

Griffonpoint's Thoughts on Puppy Selection

There are generally a variety of temperament types in puppies from any given litter. These types will range from confident, bold, possessive and driven to tentative, passive, submissive, and cooperative, and any number of combinations. The temperament qualities that breeders select to carry their breeding program forward are defined by the activities that they (the breeders) engage in with their dogs.

For many breeders, availability of land, wild game, pen raised game (for training), costs of fuel and time, seasons and social stigmas, etc. make the hunting of wild game difficult enough that they look to other venues to test and select their upcoming prospects. And there are many breeders who no longer find the time or ability to hunt with their dogs so instead participate in hunting Trials, Tests and Competitions. These events seek to evaluate the talents required of gun dogs. Tests and competitions attempt to evaluate each dog's use of nose, tracking, stamina, prey drive, and requisite, supreme obedience.

But it needs to be mentioned that Field Trials/Hunt Tests are not necessarily the same as hunting. The requirements are different. A FT dog will often be required to quarter to a signal, retrieve to hand, point planted birds that will or won't flush when pressured, etc. A Hunt Tested dog will be required to make a direct line on a marked retrieve without deviating from the sent course to take an easier in or out, must retrieve to hand without dropping the bird or stopping to shake, etc. In a Trial or Test, a dog is not generally permitted to manage a moving bird, this is often seen as creeping and unsteady. A faultless performance is rewarded, supreme obedience is rewarded. A thinking dog might be penalized for widely circling a running bird to help pin it. Conversely, an owner out hunting with his dog will not find his hunting experience compromised if his dog, who after a 30 minute water search, drops the bird on shore to shake before picking it up again to bring the rest of the way back to the blind to drop it at the shooter's feet. While hunting wild birds, a dog need not know quartering signals, if he is handled well and is connected to the shooter/falconer, he will naturally work to front. If fanning out to the East is using the wind to the best advantage (the dog will probably already be there) the handler need only turn and walk to the East a bit, the dog will naturally work to the front and East. If a thinking dog realizes that the bird is running 50 yards ahead of the gun/hawk and it will not set or flush, and the dog chooses to work way around to head the bird off, the handler will not be disappointed, he will be thankful for the opportunity to harvest that bird as opposed to disappointed that his dog deviated from what the judges expected to see that day.

Successful trial dogs must be perfectly obedient. Training is rigorous and requires consistency, timing, repetition and judgement. After perfect obedience is attained, the dog must have enough drive and desire left to do the job. 'Soft' dogs generally fail or wash out. Dogs who shut down during obedience training or who don't have enough desire/drive to hunt after becoming obedient to all commands, are passed on. These softer dogs do not make it into breeding programs that focus on competing and testing. The more assertive, resilient pups do make it into breeding programs as they generally take the rigors of obedience training and of hunt testing better than their softer siblings. This is how some breeders create subsequently tougher and tougher hunting dogs.

Conversely, the majority of owners who own dogs to help them hunt and harvest wild game are happy to have a dog find, hold, flush and retrieve game efficiently if not robotically. If the dog drops a bird to shake when he reaches the shore, the hunter is

glad to pick it up off of the ground and continue the hunt, the quality of his hunting experience is not affected because the bird was not delivered to hand. Perfect obedience is not necessarily the goal, harvesting wild game together is the goal. The majority of these owners will not have the consistency, timing, judgement and dedication to obedience that Trial trainers do. For these reasons, a different kind of dog is indicated. A dog that is innately cooperative, naturally defers, is not competitive and seeks the company of others is much easier to convince to want to hunt with a gun or a hawk. But because many breeders choose to FT and test their breeding stock, fewer and fewer of these softer, more cooperative types are being promoted or used in breeding programs.

