

I want a Bird Dog!! What kind do I get? Where do I find one? I found a litter, now what?

By Ed Wylie, of Double "H" Bird Dogs

Over the years, I have been asked these questions by people who are looking for a new "four legged" hunting buddy. It was several of my first questions when I wanted to get my first bird dog. It's my goal to share my experiences with you so that you will avoid some of the common pitfalls associated with acquiring a bird dog, and educate you enough to make an informed decision when picking a new puppy.

When I bought my first house I decided to get my first bird dog. I knew what I wanted my new hunting buddy to do, retrieve my downed birds. I can still picture that scene in my mind. It's a warm September afternoon, sun at my back, my new dog scowring the sky for my next shot bird. "Here comes one, get ready." BANG!! By this time my new buddy has already seen the bird spiraling to the ground, marked it and is waiting my command to "fetch" the bird. "Bird down!!" I figured finding a dog and training him (or her) wouldn't be so hard, in fact it should be pretty easy and my dream would come true in no time. Yea, right!

So I told my wife what I wanted to do. Then she asked the question that lead to months of research, "What kind of dog are you going to get?" That question started a ripple effect of questions that just blew the whole concept of "easy" out of the water. With questions in tow, I set out to find my new hunting buddy. I went to the local newsstand and purchased every dog magazine I could find. I presented my questions

to my friends, parents, etc. I looked at labs, britts, setters, pointers; basically every breed of dog that came out on my Internet search for hunting dogs, bird dogs, or gundogs. After months of research I finally decided on the German Shorthaired Pointer (a.k.a. GSP).

The GSP is revered as the most versatile hunting dog ever created. Often referred to as an HPR breed (hunt, point and retrieve) the GSP was developed to find and point game, flush if necessary, and retrieve or track wounded game from land or water. They are highly intelligent, and make great housedogs, good obedience dogs, reliable watchdogs, and excellent hunting buddies. Ultimately, you must choose a breed that is appealing to you and whose personality and type fits your hunting situation and life style.

Once you have decided on your breed, step two, which by far is the most important step, is to find the right puppy. This, without a doubt, is the most exciting and exhilarating part of the whole process. It is a life changing decision. The most promising way to locate your new puppy starts long before the puppy is born. Attempting to find a quality puppy from a newspaper advertisement or waiting to find one at the last minute is often a frustrating experience. Calling advertisement after advertisement and finding out that all the pups were sold; quickly becomes a very disheartening experience. If you want to find a well bred puppy you will soon find out that most, but not all, puppies are sold either very quickly or way in advance. In short, it pays to plan ahead.

Let's find a Breeder

Look for a reputable breeder. This is a breeder who isn't breeding dogs as fast as possible just for the money. If you find a breeder that has bred the same bitch every time she comes into her cycle or she was bred before 2 years of age, stay away! Most responsible breeders abide by the responsible breeding practices of the American Kennel Club (AKC); are members of local, state, or national dog or hunting clubs, and they are generally listed as registered breeders on one or more respected internet sites. In this age of communication technology most breeders maintain a website featuring detailed descriptions of their breed, the history in their respective breed, plenty of pictures, pedigree's, contact information and any warranties or guarantees that they have incorporated into their breeding program.

Next, consult with owners who have a dog from the breed that you have selected. Attend field trials and conformation shows to satisfy your quest for breed specific knowledge and to further familiarize yourself with the breed that you have decided on. Once you have selected the breeder, establish a dialogue with him or her. Most reputable breeders are more than willing to help you with your search for a new puppy, whether or not you are purchasing your new puppy from them. Reputable breeders want individuals who purchase pups to be responsible and caring dog owners. In fact, most breeders will ask prospective puppy buyers a series of personal questions in order to evaluate their experience and gauge the quality of life the new pup will have. The idea is to pair the new owners with pups that will fit their lifestyle without sacrificing the "quality of life" of the new pup. If a breeder spends an excess amount of time on a "sales pitch", beware.

Once you have narrowed down your list of breeders that you are comfortable with, look at their dogs' pedigree. Studying the pedigree will provide you with valuable information of your prospective pup's ancestry. If you are looking for a working bird dog or gundog, (also called a field dog) steer away from purchasing a show dog, unless the pup's lineage is from dual dogs (conformation and hunting). Many people think that it doesn't matter if the pup comes from a show dog background or a field dog background but the difference in the overall ability of the pups is often dramatic. Dependent upon the breed, inherited and field bred supported traits such as endurance, scenting ability and prey drive are instilled in field dogs much more than show dogs. All things taken into perspective, finding a pup with an impressive pedigree doesn't guarantee you are going to get that once in a lifetime great hunting dog you've always wanted, but your chances are better.

Dogs, like people, inherit traits, good and bad. Genetics play the major role in the ability and health of your new pup. Finding a breeder who has a solid reputation of producing healthy, genetically sound pups is definitely your safest bet. And again, you have increased your chances of getting a good quality puppy. Also, a reputable breeder will probably be happy to see you doing research and showing interest in the quality of pup you are getting. It shows you care and chances are you will provide a good home for the pup.

