "active eyebrow", which can at times give the impression of more stop than is actually there. Evaluation of the head must pay particular attention to this facet of the Flat-Coat head and expression. Flat-Coat eyes should be almond shaped, medium sized and dark brown on black dogs and hazel on liver Flat-Coats. Round and/or yellow eyes should be faulted. The ears on a Flat-Coat should be relatively small, laying close to the side of the head. Ears that are set too low (hound like) or too high should be faulted. Scissor bites are preferred but level is acceptable. Full dentition is not specified and as such it is not necessary to count teeth in the Flat-Coat.

Size matters. But how much? Although there is no size disqualification, the Flat-Coat standard calls for a preferred height for dogs between 23 and 24 ½ inches and for bitches between 22 and 23 ½ inches, with an allowed inch on either side. Whereas finding an adult male Flat-Coat measuring 23 inches would be a rarity, finding dogs reaching the recommended upper limit or taller is not uncommon. Dogs falling outside the recommended ranges should be considered impractical for the types of work for which the



Flat-Coat was developed. All other things being equal, a moderate sized dog falling within the desired range should be favored.

Unlike the Golden Retriever standard, which specifies a ratio of 12:11, the Flat-Coated Retriever standard only specifies that the length of the body from the point of the shoulder to the rearmost projection of the upper thigh should be slightly more than the height at the withers. Still one must remember that the Flat-Coat is not a square breed and should never be cobby. One structural component that can affect both the height and length is the lay back of the shoulder blades. A dog with upright shoulders will stand taller with a corresponding reduction in length when compared to a properly constructed specimen of otherwise similar measurements.

Although it has been said that if it gets down to a dog's feet to be the deciding factor between two dogs, then you have two pretty good dogs. However, feet are of prime importance in a hunting retriever. Ralph Waldo Emerson once said "power and speed be hands and feet." This is no less true for the Flat-Coat. Feet should be thickly padded with well-arched toes. All too common are thin, flat feet, which will not stand up to the work the retriever

is expected to do. Dewclaws on the front legs are optional and do not exist on the hind legs.

Coat is another area where variation is frequently seen and often misunderstood; there can be variation in length, and in the amount of texture or wave. The standard calls for a "coat is of moderate length, density and fullness, with a high luster. The ideal coat is straight and flat lying. A slight waviness is permissible but the coat is not curly, wooly, short, silky or fluffy". The section on coat ends by stating "the Flat-Coat is shown with as natural a coat as possible and must not be penalized for lack of trimming, as long as the coat is clean and well brushed. Tidying of ears, feet, underline and tip of tail is acceptable. Whiskers serve a specific function and it is preferred that they not be trimmed. Shaving or barbering of the head, neck or body coat must be severely penalized." These guidelines allow for a wide range of what a judge might see in the show ring. Undercoat is not mentioned in the standard and frequently dogs will have no apparent undercoat. This is not to be faulted. Excess coat should be considered as faulty as insufficient coat. Although not uncommon in Europe, the American standard specifically prohibits shaving or





barbering of the head, neck or body coat, which could lead to the appearance of a more pronounced fore chest.

A fit, well constructed Flat-Coat's movement should be a thing of beauty, covering ground efficiently without any wasted movement or choppiness. The dog should maintain its level topline while on the move. The standard seems to place emphasis on side movement over coming and going and the breed should be gaited at a moderate speed on a loose lead. A personal preference is to ask the handler to let the dog free stand upon return from a gaiting pattern, allowing observation of natural stance and balance.

Saving perhaps the most important for the end, no discussion of evaluating Flat-

Coats is complete without a discussion of temperament. The standard states "character is a primary and outstanding asset of the Flat-Coat". The standard goes on to remark, "in competition the Flat-Coat demonstrates stability- and a desire to please with a confident, happy and outgoing attitude character-

ized by a wagging tail. Nervous, hyperactive, apathetic, shy or obstinate behavior is undesirable." Unprovoked aggressive behavior toward people or animals is totally unacceptable and the dog should immediately be excused from the ring.

In summary, a judge should be delighted to find a moderate, athletic and cheerful Flat-Coat exhibiting the qualities described above. Please keep in mind the history and purposeful breeding that has kept the Flat-

Coated Retriever a true "multi-purpose" retriever and evaluate your entry with both form and function in mind. ■



Male Heads

Biography: Kurt D. Anderson

Kurt's involvement in purebred dogs began in 1974 with the purchase of our first retriever, a Golden, Retriever. We purchased our first Flat-Coated Retriever in 1985. Since then I have bred, owned or handled in excess of 20 AKC Champions, and many of which have or held titles in field, obedience and agility. Our dogs have won multiple national specialties in Canada and have won multiple supported entries and boosters in both the U.S. and Canada.

Past President and current Delegate to the American Kennel Club for the Flat-Coated Retriever Society of America, Kurt is approved to judge Flat-Coats, Goldens, Labrador and Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retrievers as well as Junior Showmanship.