

Redlion Chesapeakes & Labradors

Dogs for hunting, competition and family

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The Chesapeake Bay Retriever Vivacious & Versatile

By Sharon Pflaumer ~ Dog World- October 1999

Many characterize it as the ultimate sporting dog-the Cadillac of retrievers. For unlike some sporting breeds today that have become more show dogs than workers, Chesapeake Bay Retrievers still are capable of excelling in the field as well as in the ring. However, the characteristics that distinguish it aren't limited to fieldwork and conformation only. Performance events such as agility, fly ball, tracking and obedience are right up its alley, and law enforcement bomb and drug detection almost are second nature to this breed due to its sensitive nose. It is a gentle therapy dog that also makes a terrific family pet because it loves children. And should the need for an intimidating watchdog arise, it has plenty of grit. No matter what the challenge, it seems this incredible dog is up to it. The Chesapeake Bay Retriever, or Chessie as it is known by breed fanciers, is a paragon of canine versatility.

History Of An Outstanding Retriever

Theories about the Chessie's development are as numerous and varied as the breed's talents. Beyond the fact it descended from the Newfoundland, there is much disagreement about its history. For example, one theory traces Chessie trances try to two Newfoundlands aboard a vessel that ran aground near an estate called Walnut Grove in the early 1800s. The ship's captain gave the dogs to John Law, the estate's owner.

Law is said to have crossbred the Newfoundlands to Coonhounds and Foxhounds. Here, "Foxhound" refers to the old Southern style of Foxhound that actually more closely resembled the Bloodhound than the modern-day American Foxhound. The theoretical Foxhound infusions are said to be responsible for the Chessie's superior scenting ability, which allows it to locate dead or wounded birds and distinguishes it from other retrievers.

Another theory attributes Chessie ancestry to two Newfoundland puppies owned by the captain of a British brig. When bound for Poole, England, in 1807, it ran aground off the coast of Maryland. The pups, along with the ship's codfish cargo and the inebriated crew responsible for the brig's distress, were rescued by *The Canton*, a nearby vessel. Law-in this theory one of the rescuers-gave the bitch, Canton, to Dr. James Stewart of Sparrows Point and the dog, Sailor, to John Mercer of West River.

Canton and Sailor are said to have gained such outstanding reputations as retrievers when they matured, many were eager to crossbreed their dogs to them. According to "The Complete Dog Book: Official Publication of the American Kennel Club," their out crossings to the Flat-Coated and Curly-Coated Retrievers probably were the most influential in the development of the breed.

According to Diane, editor and co-author of the American Chesapeake Club's latest edition of the book "The Chesapeake Bay Retriever," however, there is no documentation of cross breedings to Coat or Curly-Coated Retrievers. Rather, she credits infusions of the Irish Water Spaniel (commonly used in the United States in the 1800s) and the Coonhound as being most significant. In the case of the latter, however, the AKC's book again differs in that it specifically states there is no trace of hound in the breed.

There are two additional theories regarding supposed infusions. One erroneously asserts that English Otterhound was influential in the breed's development, while the other-which is nothing more than a myth - claims the Chessie sprang from a crossbreeding between a Newfoundland and a marsh otter! This myth is based on the fact the Chessie has webbed feet.

(Interestingly, the Chessie was known as the Otter Dog at one point in its history. Other early names include the Winchester Ducking Dog, the Chesapeake Bay Duck Dog and the Bay Duck Dog.) Whatever the reality of Chessie 'ancestry, it was a well established breed that bred true to type by the time of the Civil War. From then on, its popularity gradually spread nationwide. The AKC registered the breed in 1878, and in 1998 4,685 Chessies were registered, ranking it 42nd out of 146 AKC-recognized breeds. Thirty years later, the ACC was formed, which was the first AKC parent club established to be devoted to a retrieving breed.

Some Early Differences

Another subject of debate regarding the Chessie's development is that of coat color. Some sources believe

that, in the days of its early development, it was bred only in dark brown, shading into reddish sedge. According to them, dead grass, a favorite color in the Midwest, was written into the standard at a later date. Diane disagrees, however. "Early breeders bred dogs in all colors. While dead grass was preferred in the Midwest, it occurred in the East as early as the 1860s."

