



## The Origin and Purpose of the Labrador Retriever by Dr. B.W. Ziessow

The recent proliferation of books written about the Labrador Retriever is consistent with the breed's growth in popularity. All seem to have at least one thing in common; if not the first, one early chapter pertains to the origins and/or history of the Labrador Retriever.

Where did he come from? To understand the origin of the Labrador Retriever, almost requires a study of the history of Newfoundland. The island from whence he came. According to Dick Wolters, probably the best modern dog chronicler of the breed, the first people to settle Newfoundland were the Dorset Eskimos. However, they didn't have any dogs. Nor is there any evidence any dogs inhabited the island when they arrived.

The so called "new world" was known by whalers and fisherman as early as the fifteenth century. Bristol (England) traders "discovered" Newfoundland in 1494 and the Bristol Company attempted to establish its first settlement in 1504; however, it was not until over 100 years later Newfoundland was finally settled; almost entirely by fisherman that jumped ship. It is said that for almost two centuries afterward, the island had no law - courts, police, schools and churches were non-existent.

Notwithstanding it's harsh life, Newfoundland's fishing industry grew and prospered. Each year fleets of fishing boats from England and other European nations were sent to fish it's waters. The dried salted fish was shipped to European countries, principally the Catholic country of the south.

I provided the short insight into life in Newfoundland to give some idea of the environment in which the Labrador Retriever originated and was developed. Where the dog originally came from is open to question. There are many theories pertaining to the origin of the Labrador. One states it was a descendant of the Newfoundland dog - hence the name lesser Newfoundland was used to describe the smaller dog. However, as stated previously there is no evidence that any dogs existed in Newfoundland before the fisherman arrived and it is generally agreed that the ancestors of the Newfoundland dog was also brought to the island by fisherman from the European countries.

Since same was abundant in the island and a good hunting dog could provide food to supplement their fish diet it is believed the early settlers brought or imported dogs hunting stock from home. Accordingly, both the larger and smaller Newfoundland dogs had to be introduced.

In 1662, W.E. Cormack, a native of St. John's made a journey on foot across Newfoundland. In his account of his journey he saw small water dogs which he describes as "admirably trained as retrievers in fowling and are otherwise useful - - the smooth or shorthaired dog is preferred because in frosty weather, the long haired kind become incumbered with ice on coming out off the water."

Since utility was an important factor, the dogs also had to be good strong swimmers and be small

enough for the fisherman to take in his dory. A good friend and business associate (w. Wallace anderson), who was born and raised in Newfoundland reports that as late as the 1920's, Newfoundland fishermen carried a Labrador Retriever in the dory to retrieve fish that came off the trawl. He also stated that, while the larger and smaller dogs (Newfoundlands and Labradors) slept together under the house they did not interbreed.

The Labrador's hunting and swimming ability, as well as his good disposition did not go unnoticed by the English sportsmen. When organized shooting of pheasant, grouse and partridges became popular among the landed gentry in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries it became the custom to replace pointers and setters with retrievers. In the early days, a retriever was simply known as a "retriever" and the owners freely interbreed short coated, long coated and curly coated retrievers. Many dogs were imported from Newfoundland and their owners considered them vastly superior as retrievers to any other breed.

Colonel Hawker, in 1830, referred to the St. John's breed of water dogs as, "by far the best for any kind of shooting he is generally black and no bigger than a pointer, very fine in legs with short smooth hair and does not carry his tail so much curled; is extremely quick retrieving, swimming and fighting."

The 2nd Earl of Malmsbury is credited to have imported some of the first St. John's or Labrador dogs about or before 1830 his son, the third Earl (1807-1889) imported many and bred them. Among others who imported dogs from Newfoundland about 1835 were the 5th Duke of Buccleuch, his brother Lord John Scott and the 10th Earl of Home.

The 3rd Earl of Malmsbury in a letter written to the 6th Duke of Buccleuch said, "We always call mine Labrador dogs and I have kept the breed as pure as I could from the first I had -- the real breed may be known by their having a close coat which turns water off like oil, and, about all, a tail like an otter." However, all breeders did not always "keep the breed pure". Many breeders, realizing the excellent qualities, crossed Labradors with other retrievers. Still, if a Labrador is crossed with some other strain, the Labrador type nearly always predominated and their descendants were most always called Labradors.

"Stonehenge", writing in 1873 included the following in his description and scale of points of the Labrador Retriever.

"Symmetry and temperament - the symmetry and elegance of this dog are considerable and should be valued highly. The evidences of a good temper must be regarded with great care since his utility depends on his disposition."

The Labrador Retriever was first recognized as a special breed by the Kennel Club (England) on 7th July, 1903, at which time it was decided to give classes at the Kennel Club Show for Labradors as a separate breed. On 3rd november, 1903, Labradors were definitely recognized as a separate breed and on 3rd january, 1905, they were separately classified as a sub-variety of retrievers.

In 1923 the Hon. A Holland Hibbert (later Lord Knutsford) wrote an article in which various

points of the breed conformation are described:

Having been asked to write something of description and characteristics of the Labrador Retriever for those who taking an interest in the breed let me first give recognized description:

Shoulder height 21 to 23 inches Bitches 2 or 3 inches less

Average weight About 60 lbs

Coat Straight, neither wave nor curl, the thicker and closer the better. Dogs have a harder and coarser coat than bitches.

