

# Are you ready for a hunting dog?

*Breeds, pedigrees matter but so do training, experience*

By HENRY CHAPPELL  
Correspondent

Your guide's pointer locks up on a covey of South Texas bobwhites. As you walk in for the flush, she rolls her eyes up at you as if to say, "Right here, partner."

Or you're sharing a duck boat with your buddy and his Labrador retriever. While your friend works the circling mallards with his call, the big Lab leans against your thigh. You feel him quivering and say to yourself, "I've got to have a hunting dog."

Perhaps. First ask yourself some hard questions about commitment, your living arrangements and your temperament. Upfront honesty can prevent heartbreak, strained relationships, shredded landscaping and even unintentional cruelty.

"A potential dog owner should ask himself if he's really willing to take care of a dog for a dozen years or more," said James Collier, a professional hunting dog trainer based near Decatur. "Having a dog is a lot like having a child, except that the dog can't tell you when he's hungry or thirsty."

"I think that if you make a commitment to the dog, then the dog will make a commitment to you," said T. Boone Pickens, founder and chairman of Dallas-based Mesa Petroleum Co.

Pickens knows about commitment to gun dogs. He owns 35 pointers and four Labrador retrievers. His kennel is legendary in quail hunting circles. "Back when I couldn't afford one dog, I had two. For 50 years, I've fed and picked up after bird dogs," he said.

A fenced back yard can be a fine place to keep one or two dogs, as long as the owner has access to open space for training and exercise. Some well-trained gun dogs make fine house pets.

"My main pointer lives in the house," Collier said. "He's completely housebroken and goes to his mat and stays there until he's called."

Although most hunters prefer to live with their dogs, boarding operations offer an alternative for those with too little time or space.

"If you're going to just keep the dog in the kennel and take him out only for hunting season, that's a sad situation," Pickens said. "Instead, give your dog a break and board him with somebody who can exercise him and give him some extra training."

Collier stresses the importance of matching the dog to the hunter's needs.



LYNN BURKHEAD

**PERFECT FIT:** The ideal dog will match a hunter's needs. Labrador retrievers make good waterfowl hunting dogs.

"If you're primarily a quail hunter, pick one of the pointing breeds. If you're a waterfowl hunter, you'll want a Labrador, golden or Chesapeake Bay retriever," he said. "A person who isn't accustomed to a lot of physical activity probably needs a dog that's easy-going and very well trained."

Characteristics vary within types and breeds. Pointers, especially those out of field trial bloodlines, tend to range widely or "run big," while other breeds, such as the Brittany or German shorthaired pointer, typically hunt at more moderate ranges.

Certain breeds have reputations for consistency.

"Pointers are the Cadillacs of the pointing breeds," Collier said. "They almost always turn out, but may not make the best companions. If I were looking for a family pet, hunted quail and wanted my doves retrieved, I'd consider a German shorthaired pointer. If I were looking for a retriever, I'd get a Lab. Generally speaking, they turn out."

## Deciphering pedigrees

The fact that a dog is purebred or "has papers," means little unless the dog descends from solid hunting or field trial stock. Experienced trainers and hunting guides usually can direct beginners to excellent bloodlines. Learn to interpret pedigrees before selecting a breeder.

Regardless of breed and pedigree, hunting

dogs require training and experience. Many hunters with the time and facilities (land and access to game birds), enjoy training their own dogs. Those desiring quick results buy fully trained adult dogs. Some hedge their bets with started dogs — youngsters that have demonstrated potential and have some basic training. Others prefer to bond with pups then turn them over to a pro.

Here again, it's best to be honest with yourself.

"I can't train because I'm just not patient enough," Pickens said. "But I wish I were."

Collier encourages hunters to find pros who train hunters as well as their dogs.

Whenever people come to pick up their dogs, I always ask them to watch me train. Some trainers will let you work your own dog as part of the training program. That's the best way to learn."

"I'd look for a trainer that has experience and could show me some of their dogs and how they perform," Pickens said. "And I'd never leave a dog with someone who has to be cruel to get results."

Gun dogs aren't for everyone, but for some, they're the reason for hunting.

"I've always felt that to be wealthy is to have an abundance of something you really love," Pickens said. "That's the way I feel about bird dogs."

Chappell is a freelance writer in Plano.

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## TRAINING AND BOARDING

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## BREED REGISTRIES

American  
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[www.akc.org](http://www.akc.org)

United Kennel  
Club  
[www.ukcdogs.com](http://www.ukcdogs.com)

Field Dog  
Stud Book  
[www.american-field.com/pages/FDSBinfo.html](http://www.american-field.com/pages/FDSBinfo.html)



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