Authorities do agree that there were two other differences between early and modern-day specimens. In the past, heads were more wedge-shaped, and coats were longer and thicker. As for the coat, fine, dense, woolly undercoats and short, harsh, wavy outer coats-presently no longer than 1 1/2 inches is allowable-were and still are highly desirable because they insulate dogs from the frigid water in which they often retrieve downed waterfowl. The oiliness of the outer coat aids in its quick drying time.

The Chessie speedily swims through rough, heavy water due to its great strength, which arises from its large, powerful size. Males stand between 23 inches and 26 inches and weigh 65 pounds to 80 pounds, while females stand 21 inches to 24 inches and weigh 55 pounds to 70 pounds. (Although the breed is relatively large in size, it enjoys a long life span: between 12 and 14 years on the average.) The Chessie's coat can be any color of brown, sedge or dead grass, but the color should be solid and should closely match its working surroundings. The two pups on the left are brown, the two in the middle are dark brown and the two on the right are dead grass.

To say the Chessie is extremely devoted to its owner actually may be an understatement! "Chessies are one-family, or even more often one-person, dogs," Darlene says. "They stick to their owners like glue, following them from room to room." Darlene is the ACC's public education coordinator as well as a certified evaluator for Therapy Dogs International. In addition to having earned advanced obedience titles on her dogs, she teaches obedience and agility classes. She and her husband, Kent, who is a regional director for the ACC, also have earned Working Dog certificates. (Note: The ACC issues Working Dog, Working Dog Excellent and Working Dog Qualified certificates to dogs that pass retrieving tests on land and in the water.) Unfortunately, the intensity of the breed's attachment to its owner sometimes gives rise to separation anxiety, which

The Charismatic Chessie

It seems that everything about the Chessie is grand in scope: its working ability, its size and its personality. When asked to characterize members - ""of the breed, Diane states they are "extremely devoted, incredibly intelligent, very determined and protective of their homes and property."

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Unfortunately, the intensity of the breed's attachment to its owner sometimes gives rise to separation anxiety, which may affect dogs not only when they are left home alone but sometimes even in the ring. Darlene cites the example of one of her bitches that initially had a problem with advanced level obedience work because it required Darlene to be out of sight briefly during the Long Down exercise. This same bitch destroyed most of the books in Darlene's bedroom one day when she was gone. As a corrective measure, Darlene made her retrieve every single shred of paper. Although many breeds never would connect the punishment with the crime, Darlene's bitch did. She never again destroyed anything in Darlene's absence. Because the breed can be destructive, Diane recommends puppies to be crated when owners are gone. "Puppies should never be left alone while confined in a kitchen or bathroom. They chew everything-table legs, cabinets, molding," she explains. However, "After most dogs reach maturity around 2 years of age, they can be gradually conditioned to being home alone and loose in the house. When I'm gone, I always leave my dogs' toy box open so they have things to play with."

A Quick Study

Keeping the breed busy also is important because Chessie fanciers say the breed is so smart, it "thinks." "They never perform automatically," Darlene notes. "Before they do anything, they think about it first." Unfortunately, this high intelligence often is confused with hardheadedness. Diane and Darlene insist, however, the Chessie is not stubborn and instead believe improper owner handling causes behavior problems. "Because Chessies are very bright, they pick things up quickly. That means owners must be careful about shaping their pups' experiences from the moment they get them, or their dogs will learn wrong ways of behaving. It's far more difficult to retrain Chessies than to properly train them in the first place," Diane explains. "The best way to avoid trouble is to never allow a puppy to do anything he won't be allowed to do as an adult."

A resolute retriever, the Chessie is characterized as being very determined because it will stick to a task until it is completed. This tenacity is the byproduct of being developed to retrieve in tough conditions (Like, in rough, heavy, ice- or snow-packed water). Because the breed tends to have a dominant personality in addition to its determination, it easily can get out of hand. "Owners must be alpha. If they don't assume the role of leader, their dogs are soon beyond their control," Darlene emphasizes. "Chessies like to test their owners. It's as if they're saying, 'Come on-make me do it.' It's times like these that owners must grab their dog by the collar and say, 'You're going to do it my way,' and then make the dog do whatever he failed to. If the dog didn't drop into a Down or Sit on command, the owner must physically put the dog into position." This is no small task when one considers the height and weight of a mature member of the breed. "Corrections need to be consistent and firmer than those suitable for many other breeds," Diane adds. "And, when dogs are corrected, owners must be certain they get the point."

