

The CHESAPEAKE BAY RETRIEVER: Beyond the Myths

by Emelise Baughman

Retriever aficionados, here's a true-false test. Question one: The Chesapeake Bay retriever is an untrustworthy, stubborn brute requiring a log chain and two-by-four to restrain and train. Question two: The Chesapeake Bay retriever is the paragon of duck dogs, the ultimate in loyalty, bravery, and the only possible choice for a true waterfowler.

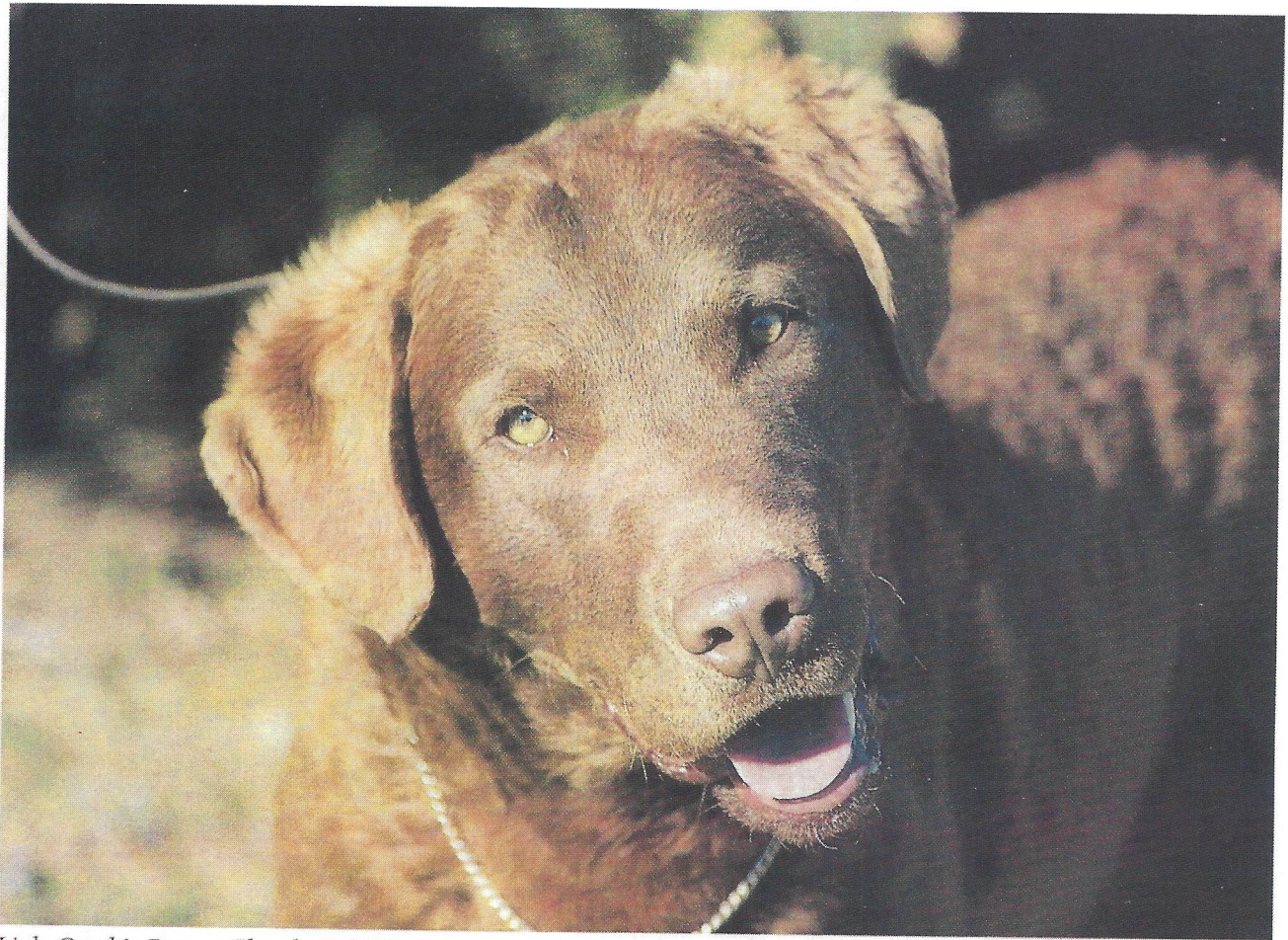
The reason this test has only two questions and no answer key is that most people with an opinion on retriever breeds have exceedingly strong ones about the Chesapeake. Those who have owned a Chessie never forget them, and those who are observers only are susceptible to the rather dramatic stories abounding about the breed, both good and bad.

