



A LOOK AT THE CHESAPEAKE BAY RETRIEVER

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Here in the Midwest, we face some of the harshest conditions during our hunting seasons imaginable. Temperatures near zero, brisk winds, snow and of course frozen bodies of water are very typical for the Midwest bird hunter. Some of us hunt waterfowl, others hunt upland birds and most of us hunt both! When you combine both waterfowl and upland bird hunting with Midwest hunting conditions, it is easy to see why the Chesapeake Bay Retriever might be an ideal choice as your next dog.

The breed has a lot to offer, and unfortunately is one of the most misunderstood breeds amongst sporting dogs. My hope is to give an honest overview of the Chessie to give you a more accurate picture of what they are like to own, train, live and hunt with. Let's begin with some of the biggest advantages to the breed.

Chesapeake Bay Retrievers are hardy. As mentioned previously, these dogs are built to tolerate cold temperatures and icy conditions. The Chessie is a very strong water dog as well, originally bred as a retriever for retrieving game for ocean hunters that face big water. Imagine what it takes to make 100-yard (or longer) retrieve in big rough water with swells up to 3 or 4 feet! While we may not get that here in the Midwest (maybe possible if you hunt bigger lakes), we do face very cold water and certainly ice. All of the retrievers have been known to tolerate these conditions fairly well, but the Chesapeake does have the reputation

of being the “tough-guy” amongst the group. Their coat is very rough (almost wiry), and does a great job of repelling water and cold. The wool-like undercoat doesn't hurt either! There is a very natural “grit” that this breed has making them an ideal hunting companion for the harsh conditions on land or water.

Another important benefit to consider with the Chesapeake is how incredibly versatile they are as a sporting dog. Yes, they were bred as a retriever, particularly for water use. But make no mistake that this breed is more than capable in the uplands. Like any breed, when you deal with quality genetics, proper socialization and a solid training regimen the Chesapeake proves to be very athletic, driven, intelligent and highly trainable. In my experience, most Chesapeake's I have trained or hunted with have a very natural desire to work, retrieve and learn. For you goose hunters, a bigger and stronger dog could be advantageous in the field when

you are trying to bring in very large birds!

This is a good time to take a break from the toughness, versatility and work ethic of the breed and specify that they are very social dogs. My mentor in retriever training has owned and operated an Iowa-based retriever kennel for over 30-years, specializing in Chesapeake Bay Retrievers. His dogs have been going to family and hunting households with tremendous success, and at this point in his career, several of his client families are on their third or fourth Chessie from his kennel. Chuck Bolinger of Goldeneyes Retrievers (Forest City, Iowa) was the perfect source of information as we explore some of the generic stereotypes that surround the Chessie; starting with the notion that they are a mean and aggressive dog.

“I think if you see enough dogs, you could find examples of any breed that exemplify traits that are undesirable such





as aggression”, said Bolinger. “Genetics are very important, but so is proper socialization and upbringing; with any dog regardless of breed. Having bred Chesapeake’s for over 30-years I can attest to the fact that this is a very loyal, gentle and social breed that does extremely well in a family setting. Any dog that is not well socialized, there is always a risk of unwanted behavior”.

While I would never agree that the Chesapeake is a mean or aggressive breed, I will say that like many working breeds they do need to be well socialized and trained a particular way. Again, this is not because they are a worse breed than any other retriever; these principles actually apply to any sporting dog in my opinion. I went to Chuck for his take on how to train a Chesapeake successfully, and asked about the other common stereotype that they are stubborn and more difficult to work with. “What people need to understand is that a Chesapeake is not a Labrador. In theory, you are trying to train the dogs the same exact things, but the process may not always be the same”, said Chuck. “In my opinion the Chesapeake may mature (mentally) slower than some Labradors, which is why it is so important to understand that you cannot be forceful and apply too much pressure to them (particularly younger dogs). They have great memories, and if they have a negative experience, they can hold a grudge”.

Any training experience I have with Chessies tells the same story. Overall (there are always exceptions, and I’ve seen several), they do not respond as well to a heavy handed trainer who tries to force concepts onto the dogs and uses high levels of pressure. That being said, this does not reflect a lack of intelligence, biddability or willingness to work. The breed simply does better when you teach them through patient repetition and repeated action, while keeping the drills fun and happy. The biggest mistake

people make with this breed is that they interpret softness (reluctant to perform under heavy pressure) with stubbornness. The first reaction of most dog owners when dealing this their “stubborn” dog is to instantly correct it with added pressure. This simply compounds the issue.

Chuck continued, “To me, attitude is everything when training dogs (regardless of breed). You will be much better served to begin early training in a fun and enthusiastic manner, focusing on quality repetition. With a dog that develops and matures slower, we must always remember that certain lessons could take longer to teach than others. Do not rush training with a Chessie, make sure you are always teaching while keeping the training sessions fun and positive; you will be amazed at how well they retain the lesson”.

Being a judge in the Upland Gundog Association events, I have noticed an increase in Chesapeake Bay Retrievers participating in the upland venues. The same goes for retriever hunt test venues I attend as a participant. The breed is a joy to hunt with, and in the end you have a very talented, strong and savvy hunting partner capable of doing all the work to be a high level retriever in both upland and waterfowl hunting. They happen to like family time and hanging out at home all the same, making them perfect house dogs as well. They do develop differently, and need a trainer that can be more focused on teaching rather than high pressure and rushed training, but I personally do not view this as a negative because any dog will benefit from this approach.

If you are a Midwest bird hunter and need a versatile dog that can be in the home with the family but also hunt upland and waterfowl birds, the Chesapeake Bay Retriever should be at the top of your list to consider. 🐾

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