

The "Forever" Adolescent Flat-Coat

By Sally J. Terroux (reprinted with permission)

Flat-Coats are slow maturing dogs (usually 3 to 5 years), but even in the "mature" Flat-Coat there usually remains a spark of joy and mischief. One of the leading authorities on the breed, Dr. Nancy Laughton of Great Britain, refers to the Flat-Coat as a canine Peter Pan. This is an endearing quality for Flat-Coat fans when the 10-year-old Flat-Coat is still playful and eager to hunt. It is not so admired by the pet owner whose Flat-Coat gets into some mischief at 6, 8 or 10 years of age when the owner is sure "he knew better."

In our country of "disposable" dogs, many pet owners who buy a cute, promising puppy unreasonably expect mature behavior when the puppy has attained adult height. At that time, 8 or 9 months of age, the puppy is at an early stage of adolescence, easily the most difficult state of life for any animal. At that time, the dependent, well-behaved puppy becomes curious, investigative, adventuresome, peer-oriented and independent. Just when the owner is expecting maturity, the puppy becomes more trouble than he has ever been. More dogs are discarded during adolescence than at any other stage of life.

This causes even more than the usual problems for the Flat-Coat because he has a particularly lengthy adolescence. Most people interested in getting a Flat-Coat are primarily interested in having something that looks rare or different, and naturally expect the Flat-Coat to act pretty much like the more popular breeds of retrievers. In some respects they do, but in many they do not.

There are reasons why the breed is rare. The Flat-Coat is not a breed that suits everyone. The Flat-Coat is a very natural breed and likes to do natural things. That can mean digging, chewing, eating feces, rolling in manure and mud puddles, and barking when confined if he doesn't jump over the fence to entertain himself. The Flat-Coat is not extremely destructive. I don't get reports of Flat-Coats tearing down draperies and demolishing sofas. They carry or chew on what's handy or can be eaten or smells good, such as articles that smell like the owner, laundry, children's toys, magazine and book bindings, trash, tissue, plastic and wood. The Flat-Coat doesn't chew excessively. He leaves things alone long enough for you to think he has grown up and trustworthy and then finds something irresistible. The hit or miss or shortcut training methods that are effective on many breeds leave holes the Flat-Coat bounds happily through. And he matures very slowly. Many never completely mature. They are genetically "frozen" in a child-like stage that keeps them dependent, playful and friendly, like eternal puppies. This allows the Flat-Coat to bark a warning like a watchdog puppy, but still be friendly to all living things.

The very characteristics that make the Flat-Coat special to those of us who love him dearly are the same traits that make him a nuisance to a typical dog owning family. The Flat-Coat is a thinking dog. He want to please but he is always looking for the exception to the rule. That is, in part, what makes him an exceptional hunting dog. But even there he is different. Other retrievers retrieve for the joy of retrieving. If the Flat-Coat is not both bonded and motivated to work for the handler, he will work for himself, or perhaps not at all. He is birdy and will find birds, but whether he stays within gun range and brings downed birds back or takes direction will depend on the relationship he has with his handler.

Is confinement to a "safe" area the answer for the Flat-Coat growing up? It can be as long as the Flat-Coat has had enough attention and exercise before being confined, and is greeted calmly to again spend personal time with the family. But the Flat-Coat who is separated too much from the owner, like all night as well as all day, will develop an extreme amount of anxiety, making life difficult for his family as well as for himself. Flat-Coats are not good backyard or kennel dogs, but they are very rewarding dogs for families who enjoy an affectionate, friendly dog who is active mentally as well as physically.