Head Skull broad and well domed leaving plenty of "brain pan". Ears rather far back and set fairly high (but not cocked up like a collie's) and rather small. Avoid mastiff-like head with its heavy hang and shape of ears. The 'stop' is not very pronounced. Muzzle on the square side as opposed to the snippy shape, which is much to be avoided.

Colour of eye Brown - the colour of burnt sugar a generous affectionate aspect is characteristic of the breed and this rules out any tendency to snub nose.

Shoulders and body Rather laid back, chest on the broad side - ribs really well sprung - body compact - back straight and good loins.

Feet and legs Forelegs straight and the more cat-like the feet the better. Splay feet are much to be avoided.

Tail The nearer the level carriage and the closer resemblance to an otter tail the better, i.e. short and thick at stump with the hair underneath divided almost as if parted

General appearance The general appearance should be that of a strong built, short coupled very active dog - wider in the head than a flat coat and wider through the chest - ribs well spring-coat close and dense, coat free from curl and wave - skull wide giving plenty of brain room - tail short and straight - eyes colour of burnt sugar - feet small and upright."

It was not until 1917 that the first Labrador was registered by the American Kennel Club. In 1927, there were only twenty three retrievers of all kinds (Labradors, goldens, flat coat, curly coat and Chesapeake) registered with the AKC. During the twenties, American sportsmen, attempting to emulate the Scottish sport of pass shooting, brought in young Scottish gamekeepers, bought guns from the finest London gunsmiths and imported dogs from British kennels. Some wealthy families virtually turned their estates into shooting preserves. It wasn't long before the "shoots" developed into field trials. The first trial licensed by the AKC was held December 21, 1931. According to James Cowie.

The early licensed Labrador Retriever trials were the result of the work of Franklin B. Lord, the moving force behind the small group of sportsmen that organized the Labrador Retriever Club.

The Labrador Retriever Club, was incorporated under the laws of the State of New York on October 7, 1931. The particular objects of the Club were stated as follows:

- (a) To maintain, foster and encourage a spirit of cooperation in the breeding owning and exhibiting of pure bred Labrador Retriever dogs by individuals, organizations, kennel clubs, show clubs and specialty clubs
- (b) To formulate, define, ascertain and publish the the standard type of Labrador Retriever dogs and to procure standard type of Labrador Retriever dogs and to induce the adoption of said standard type by breeders, judges, dog owners, dog show committees and others, and to endeavor to have standard type recognized by all, so that the Labrador Retriever breed shall be judged by said standard.
- (c) To encourage foster help, aid and assist to protect advance and increase the interest of people in the Labrador dog breed.
- (d) To offer prizes, create publicity and give and support shows where Labrador Retriever dogs are exhibited.
- (e) To do all such acts and things as are incident or conducive to the premises and generally to do all acts and things and to exercise all the powers now or hereafter authorized by law necessary to carry on the said Corporation or to promote any of the objects of said Corporation, all of which shall be conducted without pecuniary profits.

The Clubs first annual specialty show was held on May 18,1933 in New York City. The judge was Mrs. Marshal Field, Best in Show was awarded to Mr. F. B. Lord's Boli of Blake who was the first Labrador to earn his American championship. (Nov.1, 1933)

The first Best in Show Labrador in this country, Ch. Earlsmoor Moor of Arden, ran and placed in field trials. When Labradors were a relatively rare breed, his show record would, even today, be considered remarkable -- times shown 42, best of breed 40, placed in sporting group 27 times, won sporting group 12 times, awarded best in show 5 times, and won the national specialty 5 times. Based on the number of the Labradors shown today, perhaps this proves proliferation. Sometimes works in reverse.

It is important for any Labrador fancier or judge to recognize and appreciate that the Labrador Retriever was imported into England and introduced into this country by gentlemen and lady sportsmen for one, and only one, purpose -to retrieve upland game and water fowl.

The American sportsmen adopted the breed from England and subsequently developed and trained the dog to fulfill the hunting needs of this country. Today, as in the past, the Labrador will eagerly enter in ice cold water in Minnesota to retrieve a shot bird; he'll work all day hunting doves in the heat of the Southwest -- his only reward is a pat for a job well done.

As a judge of the breed for over thirty years and a breeder since 1951, my personal description of the breed is that of a strongly built, medium size, short coupled, active dog possessing an

athletic, well-balanced conformation that enables it to function as a retrieving gun dog; the substance and soundness to hunt waterfowl or upland game for long hours under difficult conditions; the character and quality to win in the show ring; and the temperament to be a family companion. Physical features and mental characteristics should denote a dog bred to perform as an efficient retriever of game with a stable temperament suitable for a variety of pursuits beyond the hunting environment.

Above all the Labrador Retriever must be well balanced - the components of his anatomy in proper correlation, enabling him to move in the show ring or run in the field with little or no effort. The true Labrador possesses elegance without over refinement and substance with out lumber or cloddiness.

The Officers and Directors of the Labrador Retriever Club, as well as the majority of the sportsmen involved in the breed are disturbed with a recent trend towards two so called "types" of Labrador Retrievers -- field dogs and show dogs. We are concerned if the trend persists, the breed may be divided into two separate and distinct kinds of dogs, as have so many breeds in the sporting group.

It is our opinion that the show dog and field dog should have exactly the same conformation and condition. Additionally, we believe the first question that should come to mind in judging the Labrador Retriever is "Can the dog do the job he was originally intended to do?"

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