

The Dual Purpose Dog A Breeders Viewpoint

by Nicky Bissell

Originally published in the AKC Gazette, October 1974, reprinted by permission

Once upon a time (as all good fairy stories begin) all dogs had a purpose. The Pointer pointed, the Springer sprang its game, the Otter Hound hunted otter and the terriers went to ground. How far the dog world has gone from that day when the owners of the working breeds sat down and put a description of their breeds on paper!

Today, in this country, a dog meeting the standards of both utility and beauty is a rarity, even though the basic standards remain much the same as they were in the beginning. The few breeds that can boast an appreciable number of working-show type animals are notably the German Shorthair Pointer, the Brittany Spaniel and the various retrievers.

Devotees of these breeds, as well as those of other breeds that participate in field trials, face different problems than the breeders of show dogs.

If you are a serious breeder of show dogs you recognize the problems involved in trying to consistently breed puppies that will develop into championship material and the even greater difficulty in choosing the right combination to produce the topflight animal destined for Group and Best in Show wins. Imagine, if you will, the problems faced by the breeder of dogs destined for competition in field trials. Where the show breeder is mainly concerned with physical characteristics, mostly things he can put a yardstick on, field breeders must battle primarily with intangibles. Their prime consideration is to keep the breed functional. In quest of this goal they must watch a lot of characteristics that perhaps are not of great importance to the show breeder. All field breeders who have the good of their breed at heart must also keep in mind that their "culls" are going to go to average hunters and will represent their breed to the eyes of the general public. If you add to this an effort to keep breed type you have tripled the problems confronting the average show breeder.

Field breeders give their first consideration to learning ability. Whether a pup is destined to be a field trial performer or whether its function is to be someone's gundog, it must have intelligence. Without plenty of brains no pup can make the grade. Equally undesirable are the stupid and the "super-intelligent" that lack the will to please their masters. The stupid dog will waste its trainer's valuable time. If it can't learn to take directions easily and can't think rapidly in a tight spot, it is never going to be more than a mediocre trial prospect or hunter. The "super-intelligent" is extremely frustrating for it figures means of circumventing the trainer's methods in order to do things the way it wants them done. This is the one frequently spoken of as "smarter than the trainer." This is the one that quickly becomes "field-trial wise," behaving perfectly in training but doing as it pleases in trials. Call this dog what you will, "super-intelligent" or "intelligent" without the will to please, it's an undesirable animal.

Along with intelligence, temperament affects learning ability. Dogs that win big stakes frequently border on the hyperactive. They have the go-go-go that gets them there first. They are the ones that appear to be on the verge of busting loose but stay on the edge of control – the eye-catchers. Some breeders and trainers prefer more stable dependable dogs. These solid dogs may not win the big one as frequently, but they are always near the top. The breeder quickly learns the value of stable temperament. Shy or spooky animals are avoided. Preference is given to those that can take all kinds of distractions in stride.

With the large number of dogs competing today, it is no longer probable that a winner can be made from dogs that are merely mechanically perfect. This was frequently the case in the past.

Today's breeders must put a great deal of accent on – call it what you will – style, class, desire, speed. It's that intangible that, if you have the eye, you recognize in little Olga Korbut, in Jack Nicklaus, in Secretariat. It's that special something that makes one dog stand above the rest. It's that extra burst of speed and the spectacular leap when the retriever hits the water, the boldness with which the Springer puts the bird to flight, the beautiful gait of the Pointer. It's what you have to have to win today and breeders rank it among their prime concern.

Along with the basic three, learning ability, good temperament and class, breeders have to strive for all the other intangibles of their particular breed. In retrievers, breeders look for excellent eyesight to mark fallen birds and a great love of water. In the Springer one looks for the boldness to push the running bird into the air. In the pointing dog one looks for a free-flowing running style and a strong point instinct. In the hounds a good voice is of importance.

In most breeds nose is of great concern. When field breeders speak of nose they refer, not to its color and shape, but to scenting powers. Of equal importance to the trialer or the hunter is the best possible nose. There is so little known about the dog's scenting powers; why some get turned on by birds, others by rabbits; why some are unable to distinguish between ground scent (trails) and body scent. Most of this is a mystery to breeders but they know that a keen nose is desirable. "Nose" must be accompanied by intelligence in order to make the most of it.

Next in importance to the field breeder are the physical aspects of the dog. Here one can relate to show breeders as they want many things in common. No field dog can be considered desirable unless it is sound. Good strong, straight legs and correct angulation contribute to drive and an attractive gait. An unsound dog will lack stamina. Proper tails, feet, and coats are of prime importance to the field breeder. Even head conformation is important. In retriever breeds the mouth needs to be large enough to carry a bird, the neck must be strong enough to carry the weight. Eyelids must be tight enough to keep out weed seeds and debris. Even if there were no written standard the field breeder would automatically tend toward a sound animal eliminating from breeding stock as nonfunctional, those with unsound mouths, unsound hips, poor legs, and bad bodies.

Field and show breeders will probably be furthest apart in overall size, size of bone, heaviness of head and amount of coat. Accent in the field will be on the lighter weight dog that can cover ground faster. The heavier boned specimens, while more eye-filling in the show ring, tend to be slower and more methodical field workers. It follows that the heavier bone will call for a larger head for balance in the show ring. The more profuse the coat, carefully nurtured by the show breeder, is of little practical value to the field breeder. Correct texture should be important to both. In the longer coated breeds most field dogs carry less coat than their bench counterparts, though many would undoubtedly be heavier coated if the dogs were confined and not allowed to run the fields.

Field and show people can continue to go their separate ways and produce the beautiful beast or working animal. Either is being shortsighted if they do not make themselves aware of what the other half of the doggie world is doing. A pleasant surprise may be in store for their goals are not that far apart. The field breeder who breeds entirely for function, producing animals that cannot even be recognized as the breed that they are, is not truly concerned about their breed. Show breeders who forget their breed has a practical use are just as much at fault. They would benefit their breed, as well as help their own disposal of non-show quality pups, if they kept working ability in their strain. The end result would be puppy buyers happy to obtain a pup with which they can hunt and a dog happy to perform the duty for which it was bred.

The show breeder probably won't breed a field champion. Neither will the field breeder breed a lot of show champions, but, by each group being aware of the other's purposes, the breed will be strengthened and, maybe, a little improved. Remember that show dogs *can* hunt and hunting dogs *can* show. Ask that elite group who are privileged to own a Dual (Field and Show) Champion and they will tell you of the special fulfillment there is in doing the almost impossible.