

## Are We Dual Purpose Dogs?

Three letters from the Shooting times from 1985. The three letter in Shooting Times is a reaction to an article by Peter Moxon – also in Shooting Times.

Flatcoat revival - by Peter Moxon from Gundogs, Shooting Times and Country Magazine in May 9 – 15, 1985

Nobody could be more pleased than I am to learn that there is a movement afoot to resuscitate that grand old breed, the flatcoated Retriever, as a genuine shooting and field trial dog. At the turn of the last century flatcoats were pre-eminent in the field and seemed to be carrying all before them, but the subsequent emergence of the Labrador and the golden retriever ousted them in popularity, so much so that, nowadays, retriever trials are often referred to as “Labrador” trials. With this decline in fortune, usually attributed to the outstanding pace and style of the Labrador plus its “trainability” and docility, shooting men and trailers (apart from a dedicated few) lost interest, and the flatcoat became prey to the show fraternity which, as always when it gets its claws into working breeds, wreaked outstanding characteristics which, originally, the breed undoubtedly possessed, qualities such as nose, courage, perseverance and stamina, which are still in evidence in dogs bred and owned by the handful of enthusiasts who have now got together and are determined to put the flatcoat back on the map as a practical shooting dog – where it rightfully belongs.

Register of working flatcoats.

In view of my high regard for the flatcoated retriever, and indeed, of the cause of all the “Cinderella” breeds of gundog which performed a very useful job of work for the shooting fraternity, I offer no apologies for reproducing below an appeal from the faithful band of flatcoat admirers in the hope that interested readers will respond and assist in reviving the fortunes of a very worthwhile gundog: “There has been a steady increase in the popularity of the flatcoat since the war, but with the success of flatcoat winning Crufts, the explosion of flatcoats on the open market has brought an imbalance. Whilst the breed is flourishing in the show ring, the natural gundog ability with which the breed was once so generously endowed is being diluted almost to a point of no return by the great increase in numbers.

“A group of like-minded people agree that action must be taken to protect the working characteristic of the dog. This group will aim toward the elimination, of penal faults, such as whining and hard mouth, and to improve working ability and trainability be selective breeding to these ends. Attention will be paid to good temperament, general soundness and stamina.”

“The resulting progeny will be placed in the hands of dedicated trainers as far as possible, and only the best will be bred from. Hopefully, this process will continue until we have a large pool of dogs working satisfactorily in the field an even in field trials.”

“It is vital that the group b recognised by the shooting man and the working gundog world in general, and to this end a declaration of our aims was made at the 1985 Annual General Meeting of the Flatcoated Retriever Society. In the main our group consists of people who have striven for this endeavour on their own in past – gamekeepers, shooting men, ad very important to us, keen field trailers.”

“The group intends to compile a register of working flatcoats and we ask your help if you know of any flatcoats in your area, and you know the dogs to be free from penal faults, we would be grateful for this information and the name of the owners, as they may wish to bcome involved in this group. We do know that not all flatcoat owners are members of the Society, and naturally we do not seek to impose our aims on others, but any help offered would be greatly accepted.

Peter Moxon.

#### FATE OF THE FLATCOAT – WORKER – SHOWDOG OR BOTH.

By Patricia D. Chapman from letters to the Editor, Shooting Times & Country Magazine, June 13 – 19, 1985.

Sir, I would like to reply to the recent article by Peter Moson about flatcoated retrievers.

In it he supports the efforts of the group of flatcoated retriever owners who are attempting to improve the working ability of the breed. I support the principle in its entirety type., but not the method. The letter circulated by the group requested details of working dogs, placing great emphasis on working ability, trainability, temperament, general soundness and stamina – all essential attributes of any good working gundog. Surely this is the point: it could be a Labrador, golden retriever or any gundog; the vital difference – which was not

mentioned – was bred. This is the one element that separates the breeds. Bred type must be maintained otherwise the flatcoat will go the way of many breeds where the working lines hardly bear any resemblance to the breed standard. What is the point of an excellent working flatcoat, described as a black retriever?

I do not accept that winning Crufts has had any detrimental effect on the working side of the breed. How many people in the group have used “show dog” on their working lines. Not many, if any. Therefore this cannot have led to the dilution of the working ability. I believe it is a poor excuse for a much more fundamental problem, the ascendancy of the Labrador retriever. If quantity causes a dilution of working ability, why is this not so in Labradors, as they are numerically far greater than the flatcoat?