Since the Chesapeake has earned such solid respect from waterfowlers through the years, a hunter in search of a dog would do well to learn more about them. A realistic appraisal from people who own Chesapeakes may also help clarify some of the myths that surround this American breed. After all, the true experts on the breed are those who live and work with them.

When a hunter decides to acquire a retriever, there are several basic qualities he considers. Without attempting to rank these qualities, they include retrieving desire, trainability, temperament, and suitability for the hunter's particular needs. Most people also have certain prefer-

Managing a big mallard is what Chesapeakes do best, as illustrated by Ch. Lick Creek's East Wind, WD.





Lick Creek's Bayou Chunk at 9 months shows the typical Chesapeake handsome face and yellow eyes.

ences in size, color, and coat type. Some of these traits can be objectively measured, others are best understood by anecdotal information.

Appearance is one of those objective qualities, although whether the appearance appeals is up to the individual. The Chesapeake looks like what he is, a rugged, built-to-work, water dog. The standard weight of 80 pounds is often exceeded by the males, but size is overshadowed by heart, or the courage and drive of the dog. Their unique silhouette is formed by the long hind legs, designed for swimming, and the back's straight line or slight slope up toward the tail. There may be a dip behind the withers, but the back itself should be strong, never swayed. Again for swimming, the toes are heavily webbed.

As with his natural surroundings, the Chesapeake's wavy brown coat



Fireweed's Artesian Ruddy, WDX proves his prowess on doves in Kansas.



Lick Creek's Dixie Belle has correct conformation and shows the shading often found with the dark deadgrass coat color.



Fireweed's Artesian Ruddy, WDX keeps cool brushing up on training during the summer.

may be any shade or variation of the color. The light straw-colored ones are aptly termed deadgrass, and color ranges on through tan, a bright light red, deep reddish chestnut, flat brown, and a dark chocolate brown. A small amount of white on the breast, belly or toes is perfectly acceptable according to the breed standard. The brown coat color sets off the distinctive, unsettling dark or pale yellow gaze.

The Chesapeake has a thick, woolly undercoat for warmth, and an oily outercoat for water resistance. The coat will shed profusely and slicken in hot weather, but the correct Chesapeake coat will still be a double one. Brushing, swimming, and clean quarters keeps the Chessie socially acceptable.

The traditional reputation of the working Chesapeake is premier for waterfowl. This is the retriever to take for the coldest, toughest conditions. He will go after ducks in the water, geese in the cornfields, and ice or muck for either.

Many pheasant hunters swear by the Chessie, citing a superior nose for finding birds and tracking downed birds, and his ability to work close without pushing them. Despite stories of hardmouthed Chesapeakes, the reality is that many of the brown dogs work beautifully on dove or any other bird, bringing them back unscathed.

The Chesapeake's personality is as unique as his physique. Although the Chessie's versatility allows him to live happily without ever going hunting, it is difficult to fully appreciate their nature without seeing them retrieve.

The feelings of a Chesapeake toward retrieving go beyond mere love. The prospect of retrieving changes their very appearance. Their yellow eyes begin to burn and every muscle tenses. Retrieving is the business of a Chesapeake, and it becomes obvious that everything else in their lives has just been to pass the time until they retrieve again.

When Chesapeake owners discuss their dogs, they describe many typical traits which help to fully define the breed, but the retrieving is first. The other traits best describe how the dog approaches his retrieving.

Roger Stumfoll calls it "drive." Roger, a waterfowl guide in eastern Kansas, bought his first Chesapeake four years ago. Doc is a big deadgrass male who has earned both a show championship and a working dog title, but Roger's heart is in the duck blind. He describes Doc's best trait as drive, that he knows what's going on and is just driven for the bird. He also describes Doc's worst trait as drive, because "sometimes he wants the bird so bad that it overpowers his desire to listen to me." In other words, Doc breaks.

The most tenacious myth about Chesapeakes concerns temperament, but, again, the true experts have their own opinions. "I had heard they were stubborn and bad-tempered, but Doc is far from it," asserts Roger, continuing, "He's a very controllable dog; he does everything he can to please me."

