

I Just Want . . .

“I just want...” What a mouthful. This article has been running around in my head for years. Over the past fifteen years as a professional dog trainer and breeder, I have heard this overly simplified statement hundreds of times. It sounds like a simple request but when you delve into what the person wants and expects it becomes extremely complex.

First, let's clear the deck by saying something simple like, “all dogs are not alike.” For example let's talk about sporting dogs (in our case pointing dogs, flushers, and retrievers). They come in all shapes and sizes even in the same breed. Some are smart, some are not, some are healthy, many are not, some are highly trainable and many are not. In other words it is not like going to buy a Chevy Tahoe and just looking for price and availability. Buying dogs is not as simple as buying a car.

To get back to, “I just want...,” the four most common things I hear are: 1) I don't want a show dog, I just want a good pet; 2) I don't want a field trial dog, I just want a good hunter; 3) I just want the dog to retrieve; and 4) Do I really need to spend any money, I just want something for my kids to play with. Each one of these statements oversimplifies what the person really expects.

As far as the show concept goes, I am not a big fan of what has evolved in this venue. The only breed that the show ring has not distorted is the Brittany. This dog is the #1 Breed of Dual Champions. This means that the same dog is a Bench Champion (Show) and a Field Champion. The balance of the sporting dogs has been damaged or ruined through years of breeding to meet the standards of the breed in the show ring.

One example of this is demonstrated by a story a dog handler once told me of a Westminster Show Winner (Irish Setter) that would have a hard time eating if he moved the food dish, never mind successfully finding, pointing, and retrieving a bird to hand. The originally desired traits of the breed have been sacrificed to achieve physical attributes.

In show breeding the look is EVERYTHING. The dog might have mild hip dysplasia, temperament trouble, low trainability, or any other dysfunctional attributes, but if it has the *looks*, the dog is a winner in the show ring. However, the dogs that don't make it in shows may be too big or small, may have a bad bite, or just may not have the look or style. These dogs often become *pet quality* when they are sold. The price of the dog is often discounted, and the breeder tells you what a great deal you are getting. The family pet market then becomes the dumping ground for the show dogs that don't make it.

Could you get a satisfactory dog from one of these people? Absolutely, however, when the look is the strong suit, you might get an unhealthy, untrainable, or unstable dog to spend the next decade with. Is this **just** what you are looking for?

The next topic, “I don't want a Field Champion, I just want a great hunting dog.” When I asked the person what he thinks a Field Champion is he gave me a wide array of comments from what might be true to the ridiculous. First of all there are many people who would give their right arm for a show or field champion. They work their lives

spending a small fortune and much time and energy working toward achieving the title and will never take a dog to that level. It is not like driving through McDonalds' drive through and ordering a Big Mac, fries, and a Coke. Like any game or sport there are good and bad people in both, there are honest and dishonest people. When people call and say they just want a hunting dog they don't understand what it takes to make *just a hunting dog*.

An example of this is a woman who called from a referral of another person whose dog I had trained. She had two one-year-old English Setters. In the conversation I asked her what her goals were. She very confidently stated that she wanted both dogs to be great hunters. I dug deeper to find out her definition of a good hunter; and she said as though it were no big deal, "I just want the dogs to hunt close, find birds, point the birds, and retrieve them when they are shot. I also would like them to hunt as a team and to be able to hunt with my casual hunting friends when I can't take them."

"THAT'S ALL?" I thought to myself.

The pointing dog I hunted grouse with last year was a 3-year-old Brittany, named Rusty. He was born here at Kirby Mountain Sporting Dogs, well socialized, and had 10 months of formal training over his first three years of life. In addition, he was force broke to retrieve, another 2 months of training, and was handled by me alone (no one had the opportunity to make mistakes with him). This season, with all of this work combined with his maturity, he pointed 95% of the woodcock he encountered and 75% of the grouse. He retrieved every shot bird to hand and was a pleasure to hunt with. When people say to me, "I just want a dog like Rusty," I say, "Fine, you can just write me a check for \$10,000, or you can buy a well bred dog, don't allow anybody to hinder his progress and spend the next 4 to six years training and hunting your dog." *Just a hunting dog* is a misconception. You need to understand what it takes to get what it is you are expecting out of your hunting companion.

