

How to Pick a Hunting Dog

By Todd Chrisman

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Now I know this topic has been mulled around for about 10,000 years, but a lot of folks are considering it for the first time, or are reconsidering after having made a bad choice the first time. So I'm going to wade out where so many have gone before me, but put my own personal bias into the mix. One advantage you will have with my tale, I'm going to tell you what my bias is, so you can factor that into how much weight you put on what I have to say.

I've frequently said that it takes three dogs for most folks to get the one they want. The first dog is the first one they find, the first time they start looking. When contemplating the second dog, folks avoid some of the mistakes they made the first time and find a reputable breeder. The problem with the reputable breeder is the breeder isn't breeding the TYPE of dog the folks want. On the third try most folks find a reputable breed that is breeding their kind of dog and finally find happiness. If you were thrilled with your first hunting dog, you either found the third breeder by accident, or don't really know how much a hunting dog is capable of.

I'm going to take a shortcut here, and assume you want to hunt wild birds. Ok, that gets rid of hounds, retrievers (for the most part), and every type of dog not in the Sporting group. In fact it leaves two general kinds of dogs, flushers and pointers. So you have to answer a question right now:

Do I want to have a dog that hunts close and puts birds in the air as he finds them? Or do I want a dog that covers more ground for me and stops when he finds a bird?

If you want a flushing dog, the rest of this article will be of some general service to you, but I don't know anything about them. Frankly, I like the cockers that I see doing demonstrations, but have never hunted over one. They seem like a kid's toy, and I wonder how you wind them up.

If you answered that you want a pointing dog, I have more specific information for you, and more questions. The pointing dogs can basically be broken down into two main groups: the British type and everything else. So you have to answer another question right now:

Do you want a dog who just points? Or would you like a dog who points, retrieves, and will hunt ducks or make a water retrieve?

The good folks of Great Brittan bred specialty dogs. One dog points, the other retrieves. It's a good concept, and you get dogs that do one thing *really* well, as opposed to a bunch of things done *pretty* well. If you want a shorthaired specialist, it's the Pointer. Setters have long hair and are probably the American classic for hunting grouse. Of course, a lot of other breeds have taken the setter out of the dominant role.

If you want a dog that "does it all" you will want a dog who hails from continental Europe. Hunting was not limited to royalty, and having one versatile dog was more appealing than having a kennel of specialists.

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The versatile breeds come in all shapes and sizes, and in any color or length of hair you could want. The following table shows the number of dogs tested by NAVHDA in 2004, provided the breed represented at least 1% of dogs tested (more on NAVHDA testing and training later). It does not represent all of the NAVHDA breeds, but does give a picture of each dog's popularity.

Breed	NAVHDA Rank	Percentage	Size	Hair Type
German Shorthaired Pointer	1	39%	Medium	Short
German Wirehaired Pointer	2	17%	Medium	Wiry
Wirehaired Pointing Griffon	3	10%	Small	Wiry
Spinoni Italiani	4	6%	Large	Wiry
Pudel Pointer	5	5%	Medium	Wiry
Small Munsterlander	6	4%	Small	Long
Large Munsterlander	7	4%	Large	Long
Brittany	8	4%	Small	Long
Vizsla	9	4%	Medium	Short
Weimaraner	10	2%	Large	Short
Braque du Bourbonnais	11	1%	Small	Short
English Setter	12	1%	Large	Long

The Shorthaireds are more popular than the next 4 breeds combined, or to look at it another way, more popular than the entire other breeds combined if you exclude the Wirehaireds. There are good reasons for this. First, they are great dogs who do well for a hunter on foot. Second, they are popular enough that you can find a good one near wherever you live. And third, breeders can find good breeding stock close to home. Breeders are just as lazy as everyone else and good ones will settle for the best stud within reasonable driving distance.