As my understanding of breeding evolves and broadens, I recognize the differences in program goals and how these affect what a breeder will look for when evaluating young puppies. Most breeders tend to look for the driven pup who is most eager to engage with birds; that pup who might be the most eager to fixate upon then chase and then point a feather. The pup who sits by and watches, who backs off of a bird when another pup comes in aggressively or who flares off when the bird flushes will often be overlooked. Interestingly, I have noticed that those softer pups are getting as much out of the early exposure as the more aggressive pups. In my breeding program I often see the more submissive, cautious pup go on to be just as driven, just as talented, but more cooperative than his more assertive siblings. A more submissive dog will have all of the drive and focus and style he needs to find and engage with game, but be more aware of and willing to use a human in the field. This desire to work as a pack, to participate in a synergistic relationship, is hardwired into all pack hunting predators. There are some breeds of dogs and individuals who tend to have stronger pack tendencies than others, these dogs tend to be much easier to train because they want to work in a cooperative effort to harvest prey. Dogs who are bred to run big, and who are bred to be independent tend to require more pressure to be steady when they engage with prey. It is harder to break their focus and they often don't feel the need or desire to remain steady until the shooter or hawk arrives to help harvest it. Left to their own devices, they will flush and chase every time. I am not saying that a softer dog will not flush and chase, but he is much less likely to do so if he feels like he will be more successful if he waits for the gun or hawk, he is more willing to work cooperatively to achieve the goal. I will clarify that running big is relative in certain breeds and individuals. Running big because a dog is covering more ground more efficiently, but is absolutely aware of where the gun or hawk is at all times, is completely different from a dog who is running big because he can't wait to get over the hill and out of sight of his handler so that he can bump and chase game. Of course handling is a large part of this, but that is another topic for another day.

The prospective buyer has a difficult task in finding the breeder most likely provide a pup who will meet his hunting and companion expectations. They also have a difficult task in finding supportive literature, videos and people who will be able to help him train his dog for his venue. My advice to any buyer is to find a breeder who does what he plans to do with his new puppy and does it well. If the buyer fancies Field Trialing, he should go to some Field Trials to see if he enjoys them, attend some training sessions to see if he enjoys the process, observe Field Trialed stock in and around the home to see if the energy level and needs are compatible with his lifestyle, then choose a breeder who he believes will be a good mentor. If the buyer is looking for a hunting partner to harvest wild birds, he should look for a breeder who hunts the same wild game in similar conditions that he plans to hunt. Any breeder who purports to breed hunting dogs will offer to take the prospective buyer out with gun or hawk to show their

dogs' style, cooperation and aptitude for hunting. If a breeder is too far away to visit, they will have unedited videos of their dogs working, or even other clients with relations to the pups on offer, who will be glad to show their own dog in the field. Additionally, a buyer must clarify their expectations in their dog's behavior while out hunting. Do they need Steady to Wing or Flush, Steady to Wing, Shot and Fall, Retrieve, Honor, tracking, water search? What does a Steady dog look like? Will they be using an electronic training collar or even two at the same time? How much time are they able to dedicate to learning how to handle their dog? A buyer should understand that more FT titles in a pup's pedigree will not ensure desired results. In fact, more FT titles may be a good reason to not buy a pup if FTs are not what a buyer plans to do with his pup. I am not saying that FT stock make poor hunting dogs at all, many make fine hunting companions. But I am advising 'horses for courses'. Choosing a puppy from parents who behave, look and perform to expectations is the best way to start. Continuing with the breeder's advice in training is the next step. The breeder who is successfully training his dogs for his venue, whether it is FTing or hunting, will most likely have methods that work with his dogs.

And a buyer need not be too afraid of that puppy who sits back and observes while his siblings are in the middle of things. With adequate socialization, opportunity and exposure to game, experience running and playing with other dogs and children and not too much early obedience training, that pup may very well end up being the star of his litter and a gem in the field and home.

Katy Stuehm

Working with **Brad Higgins** in the Higgins Training Method since 2007.

My Words :- Breeder of outstanding working and companion Korthals Griffons (Wirehaired Pointing Griffons) with Griffonpoint founder Shannon Ford since 2003.

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