In looking back to the situation with the woman who had not only one dog she wanted to be *just a good gun dog*, but two setters, we need to understand the further complications of the expectations in wanting *just a good gun dog*. The two setters were brothers but were no more like siblings than night is like day, which is not uncommon for two pups that are raised together. One was extremely bold and the other very shy. Throughout the training the bold one became bolder and the submissive one became more submissive. This is often a result of the pecking order in practice.

The bold dog would come out of the box and couldn't do anything wrong. He was searching for birds, pointing them, and was happy at this new game. The shy one was afraid of everything and everyone. He appeared to be gun shy (a man made problem) which no one but the dog let me know, and it was very obvious that he was not having fun. When a dog has experienced a traumatic experience with a gun and the dog is then brought for training, the owner should always inform the trainer of the traumatic experience. This owner forgot, or did he? Dogs do not lie—their traumatic experiences show like a red flag in the first few sessions of training.

The reason I bring up this pair is that the goal of the owner was achievable, though very lofty, only with the bold dog. The goal with the shy dog seemed next to impossible.

Although the dogs had the same genetic origin and were raised in the same environment, this example underscores my earlier statement that not all dogs are created equal.

Retrieving is another “I just want...” topic. Many people can't believe that their dog will not retrieve to hand. For the record, many dogs don't. People become confused by the term *natural retriever*. It is natural for the dog to run after an object (prey drive), but it then does not know what to do when it catches the object. A dog chasing a car is an example of this. No, not many dogs can retrieve a car. Many dogs will race out after things and pick them up and run away. The chase is on! Or, other dogs will do what I call the victory lap. This is when the dog makes the retrieve and decides to bring it to you but has to parade around for 5 minutes showing you who is in charge.

The only 100% predictable application for a dog to chase the object, pick it up, and return it to your hand is the trained retrieve also called force breaking. If you just want your dog to go to a sent object, pick it up gently (without chewing it up), and straight line it back to you to a sit or standing position in front of you while it waits patiently for your command to *drop*, then you need to force break your dog. Just retrieving is not a totally natural activity for all dogs.

The last “I just want...” is the person who has the misconception that they can get any dog that's available and just have a great pet. Whether the dog is free, inexpensive, or very expensive, a buyer must do their homework. The dog from the shelter, from the rescue, from your neighbor's friend, or your brother's boss may not be the best way to choose a dog to make a great family pet. People don't get rid of great dogs for no reason. Don't get me wrong. Choosing a dog from a shelter or rescue can be a rewarding humanitarian experience. But it can also be a disaster if you are not properly prepared or forewarned. It is likely that a dog from any of these situations will come with more baggage than a Greyhound bus. They have not been given away because they were great dogs.

Being a professional dog trainer I get many calls for help with these rescue dogs and the problems they bring to their families. Some things can be fixed easily and some almost never. Again it is people's expectations and what they are willing to live with that will make these situations successful or not.

In most of these cases not only behavior problems arise but also you are playing Russian Roulette with the health portion of the dog. You never know what will go wrong or when. Even in the best situations when you do know the bloodlines of the dog and its genetic make up, there can be problems but most times you at least know what you are dealing with. Our dogs at Kirby Mountain Sporting Dogs come from generations of healthy and trainable dogs along with a health and temperament guarantee, there are no such guarantees with dogs from shelters, casual breeders, neighbors, or friends. Getting an inexpensive dog or a free dog seems financially pleasing at the time; however if the dog ends up with a serious genetic problem such as hip dysplasia, the owner can end up spending hundreds of dollars with vet exams, tons of emotional and physical energy, and it may eventually be determined that the dog needs two artificial

hips at the cost of about \$1,500.00 each. Remember the adage, “You only get what you pay for.”

As you think about your hunting companion and family pet, you want to remember the commitment you are making and then think about just how easy it is to get just exactly what you want. Or is it?

All I can remember is the person saying, “I just wanted a dog.”

Good luck and great hunting,

John

at Kirby Mountain Kennels