Puppy Socialization

Next, look at the pup's socialization skills. Pups that are bred by small breeding operations are usually raised in the home with the family, resulting in a pup that is

sociably sound and accustomed to the human touch and noises associated with human interaction. Prime examples are Double “H” pups. My wife and I handle our pups everyday from the day they are whelped to the day they go to live with their new families. We encourage our family and friends to play with them once they have reached four to five weeks of age. By seven and eight weeks of age our pups are extremely socialized and never fearful of people.

By the same token, some breeders allow their litters to be “kennel raised”. Although acceptable in some circles, is not in agreement with our philosophy. A responsible breeder, who kennel raises their pups, will make sure his or her pups have plenty of human contact and socialization. A well-socialized pup will have a wagging tail, jumping at your feet, ears held high, friendly, and at ease around anyone who wants to hold or play with the pup.

At the other end of the spectrum is a puppy that has not been socialized or has had limited or no human contact. These pups will cower and be afraid of people, they usually have their tails tucked down between their legs, ears back and down and will run away when trying to be touched or you may have a very independent pup that has no need for human interaction and will rarely acknowledge that you are even in the room. These pups, if not socialized soon, routinely become fearful, threatened, and anxious. They might even try to defend themselves, which could result in biting or snapping. Early socialization, puppy playing and exposure are essential to proper puppy development.

Environment/Home Life

Now let's look at your prospective pup's environment and home life. For the most part the kennels or sleeping quarters should be clean and dry. The pups should smell nice and look bright and alert. They should be free from internal and external parasites. Eyes, ears and nose should be clean, and the pup's coat should be clean and shiny without being thin or having any bald spots. Another good place to look is the pup's "belly-button". It should be well healed by 3 to 4 weeks of age. If it is swollen, red, tender, "oozing" or inflamed it is a good sign that the kennel floor was dirty or the dam (for whatever reason) has rejected the pup and is not performing her natural instincts of cleaning the pup. Possibly, some other trauma happened to the pup that has been left unchecked by the breeder. If not healed correctly or fixed by a veterinarian, it will be a "soft-spot" for bitches when and if they become pregnant and may turn into a hernia later in life.

Looking at the Pup's Parents

One rule of thumb when picking a pup, is to always view the pup with his or her dam, and, if possible, the sire, too. A fairly decent snapshot can be taken as to the pup's future appearance and abilities by looking at the parents. The sire and dam should be relaxed, friendly, and sociable when people are picking and looking at pups. They should also both be judged in accordance with the AKC breed standard. Keep in mind, the dam just whelped a litter of pups so she may appear to be somewhat out of shape. However, she should still look relatively healthy; have bright eyes, an attentive expression, shiny coat, and not without enthusiasm.

Picking Your Pup – Finally

The big day has arrived! You have been on a puppy waiting list for a couple of months and the anxiety has mounted. It's finally time to bring your new pup home. A reputable breeder will not allow a pup to be removed from the litter until it is at least eight weeks old, but ten weeks old is preferable. In certain rare circumstances a breeder might allow the pup to leave the litter at seven weeks of age. This is acceptable, providing the pup is healthy and very well socialized.

Be cautious of a breeder that allows pups to be removed from the litter before they are six weeks old. A pup taken to a new home prior to six weeks of age is at a higher risk of having behavioral issues that will ultimately transcend into training problems. The early release will generally result in the pup's lack of maturity as related to its position in the pack. Dogs are pack animals and in essence they will have been deprived of learning how to be a "member" of a pack. This will ultimately result in your new pup not acknowledging you as the pack "leader". A pup that does not acknowledge you as the leader is very difficult, if not impossible to train. We reiterate, the pup will be much better equipped to be introduced into its' new home if it is allowed to stay with its' siblings for up to ten weeks of age.

Let's look at puppy temperament and personalities. Believe it or not you can make some pretty good judgments about a puppy's temperament between 6-10 weeks of age. For example, let's look at a litter of GSP pups at 8 weeks of age all running around. Watch them eat together, play together and "play fight" together. What do you see? Right off the bat you will see the alpha male or female, always the first out of the

kennel, always the first one to eat. You see one pup off by himself, maybe a little timid. You'll see the growler/barker trying to show dominance. If you are looking for a hunting buddy it is a safe bet to look for the pup that carry things in its mouth, the one that is superiorly aware of its surroundings, and the one that boldly explores, shows confidence and is not afraid to run hard.

There is no exact science or crystal ball that I can give you to help you pick your pup. Also everybody has their own opinion on how to pick the "pick of the litter". The only thing I can emphasize to you in this area is to educate yourself on the specific breed you are considering. By reading this article you have taken your first step in educating yourself about the world of dogs. I believe it is true that you should "pick the litter, not pick the puppy". If you have done your homework and if the breeding was a good breeding, all the pups of that litter have the potential to be the "pick of the litter". If you have found a good breeding from two genetically sound, solid, healthy dogs don't fret over the picking. Take a good look at the pups, take your notes and pick what feels right. Let the breeder guide you through the rest. With a little research, I'm sure you can find that perfect pup you've been searching for.

In the next article we will take your pup home and start puppy training.