

A Primer on Picking a Gundog Puppy

I have known hunters that always pick a gundog pup with a black mouth, or one that has three, four or five hairs growing out of a mole, or one that will submit while laying it on it's back. Delmar Smith claimed there are more champions that started life as a "cull" than the "pick" and could prove it. I cannot tell you if any of these methods will work or if Smith was right but the two best dogs we have ever owned were leftovers from large litters that the breeder was happy to unload, and one had a black mouth and other had three and four hairs on his cheek moles.

All unexplained phenomena aside, unless you have a crystal ball picking a pup is like rolling dice and the best you can do is improve the odds by loading the dice. The way to load the die is to research pedigrees and breeders. While imperfect and you'll probably end up paying a little more, you'll get an average or above average pup nearly every time.

Researching the pedigree does not mean taking the breeders word for it that: "both parents are good hunting and family dogs from champion stock". Whenever I read those lines in the paper I am reminded of Jim who bred Bubba. Now Bubba fought at the drop of a hat, didn't like children, was larger than the breed standard, and so dysplastic he was virtually three legged. When I asked Jim why he bred Bubba he responded that Bubba was the greatest hunting and family dog he had ever known, which was true, as Bubba was the only hunting dog Jim had ever owned and Jim loved him like a son.

The first step is to start contacting breeders and getting copies of pedigrees from expected future breeding(s). On the pedigree the performance and conformation titles will be included with the dog's name. A breeders pedigree includes parents, grandparents and great grandparents and on some g-great grandparents. If an abbreviated title like CH, GRCH, FCH, CHF, JH, MH, TAN, HUNT, GUN, TR, NA, UPT, UT, or VC isn't within that family record I would not call the pups from proven or champion bloodlines anymore than I could say I was descended from the King of Hungary. Today, most breeders have their dog's pedigrees on a web site making this task easy.

It is important to know what the abbreviations mean as some are for conformation, some are for tests, some are for walking trials and some are for big running dogs you hunt from horseback. While hunting from horseback sounds exciting, most folks don't own a horse which is why

NAVHDA, NASTR UKC, and AKC hunt tests and trials have become popular.

The pinnacle of these for the versatile dog is NAVHDA whose titles abbreviations are NA, UPT, UT and VC. In NAVHDA the dog must be obedient and perform for the walking hunter on both land and water. But all of these groups have their place, and to be a GUN, TR, CHF, FCH or GRCHF in any of these venues identifies a dog with a liberal portion of the right stuff.

Titles and title abbreviations vary between registries and you can find out what each of them means by contacting the appropriate registry, researching them on the web, or by contacting the breeder.

As a side note, NAVHDA, UKC, and NASTR have great events for kids, puppies, adults and dogs at all developmental stages and ages to come and improve your pet and your handling skills while having a great time. They are full of, and staged by, the best people in the world – dog people.

The more titles and the closer to the pup the title(s) resides on the pedigree the more likely the traits will be passed on. Ideally one or both parents will have shown style, skill, and trainability recognized by an unbiased test or competition. Relying on Jim's assessment of a great hunting dog is risky.

A final word on pedigrees “as in AKC registered pups” is that without a reputable breeder they do not promise much at all. The first AKC registered dog I every paid for was a Springer Spaniel. The Sire was supposedly General Star, a locally known performer. I have no idea if General Star ever visited the breeder's kennel, but if he did Lassie got there first, and while the mutt I bought was cute he was not a Springer. He went to a good home and I was out 150 bucks, a leash, a dog dish, two months of training time, and some of my innocence.

The second thing to research is the conformation and hip health of the dogs to be bred. The Sire and Dame should both be certified hip dysplasia free, to have normal eyes, teeth, coat, and color for the breed. They should be within the breed standard for weight, length and height for the respective sexes. While this will not guarantee that a pup will not have a genetic defeat or fall outside of the standard when an adult, it goes a long way to improving the odds.

Additionally most reputable breeders will offer a discount or a full refund on a pup that has a hereditary abnormality that prevents it from performing the tasks it was bred for. This does not mean a slightly dysplastic dog or one that is under or overshot, that will still hunt his or her whole life (what they are bred for) would be replaced because it is not breeding material (what they are not bred for), however one would expect to be discounted for a dog that suffers chronic discomfort that limits mobility or shortens it's life span by half or more.

Once you have settled on a kennel and breeding, you should contact the breeder to see the Sire and Dame. Much can be learned from watching them run through a few basic tasks.

A lot of times a breeder does not own the stud and you will have to settle for watching the Dame. Do not let the breeder tell you his female can't move around because she is pregnant or nursing. We exercise ours lightly for short time-periods right up until they are ready to whelp. Obviously care must be taken, but to run around the back yard and fetch a couple bumpers will not hurt her. The same goes if she is nursing. If the breeder is reluctant to show you either the Sire or Dame run around a little get suspicious. Here at Coteau Kennels we love showing off our dogs.

You want a breeder who takes the time to play with and socialize the puppies, a breeder who will introduce the pups to noise in the safety of the pack and familiar surroundings. You want to make sure that at the proper times the puppies will get their shots, worming, tails docked and dewclaws removed and that all the paper work for registration(s) is in order.

Once you have done all of that and everything checks out, put your money down and reserve your place in the pick. The usual way is first reservation received gets first pick and sequential from there after. When your turn comes you can look for one with a black mouth, or three, four or even five hairs on a mole, flip them over and see if any faint, or wait to see which is the last one picked, but my method is to take the best looking one as I already know what's inside and that's what counts.