Other first-time owners add high

praises. Brad Wright, whose profession as an architect supports his duck hunting addiction, hunts with a huge, handsome, deadgrass male he calls Ches. He finds Ches very eager to please him, but Brad's wife Suzanne comments on Ches' family manners. "Ches reflects whoever he is with," she says. With their little boy, he's an enthusiastic playmate. With their quiet young daughter, he's gentle and mannerly, dealing with her very kindly. In competition, Ches has earned both a show championship and working dog excellent title, trained by Brad, but their happiest times are hunting.

Bruce Ahlers, veterinarian, retriever trainer, and field trialer, doesn't mince words about Ian, the dark Chesapeake he co-owns with Marlene Drag, fellow in all three pursuits. "He's been everything we wanted and more, because he turned out to be good-looking, a companion dog, a better working dog than I ever could have expected." Bruce isn't just a proud papa thinking his dog is great just because it's his dog. Ian is a champion, is open all-age qualified, and has earned a working dog qualified, the highest field title offered by the American Chesapeake Club. Ian doesn't have to prove anything to anybody.

Brett McKee acquired a five-month-old male puppy, Banker, intending only to train and sell him quickly as a hunting dog. Brett explained, "I had all the Chesapeake behavior myths firmly implanted. I thought they were uncontrollable and untrainable." After two weeks, the pup's ability and potential had won him over. "He had changed my belief in Chesapeakes; he is easy to train and has a better disposition than most people. He goes into cover that other dogs refuse to enter and he has not lost a cripple yet. Friends call and invite me to go hunting, but they always say, 'Be sure and bring Banker'." Brett has all the zeal of a convert, and it's a good bet that his next dog will be Banker-brown.

Polling Chesapeake owners, whether first-time or long-time, about their dogs' best traits reveals a consistent descriptive pattern. The superlatives include intelligent, protective, loyal, anxious to please, and, above all, a very serious attitude toward retrieving. They were



You don't have to ask twice to send a Chessie into the water, as shown by Pat Baughman and Ruddy.

Photos by the author.

described as happy, tolerant and loveable. Besides describing their dogs, these owners with experiential expertise reveal something about themselves; namely, they are sold on Chesapeakes.

There are, however, Chesapeakes that are more aptly described as morose than happy, more hardheaded than loveable, and more moody than tolerant. Individuals vary within the breed, and individual dogs may not mesh well with some people but very well with others. In addition, dogs go through stages just as children do, and Chesapeakes will certainly challenge their trainers on occasion.

Expectations are a great predictor of outcome. A Chessie may be described as very diligent in the hunting field, never quitting until he finds the bird, demonstrating commendable perseverance. The very same brown dog may also cause his irritated trainer to complain about his hardheaded streak of independence. The basic personality trait is the same, but the expectations of the trainer or particular situation dictate the acceptance of that trait. A hunter may simply want the birds brought in with a minimum of personal fuss and no losses, so his expectations of his retriever might vary from a competitive field trialer who requires a controlled, consistent performance dog.

Bruce Ahlers describes Ian as hardheaded in some training situations. "He thinks he knows an easier or better way and would rather do it his way than the way you want."

Brad Wright says that Ches sometimes tests him, and at worst responds by quitting. "If I come down hard on him, he comes down hard on me, refusing to do things he can do," Brad says ruefully.

Pat Baughman, a devoted Chesapeake fan if ever there were, has trained numerous retrievers. Pat lives and breathes waterfowl through his work with Ducks Unlimited, his retriever avocation, and his hunting obsession. He comments on a female he bred, trained, and accompanied on her many goose-retrieving forays. "Windy is too smart. If she were a human, she'd be a con artist, she tests the system to see what she can get away with. You've got to think about what you're doing, because she is smart enough to know what she can get away with."

The flip side to their comments illustrates that no single Chesapeake trait epitomizes their personality. The Chessie may make the wrong decision, but he does think for himself. Brad continues, "Ches is so smart that he knows when you're doing right and when you're doing wrong. I could have ruined another dog ten times over, but he always bounced right back. He was resilient, and he accepted my training." Bruce gives Ian the time and patience to work through his streaks of independence, because the payoff is a dog whose ultimate goal is to do what he wants him to do. "Ian will do everything he can to please me and do the job right." And of Windy? "She's a sweetheart," says Pat.