There is one additional training tactic, however-an exception to the tougher correction rule. "Scolding them and then ignoring them after they misbehave is effective because their feelings are easily hurt," she continues. Obedience training is another way to reinforce the owner's role as leader. Because the Chessie needs firm handling, it should be obedience trained with a choke rather than a buckle collar. In this instance, Diane says, jerk-and-release-type corrections made with a leash attached to a choke collar work well. Although the Chessie can be a challenge to train, that does not mean food and/or intermittent retrieving games should not be used as rewards during training. In fact, the perfect training mix seems to be a combination of firm handling and positive reinforcement methods. (Note: According to Diane, games of tug of war should be avoided. They teach dogs not to release objects and thus destroy the breed's usefulness as a retriever.)

Protective Of Home And Property

All of your initial obedience efforts can produce a companion with many attributes. One of them is the breed's instinct to protect, which harkens back to one of its historical roles. After retrieving downed waterfowl, dogs were left aboard boats to guard them while hunters peddled their game in local pubs. Here again, this instinct can become problematic if owners fail to assume the role of leader. Diane believes that because protective behavior typically does not show up in young pups, owners may not be prepared to deal with it when it does arise, and it can get out of hand. "Puppies are deceiving. They don't act protective. Protective impulses don't emerge until dogs are between 9 months and 1 year of age," Diane says.

But, when protective impulses do arise, the Chessie is a force with which to be reckoned. In addition to its owner, the Chessie is protective of what it perceives as its territory: its owner's house, car, boat, etc. Although the breed will bite only if it feels truly threatened, it nonetheless can be very intimidating. Diane relates a story of a plumber who came to work at her house recently:

"The plumber came and went in and out of our house several times to get supplies and pieces of equipment he needed. After a while and without my knowing it, my husband let our dogs out. All of a sudden, the plumber disappeared! When I went outside to look for him, I found him standing on the porch with the dogs barking at him from the bottom of the steps. They were barking their 'a stranger is here' bark. The plumber was reluctant to leave the porch, and I couldn't blame him."

A Low-Impact Workout Required

Although the Chessie has some personality traits that require owners to put forth extra effort in the area of obedience training, the breed is not a demanding one in terms of exercise needed. In fact, although some sporting breeds are endlessly active and thus difficult to live with when they're kept as pets, "Chessies make

great house dogs because they're very quiet in the home. If owners spend a lot of time relaxing or watching TV, Chessies will, too, because they love to be with them," Darlene says. According to her, dogs nonetheless need between 30 and 60 minutes of retrieving daily (or an equivalent amount of vigorous activity doing something else). Diane believes they can get by with a bit less: "Fifteen to 20 minutes of ball retrieving or 20 to 30 minutes of walking daily is sufficient."

Obviously, the amount needed varies slightly depending upon the age, health and physical condition of the individual dog. Further, dogs bred by breeders who emphasize field ability are going to be more active, have greater endurance and, therefore, require more exercise.

Sufficient exercise is an important factor in maintaining proper weight, because the Chessie is a large, heavy-boned breed subject to varying degrees of hip dysplasia. But whether they are affected by hip dysplasia or not, dogs kept at a healthy weight get around better and have less intense problems with arthritis as they age.

Genetic Anomalies

Hip dysplasia is not the breeds only inherited health concern. In addition, Chessies are subject to some eye and skin disorders: progressive retinal atrophy, entropion, cataract and eczema. The following is a brief description of each.

Hip dysplasia is a painful malformation of the hip joint socket that often interferes with mobility. Breeding stock should be screened for it at 2 years of age and listed with the Orthopedic Foundation for Animals. Progressive retinal atrophy is a condition that gradually results in blindness due to insufficient blood supply to the retina. Entropion is a condition, in which the eyelid margin is inverted, or rolls under, and thps rubs against the cornea of the eye. It correctable through surgery.