I obtained my first flatcoat in 1974, which time the breed had already started to expand, not in 1980 when we had the Crufts success. Few of the established breeders can run their dogs regularly in test, even fewer running in field trials. Of the established breeders, only Dr. Nancy Laughton, Read Flowers, Colin Wells and Peter Johnson supported both shows and trial. Dr. Laughton and Colin Wells have ceased to show their dogs. Read Flowers and Peter Johnson still do so, but not as regularly. We do not have as many working owners who are prepared to breed for looks as previously, but we have more people than ever who show dogs and attempt to work them. My own line is bred from Colin Wells’ “W” dogs, five have got qualifiers and I accept that the working fraternity frown on this qualification but our breed still has more full champions than any other. My dogs have run in working test and Brett have run in field trials and picks up regularly. Surely it is more than a little harsh to blame him for the decline of working flatcoats.

Let us unite to improve the working ability and looks of our breed. We do not want a break-away group; Let us through our breed society support the people, too numerous to mention who try to work and show their dogs, of which there are far more now than 10 years ago. The fate of breed is in the hands of the owners and breeders. Let us all work together to create unity, not conflict.

Patricia D. Chapman, Coleorton, Leicestershire.

Working Flatcoats.

By the Hon. Amelia Jessel from Letters to the Editor, Shooting Times & Country Magazine, July 4 10, 1985.

Sir, Patricia Chapman's letter (June 13 issue) on the working ability and breed type of the flatcoated retriever has spurred me to write. I agree with her supporting the principles of the newly -formed working group and in wanting to retain breed type. I believe also that the winning of her Champion Shargleam Blackcap, of the Supreme Championship at Cruft's was not the main reason for the flatcoat population explosion although no doubt it did encourage mere people to jump on the bandwagon. Flatcoat interest was already on the increase before Brett's win. Pat has also always been most careful not to exploit her win although pressures on her must have been great.

My view diverges from hers in other ways. The ascendancy of the Labrador retriever is no new cause for the decline of the flatcoat. This began before the First World War. Many theories have been advanced to explain it.

The emergence (in the early 1900s) of several very good field trial Labradors; the demise of the big flatcoat kennels during the First World War, new kennels for the up-and-coming breed of Labradors being started up after the War; the free inter-breeding of Labradors and flatcoats when the progeny of these crosses often favoured the Labrador in looks, the longer coat of the flatcoat (rather a suspect theory in view of the increase in popularity of the golden retriever and the English springer spaniel) and last, but not least, the emergence of the "fiddle-headed" and "Borzoi-type" flatcoats, bred with extra long head for the show ring.

These caused much acrimonious correspondence in the sporting magazines of those days. Labrador breeders were determined "not to ruin their breed by allowing the show fancy to dictate its breeding." The flatcoat, however, thanks to a few dedicated breeders, managed, with only a small breeding pool, to struggle through until after the Second World War. It still managed to retain a few challenge certificates at Championship Shows and the Society still manage (just) to fill the 12 -dog all-aged stake, and we have even been able to run one and sometimes two, non-winner stakes.

This is the state of the working dogs today. The show dogs, however, have not been content with this modest improvement (if improvement it is). Classes of 20 - 30 flatcoats are commonplace now at shows; challenge certificates are now on offer at nearly every Championship Show throughout the country; the Society runs its

own Championship Show ( with over 400 entries) and an Open Show each year; breed type and quality are now established.

It will be seen, therefore, that it is not so much that the working flatcoat has actually declined in numbers now, but that the show and pet side has increased enormously.

This sorry state of affairs has been pushed into the open by the establishment of the shooting dog certificate days which we (The Flatcoated Retriever society) began to run several years ago. These were designed to encourage people with ordinary working dogs to demonstrate their capability on a normal day's shooting. They were asked to sit their dogs at a stand during which the dogs had to remain quiet and that they should retrieve tenderly from whatever cover was around. In short, to behave themselves as ordinary shooting dogs should.

It became obvious only too soon that some supposed workers had never been called upon to retrieve live game or to sit at a drive. Breeders and trainers dedicated to the working flatcoat knew that something had to be done, and quickly, to redress the balance and breed back into the flatcoat its inherent working ability. For this reason the working group was formed.