Protectiveness is another dual-sided trait. Like any other dog, Chesapeakes do bite. Whether they bite more than other breeds is a question that will never be satisfac-



Chesapeakes often have an enthusiastic water entry.

torily resolved, but the owner-experts had few complaints. Protectiveness is an offshoot of loyalty, a trait universal to Chessies, but threatening, aggressive protectiveness is often the result of inadequate socialization, poor training, or an equally aggressive owner. Some owners find their retriever's protectiveness to be an especially valued trait.

Suzanne Wright describes with relief and amusement the time her teenage daughter was out walking Ches. A carload of boys followed the girl, but when one unprincipled fellow got out and headed for her, the hundred-pound Ches directed his spooky yellow stare at the young man, bristled, growled, and bared his teeth, causing the boy to leap through the car window without pausing to open the door. Suzanne commented that the family had never seen this side of Ches in the four years they'd owned him, probably because they had never had to.

There are as many stories of Chesapeakes simply placing themselves between owner and stranger, quietly watching, as there are stories of aggressive, snapping protection dogs. It seems to depend on the individual once again, and Chessies range from wimps to Rambos, with a lot of reasonable, discriminating dogs in the middle. Jealousy is fairly common, however, and it would be a mistake to underestimate how important you are to your dog.

Sherry Massey has bred Chesapeakes for over 15 years, and is the editor of the Chesapeake Club Bulletin. Sherry describes the breed as independent, individual, and versatile, but she has seen some changes in the breed over the years. She is concerned about bad temperament, more aggressive dogs, and harder, more independent dogs.

If in fact this is a trend in some Chesapeakes, it is difficult to attribute such changes to any one explanation, and Sherry realizes that other breeders have other opinions. One explanation she suggested was that people looking for competitive field trial dogs need an animal that can adapt to and withstand professional training techniques. Since many field trial contenders are not such tough, tightly wound dogs, another explanation may be "a lack of socialization, proper discipline, and owner assertiveness." Sherry says that Chesapeakes "belong in a home with an assertive, consistent handler who takes the time to train."

As a breeder, Sherry also points out the importance of obtaining genetic clearances on the breeding stock. It is very difficult to be objective about your own dog, but it is essential to have OFA certification that the dog is free from hip dysplasia and CERF certification of healthy eyes before breeding. Chesapeake puppies can be difficult to place unless their genetic background and proven performance of their parents is impeccable.

Regardless of how many Chesapeakes they had or how long they'd had them, all the owners stressed that successful Chesapeake ownership requires time spent with the dog. This is a breed that takes attention, companionship, and affection. If the dog receives this, he will thrive and develop an extremely strong bond with his family. After several happy years with Doc, Roger completes his breed description by saying bluntly, "I would not recommend the Chesapeake to anyone that would not spend the time with them. They need a lot of attention."

Attention translates into socialization for the young pup, proper training, and hours spent in each other's company. Assuming the puppy had a healthy, loving start at his breeders, he must still be introduced to a variety of friendly people when he is between 7 and 12 weeks old, and not isolated thereafter. If he does not receive this socialization, he may be shy, fearful, suspicious, or aggressively protective as an adult. This is the type of Chesapeake that perpetuates the negative myths.

There is another type of Chesapeake that contributes to the breed's bad press, but this is an unfortunate blot on the human part of the team. A Chessie can be a very proud, very macho dog, and a few people pervert this into downright meanness. They deliberately bring out aggressiveness in their dogs, usually through cruel treatment. Whether this minority of owners is misguided or twisted, they are creating very dangerous animals and they should never be allowed to own a dog at all. The Chesapeake reputation suffers, but it can happen in any breed.

But what of the majority of Chesapeake owners? The dogs are so versatile that their fans vary, too, but, of course, many are hunters. Many are also rather solitary folk, choosing the same kind of straightforward, outdoorsy values as their dogs. Sherry summarizes, "Golden retriever people love crowds, Chessie people don't." The Chesapeake owner purposely chooses a dog who will "give you everything he's got and not give your neighbor a darn thing."

The Chesapeake fancier likes something different, and is willing to invest time and interest in the dog he calls his own. Bruce has been successful with Ian in the highly competitive world of field trials, and says, "I enjoy the battle with preconceived ideas. We're in the minority, and we feel like we're accomplishing more!"

Pat, on the other hand, doesn't pay much attention to breed battles. He likes his Chesapeakes because they bring in his ducks, and he is a hardcore waterfowler. Pat's Chesapeakes give him intensity, devotion, and happiness in return for his efforts, and, after all, hardcore waterfowlers are themselves a bit different from the rest of the world. □