Juvenile cataract (the most common among the various types of cataract affecting the breed) is a condition so named due to the age of onset and is characterized by a triangular-shaped opacity. Von the eye's lens that results in visual impairment. As is the case with hip dysplasia, breeding stock should be screened for PRA, entropion and cataract, and it should be registered with the Canine Eye Registration Foundation, which maintains a registry of dogs clear of inheritable eye diseases.

Note: Thanks to the research of Dr. Gustavo Aguirre at Cornell University, a genetic test for the Chessie that identifies carriers, affected dogs and those clear of PRA became available in May 1999.

Eczema is a condition in which skin is dry and flaky, but it usually can be controlled with diet. Feeding a high-quality ration that is preserved naturally with vitamin E is recommended.

Like other large, deep-chested, narrow-waisted breeds, the Chessie also is subject to bloat/torsion, a condition not definitively linked to heredity. Bloat occurs when the stomach swells with gas and then twists on itself (torsion), cutting off the blood supply. Many authorities believe exercise too soon before or after feeding and the consumption of large amounts of dry food and water are causative factors of this potentially fatal disorder. As a result, Darlene feeds her dogs twice a day rather than once and keeps them quiet and inactive immediately before and after meals.

Special Handling Required

In addition to being affected by some inherited health problems and bloat/torsion, the breed requires some special consideration to maintain its well being and protect it from injury. For instance, because the breed is the essence of stoicism, owners may not be aware when their dogs are ill or injured.

One way for owners to determine their dogs' health and happiness is to monitor food consumption. "Chessies have a high pain threshold and don't act sick until they're practically dead," Diane explains. "For this reason, I never free feed my dogs. Because they love to eat, I know something is wrong when one is off his food."

Also due to the breed's stoicism, owners should use common sense when exercising their dogs. "Young dogs, in particular, can easily overdo it playing ball or even just running around," Diane adds. Also, to prevent joint injury, agility should be off-limits until dogs are at least 18 months of age because it requires jumping on and off of obstacles. Likewise, dogs of any age should not be allowed to run repeatedly up and down stairways.

Where potential injury is concerned, Diane recommends against playing catch with a flying disc. "Chessies should never play [with flying discs]." "In order to catch [one], a dog must jump very high in the air vertically while twisting his body. High, vertical jumping and twisting can cause knee injuries, fractured vertebrae or worse," Diane cautions.

No Over primping, Please

Ensuring safe exercise may take a little time, but you'll gain it back in the grooming department. Although

many breeds need lots of regular coat maintenance, owners actually can cause problems by grooming the Chessie too much. "Daily brushing removes the undercoat and causes the outer coat to lose its waviness. Dogs should only be brushed when they blow their coat a couple of times a year. A ZoomGroom®, which is like a rubber curry only the knobbies are bigger and farther apart, works well for this," Johnson says. In lieu of daily brushing, Diane sprays her dogs' coats with clean water and rubs them down with a towel. Frequent bathing also is not recommended because it strips the oil from the coat, "which lessens its ability to insulate dogs from cold temperatures," Darlene further explains. Chessies should be bathed only when they really need it (e.g., when they have been in muddy or stagnant water, if they come in contact with skunks or dead animals, etc.).

The only exceptions to the not-too frequently grooming rule are ear cleanings, tooth scalings and nail trimmings. Regular ear cleanings especially are important because the breed spends a lot of time in the water. That, in combination with the fact it has drop ears, which limit air circulation in the ear canal, can give rise to infection. Johnson dabs ears with a cotton ball moistened with a solution of warm water and apple cider vinegar.

At-home tooth scalings are recommended because they prevent tartar buildup, and regular nail trims are needed by dogs that don't wear down their nails concrete surfaces.

Is The Chessie Right For You?

Many potential dog owners are attracted to the Chessie's versatility and beauty. Despite its impressive doggie resume, however, the Chessie is not suitable for everyone. More so than most breeds, it requires a special kind of owner. Or, as Darlene puts it, "Chessies need someone who is really into [his or her] dogs." She and Diane list the following criteria for identifying those who would *not* do well owning the breed:

Don't get a Chessie if . . .