The sizes of the dogs are gleaned from the breed standards, AKC when recognized by AKC, other sources for the rest. Size is based on averaging the smallest listed female height against the tallest listed male height, then sorting the results. Since there were 12 breeds, I called the first four "small" the next four "medium" and the last four "large". You should take caution, however, because there are wide variations in size in hunting dogs. I own two shorthaired bitches; one is 45 pounds, the other 65. The first would qualify as small here and the latter would fall in the large category. Also the "medium" GWP is, on average, only a half-inch smaller than three of the "large" dogs, and only an inch smaller than the largest.

The average average size is 23 inches. The shortest average is 19 inches and the tallest is 25 inches. I've given size and hair type information because those two issues seem to have the most effect on the decision, especially if you have to ask your "boss" if you can get a dog. Size in dogs is like gun size. Generally you want the thing to be as small as possible when you aren't using it and as big as possible when you are. So you compromise.

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So pick out a breed. That's your next step. I've given you very little information. You can do some homework on your own for the rest. If you need to see versatile dogs up close and in person, come to a NAVHDA clinic. You'll get to see lots of dogs.

OK, now that you know what kind of dog you want, you need to find a breeder. The breeder you choose may have puppies ready to go, but might not even have a pregnant bitch. The hardest thing to do is put the status of the breeding out of your mind while you pick a breeder.

You will recognize a good breeder because he or she will do what good breeders do. Good breeders carefully select a sire and a dam. They use third-parties to help verify which dogs and bitches are worthy of carrying on the genes of their breed. Let me say this again, good breeders use independent third-party opinions to help verify their hunches about which dogs to breed.

When a breeder starts spinning yarns about how his little Tinkerbelle is the sweetest dog around the house and, his buddy's dog, Tank, is the best hunting dog in three states, the red flags should start going up. Of course these are good attributes to have, but if both dogs don't have some way to back-up the claims of greatness, it's all just words.

The first and easiest third party verification is hip x-rays. Hip dysplasia is a problem in all large breeds, and all hunting dogs are large enough for conscientious breeders to KNOW they don't have a problem with it. OFA is a simple exam. A vet takes x-rays and three other vets make their OPINION. You probably won't have trouble with "good" or "excellent" hips. PennHIP is more precise. The x-ray procedure is done with the dog's legs in a brace that holds them in a specific position. The x-rays are then MEASURED. The smaller the number, the better. Almost no dysplasia has been found in dogs with a DI of 0.3 or less.

If you do any homework on OFA vs. PennHIP, please look at the dates of the articles. Most will date back to the late 1990's. Seven or eight years have passed, and OFA has backed away from many of their claims made when PennHIP was a for-profit upstart. Although OFA has removed all mention of PennHIP from their web site, many other web sites still carry the old and somewhat faulty information.

Anyway, why is hip evaluation the "first and easiest" third-party evaluation to get? Because all you have to do is spend some money and wait.

At the minimum, you want a breeder who has hip evaluations, and if you want to go a little further, those evaluations should be good.

Next you should look for a breeder who is testing or trialing his dogs under similar conditions as you will be hunting. That is on foot. Both North American Versatile Hunting Dog Association and the American Kennel Club have hunt tests. These differ from trials in that they are

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evaluations judged against a standard, not the other dogs. NAVHDA is superior to AKC in a couple (not all) areas, including water work, obedience, retrieving and finding lost game. The AKC however, requires hunting in pairs and honoring the other dog's points (which NAVHDA does only in the Invitational Test).

As I said for hip evaluations, it's good to have a breeder who has some test results, and better to have good test results. While I applaud the breeders who have Natural Ability (NA) scores and Junior Hunter (JH) titles, these tests are extremely elementary. Like a test for functional literacy. Even if you never plan to train your dog to extremely high levels, don't you want your dog to be CAPABLE of receiving such training? There's no guarantee that a junior hunter couldn't have become a master hunter, but the fact of the matter is he didn't become a master hunter.

