

The Working Dog Connection

By Sally J. Terroux (reprinted with permission)

I am frequently asked why I stress breeding for a working retriever and prefer to sell puppies as family companion hunting dogs when I personally no longer hunt.

Many sporting breeds became popular as pets because of the temperament, soundness, stamina and longevity that made them responsive and practical working animals. If we look at the sporting breeds that are still bred for work (hunting, not field trials or hunt testing), we still see these attributes.

Think about the breeds that are now bred mostly for show and pet, and seldom or never for hunting. We have breeds that were once charming and hardy now wetting submissively, yapping nervously, biting out of overprotectiveness, fear biting, even biting the owner. We have all kinds of inherited physical problems and shorter life span. No one would have purposely done all this to any breed, but it has happened. When breeders stopped breeding for the practical working animal, they lost the very character and hardiness that had attracted them to the breed in the first place.



What about the Flat-Coat? I had a male Flat-Coat from Scotland who died at 14 years of age. His dam earned her keep or the family would not have been able to afford to keep her. Her sire was a gamekeeper's dog who also earned his keep. They were both kept as family companions as well as working dogs, and were better family companions because they were bred for work. They were calm and cooperative, good natured, hardy and long-lived, because that's what a working retriever needs to be.

Right now more Flat-Coats are being used as show dogs and pets than working dogs. That does not, in itself, affect the breed. What does affect the breed is what breeders do. A breeder is any person who breeds a litter of puppies. Even one litter of puppies affects the breed. Every breeder has a responsibility. The welfare of the breed is in his or her hands. Any puppy sold with American Kennel Club full registration papers can be bred, regardless of the buyer's promised intentions to spay or neuter. When people raise a puppy they are pleased with, they feel inclined to change their minds and breed even though they previously agreed not to breed. Generally, people who are breeding only once do not feel that what they do affects the breed. Every litter affects the breed. Every puppy sold with full AKC papers has the potential for affecting the breed. Over 50% of the puppies in the United States are produced by pet owners who never breed a second litter. Pet owners who breed have more of an affect on breeds than puppy mills or breeders.

It is my personal opinion that there is no show dog beautiful enough, nor field trial dog great enough, to warrant breeding toward physical or mental unsoundness. I also feel that a breed is better off with a good specimen being neutered than with a bad specimen being bred. In other words, when in doubt about the quality of a puppy, either keep or co-own it to keep control over whether or not it is bred, or sell as pet quality to be neutered or spayed. When selling a breeding quality puppy with full AKC papers, be sure the puppy buyer is going to follow your standards and ethics when breeding. Discuss it before selling the puppy. Preferably, co-own the puppy with a strong contract.

I've talked with many fanciers who got into Flat-Coats because the breed they had been involved in developed so many problems. Let's not let it happen to Flat-Coats. Breeding for a mentally and physically sound hunting retriever has given us the attributes we enjoy in the breed. Continuing in that tradition will protect our breed from deterioration.