You don't plan to be a companion to your dog. Chessies need to spend lots of time with their owners. Obviously, this means they do not flourish when living in the isolation of someone's back yard. The breed really needs to be a housedog.

You don't want a protective watchdog.

You prefer the Golden Retriever's temperament. Whereas the Golden says, "Let me think of five ways to please you," the Chessie says, "Give me five reasons why I should do what you want."

You are unable to be alpha, or a leader, to your dog.

You are unable or unwilling to physically correct your dog.

You don't have time to train your dog.

You are unable or unwilling to provide your dog with daily exercise.

You cannot or are unwilling to condition your dog to the activities of small children in the event you are plan to be a parent. When not raised in situations in which young visitors come and go from the owner's home, the Chessie's protective instincts kick in when playmates appear on the scene.

You're not prepared to make a long-term commitment to your dog regardless of life's changing circumstances.

In particular, Darlene stresses the importance of the last criterion. She says, "Chessies bond so strongly to one person or family, it's very difficult to re home them when they're abandoned. I, personally, have had two Chessie rescue dogs. It took a lot of patience, love and knowledge of the breed to get them to trust me as their new awareness." Darlene, therefore, urges those who think they might like to buy a puppy or adopt a rescue dog first to attend dog shows where they may talk to breeders and other people who own Chessies. That way, they can hear a firsthand account of what it's like to live with one. As far as suitable environments go, Darlene and Diane agree that owners are more important than settings. "I have successfully placed dogs in cities, small towns and in the country," Diane says.

Guidelines For Purchase

When one sets out to buy a house, one must have an idea of what one wants. So, too, is the case when buying the Chesapeake Bay Retriever. According to Darlene, "Puppy buyers should first decide what they want from a dog. Do they want a show dog, an obedience prospect, a field trial candidate or a pet? While Chessies aren't bred in show or field lines per se, some breeders tend to breed more for certain characteristics than others."

Once that decision is made, she advises buyers to contact the ACC for breeder recommendations rather than buying a dog from a commercial source, because it may be the product of a puppy mill. "Although you might not expect to find Chessies in pet shops, they're there," she says.

Once buyers locate a breeder who breeds for the qualities they are looking for, Darlene recommends contacting that person and asking for the names of individuals who have purchased chased dogs from him or her. "Puppy buyers should call these owners and find out what kind of dogs theirs grew up to be," Darlene continues.

"When speaking with breeders, puppy buyers should ask about health clearances [OF A and CERF]," Diane adds. "And, since the best breeders have waiting lists, puppy buyers shouldn't expect to phone today and buy tomorrow."

The price tag for a good-quality, well-bred dog ranges between \$600 and \$900 (*1999 prices*). Some breeders do not distinguish between show- and pet-quality dogs in their asking price, however. "Unless a dog has a disqualifying feature like being marked with too much white, I sell pet- and show-quality dogs for the same price. The effort put forth to breed a good, general-purpose dog, is the same," Diane notes.

At the time of purchase, puppy buyers should receive an AKC registration application, a signed pedigree, copies of the contract of sale and health guarantee, an up-to-date health record that includes the dates of worming and other medical care and a veterinarian's certificate proving inoculation. Breeders also should provide written proof that they will take the dog back for a limited period of time if it is found to be ill or suffering from some defect. Puppies should be examined by a veterinarian within 48 hours of the sale.

Although the Chessie's versatility embraces a veritable wealth of talents, it also possesses traits that some owners might not view as ideal. Because it tends to be "non returnable" in the sense that it is very difficult to re-home, potential puppy buyers should consider the purchase of a Chessie carefully. However, those who are really "into their dogs"-and up to the demands of Chessie ownership-will find it to be a superlative canine companion in every way.

A Dog Writers Association of America annual writing competition finalist, Sharon Pflaumer holds a bachelor of arts degree in English from Northern Illinois University and has been writing on the subject of dogs for 14 years. She shares her life with Bronmaur's Conquistador (Kassie) and Bronmaur's Cross Current (Brook), two mahogany sable and white rough Collies, whom she says fill her days with laughter and love.