The very good NAVHDA dogs have passed the Utility Test; they have a "prize" of 1, 2 or 3. The excellent NAVHDA dogs have passed the Invitational Test; they have earned the title Versatile Champion (VC). In AKC, I'd rank the Master Hunter in somewhere around a Utility Prize I in NAVHDA, and a Senior Hunter about a Prize III in NAVHDA. These are the kinds of titles you'd like to see on the parents of your next dog. Keep in mind that fewer studs are needed to service the best bitches. So it's not uncommon to see a very highly qualified stud mated to a quality bitch.

A lot of the hunting dogs on the market today are either show-dog rejects or field-trial rejects. Field trials are completion where big-running dogs dominate. Many are handled and judged on horse-back. Some of these wash-outs make fine hunting companions. But many wash out because their first cast is "only" a quarter mile, too far for most hunters on foot to enjoy. Show dogs are not bred to get rid of hunting ability; they aren't selected for it either. Any hunting ability is there purely by accident. I'd take a show breeder's dog over a pet-store or puppy mill dog, however. At least show breeders have SOME criteria for breeding.

While I'm thinking about it, AKC registration means absolutely nothing. All it means is folks have purported the puppies come from AKC registered dogs, who were the product of other AKC registered dogs, etc. It isn't a stamp of quality or a seal of approval. Heck, until recently, there was no way to tell if the parents were reported correctly. Even today, there'd be no reason to check. Most breeders who continuously talk about AKC registration have nothing better to offer.

So start looking for breeders. You can find breeders in newspaper ads, on the internet, and from referrals from your friends. You might have to expand your search. Your dream dog might not be whelped within 30 miles of your house. Don't be afraid to stretch your search out to a couple hundred miles. You can whittle it down later. You can weed out all the ones who don't test for hip dysplasia and don't use NAVHDA or AKC testing. Put together a list of those who do.

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The next step in finding a breeder is finding one you like. I know this is a “no kidding” point in this story, but if the guy makes your skin crawl, no sense in doing business. An established breeder has customers beating a path to his door. For a lot of these folks, it’s rare to not have a few pups spoken for before a mating takes place, and the whole litter sold before the pups are born. So don’t get discouraged if there aren’t any puppies available right now. At this point you are looking for someone to give a deposit to. If someone is putting the pressure on for you to put a deposit right away, tell them your time horizon is about a year. There is no sense in getting rushed into this. Your dog is going to live for the next 10 to 16 years.

You want to know what the breeder expects from his pups. Your goals should be in line with his. Most folks are looking for a pretty “middle of the road” kind of pup. Neither too soft nor too hard. Some folks breed dogs that need a firmer hand to deal with, and that’s the trade-off for some spectacular field work. Unless you are an experienced trainer and handler, best steer clear of these dogs.

The breeder should be able to give good justification of why he’s mating one dog to another. It’s not so important for you to know the exact line of thinking and the minute details of the breeding plan of an established breeder. It’s more important that you verify that your breeder has a plan, is following it, and that the plan has produced good pups in the past. Again, if you do have an opinion of what kind of breeding plan works best, then find a breeder who is breeding to that plan.

Get references, and call them. Everyone can put together a list of their hunting buddies. The references should be folks who have hunted over the sire, the dam, or the progeny of the same breeding done earlier. Ask each one which they are, and the strengths and then the weaknesses of the dogs.

As an “up and coming” breeder, this part has been hard to write, but it’s true. If you don’t know the dogs involved, the breed very well, and all the trappings, you are best served by an established breeding kennel. You may do well with a new breeder, but there’s no track record to indicate anything, good or bad. If you get in touch with a beginning breeder, do extra homework and be doubly cautious.

As you pare your list down, go visit the breeders. Does the facility look like a place where you’d want to buy a puppy? Is it clean? Organized? At this point you probably know what to expect, but verify this with your eyes. Leave your checkbook at home. You’ll want to visit everyone that you haven’t weeded out, and then sleep on the decision.

Once you have a breeder, put a deposit down for the next available litter. It might be a year, sometimes it’s two, but it’s worth the wait.

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As you are narrowing the field, price will certainly come to mind. The thing about price is you often get less than you paid for, but you never get more. You may hear stories of the dog pound puppy, or \$200 classified ad special who went on to become Maine's Greatest Bird Dog Ever. I've never seen one, and suspect I never will.

The thing about breeding dogs is it costs money. When you factor in the dogs and bitches that were fixed because they didn't meet expectations, the cost of x-rays, training and testing dogs, stud fees for a REAL stud, in many cases, interstate transport to make the mating happen, equipment, and vet bills you get in to some serious amounts of money. No breeder I know actually makes any money breeding dogs, when you factor time at minimum wage into the equation.

A cheap puppy, over time, is just as costly as an expensive one. In fact, you'll spend more than the purchase price of most puppies on vet bills, food, dog toys, new shoes, and carpet cleaner over the first year. If the puppy is sickly due to poor breeding, or difficult to train you can spend many, many times the puppy's price and your valuable time to fix the problem.

I know the dog folks of days-gone-by would get rid of that problem dog and start over. Even if you have the stomach for that, chances are others in the family will veto it. Do yourself a favor and get a good puppy. Consider any "extra" cost of a good puppy an investment in your future happiness. Buying a puppy is a bit of a gamble, and the purchase price is merely the ante to get in the game.

Once your litter is on the ground, you have to pick a puppy. Don't get too worried if you don't have the first overall pick. I mean, I always want it, but I don't know why. I've seen more dogs who were picked last go on to greatness than the first dog out of the box. If you don't have a preference on sex, you'll probably want a male, most people prefer them. If you have an older dog at home, get the opposite sex. It just works out better. I've read a lot about picking a dog, and the best advise I've ever heard was (for most people) don't pick the biggest male or the noisiest female. Other than that, pick however you want. Color, size, it came up to me first, whatever.

Now that you have the little bundle of poop and pee, you need to start thinking about training. A lot of good breeders include some training with the dog either as part of the price or as a separate fee. It makes for happy customers, and helps build a good reputation. Take advantage of this training, particularly if it's "free" because you paid for it in the price of the pup.

Join a dog training group. If you took my guidance throughout this article, you probably have picked out a German Shorthaired Pointer, or some other versatile dog. The North American Versatile Hunting Dogs Association has chapters nation-wide. My chapter is the Seabasticook Chapter, which you can reach at www.seabasticook.com. There you can

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learn to train your dog while you make friends and acquaintances with folks who you can team up with for more dog training.

Take your pup hunting. I think any dog that's had its second round of shots is old enough to hunt at some level. Now, eight weeks might be too young to actually shoot over, but letting him tag along, and maybe putting him on some scent where a road chicken scurried into the bushes will be a valuable education. I've seen 7 and 8 month old pups really start to shine after a few days afield.

If you find that you don't have the time, or energy, or patience, or skill, or whatever to finish your dog's training, hire a pro. I'm telling you right now, be prepared to hire someone. I don't care if you hunt two weekends a year at the state forest, or spend \$3000 for a week's hunt at some fancy resort, or anything in between. If you hunt two weekends, don't you want them to be productive? If you hunt more, wouldn't it be better with a trained dog? You owe it to yourself and your dog to finish it's training.

Now I know I keep coming around to this, but a good dog will cost you less to train. I don't care if you do it yourself, or pay someone else. A well-bred dog will learn faster and remember its lessons longer. If you are training yourself, a poorly bred dog will cost you in hours, birds and grey hair. If you hire someone, it will cost you cash in the form of extra months (and months) of training.

So, good luck in your search. Remember to choose your breed wisely, find a reputable breeder, wait for your pup, then choose the one you are going to live with, train, hunt, train some more and repeat for the rest of your dog's life. If you choose well, you will have a "brag dog" that is a joy for years.