It has been said that the breed will be split; that working flatcoats will come to look like whippets or collies; that the breed will no longer be dual-purpose. (Dual purpose should be looked upon from both angles. If the flatcoat 30 years ago was dual-purpose, it is now much less so because it is so heavily biased on the show pet side. The working side must now redress the balance or be lost altogether.)

I agree entirely with Patricia that we must work together to create unity. We are most fortunate that our breed standard was drawn up many years ago with imagination and foresight. The conformation of the show-bench winners allows it to work with style and stamina. I hope this will never be lost, but unfortunately the inherited but invisible qualities of soft-mouth, fitness and trainability can manifest themselves only on a proper day's shooting.

It is to breed for these characteristics that the working group has been formed. I would be surprised if any of its supporters liked the idea of breeding "whippet" or "collie-type" flatcoats, but if some type is lost in order to gain some of the essential working characteristics it

should not be too difficult to breed back to type from some of the excellent show specimens, many of which at present are not far removed from genuine workers.

I hope that neither flatcoated retriever nor their owner split into factions. I believe that it is unnecessary to do so and that we can continue to work and show our dogs in harmony, but that we should remember that it is the breed itself, formed over 100 years ago as a specialised shooting dog, that is in danger of losing the essence of its character.

Th Hon. Amalie Jessel, Stoke Charity, Hampshire.

THE FLATCOAT TODAY – by Dr. N. Laughton from “The Working Gundog”, Summer Quarterly Issue, 1985.

The prototype of modern retrievers was the black wavy-coated dog. From these the Flatcoated Variety was stabilised in type mainly by Mr. S. E. Shirley who founded the Kennel Club in 1873. Up until, and for years after, the turn of the century, no self-respecting field sportsman was without one. As a gamefinder he was indispensable, and as a companion he was lovable, extremely loyal and elegant. He fell from fashion with the emergence of the modern Labrador and the Golden Retriever which were recognized by the Kennel Club in 1902 and 1912 respectively, but interbreeding with the Labrador took place for a number of years.

The Flatcoat's fortunes have ebbed and flowed a good deal over the years. In the nineteen-forties his numbers reached a dangerously low level on account of the World War, but some lines were rescued by a great effort on the part of a few devoted adherents. Numbers built up slowly with a gradual progressive increase, but exploded with his popularity as a show dog. This cult was fuelled by the winning of the much sought-after Supreme Championship at Crufts in 1980 by a flatcoat, with its tendency to produce commercial interest in the breed, and to many old and new breeders, showing became of paramount importance. Today the great majority of Flatcoat breeders have little or no interest in working ability which is always taken for granted.

There has been very little breeding of the working dog. Many breeders have leaned too heavily on the dual-purpose concept, but their stock has not been properly tested in the field. Because this has not been done, as it should have been at each generation, very little genuine working stock is available to sportmen who value the Flatcoat's excellent working potential in the field.

This situation has been a source of great worry to a number of sporting Flatcoat patrons over many years, but nothing radical has yet been done to counter it. Now, at last a group of like-minded people agree that action must be taken to protect the working characteristic of the dog. This group (the group Mr. Wilson Stephens referred to in his article in the "Field" of October 1984) will aim towards the elimination of penal faults, such as "whining" and "hard-mouth", and to improve working ability and trainability by selective breeding these ends. Attention will be paid to good temperament, general soundness and stamina. A register of satisfactory breeding stock will be compiled.

It is vital that the group be recognised by the shooting man and the working gundog world in general, and to this end a declaration of aims was made at the 1985 Annual General Meeting of the Flatcoated Retriever Society. In the main the group consists of people who have strived for this endeavour on their own in the past, gamekeepers, shooting men and keen field trailers. Members of the group were responsible for the establishment of a test of working ability in the shooting field. Successful entrants are awarded a "Shooting Dog Certificate" in one of two grades, the difference resting only on steadiness as this is a matter for the trainer rather than the dog. Although judged by two Grade A field trial judges the test is not run on field lines. It is held on an ordinary shooting day by courtesy of the shooting members; the only alteration to their routine is that the "pickers up" have to forgo their work in favour of four Flatcoats under test. Printed guidelines are available so that the details of the procedure are quite clear to all concerned. Entrants are advised that the dogs should have had reasonable experience of game in the field and should not whine or damage game. The dogs are tested for hunting, game finding, entering thick cover and water and being reasonably under control. Every effort is made to let each dog collect a "runner" as well as an adequate number of dead birds. The handler is allowed to move about fairly freely to help the dog. The results of

these tests over three seasons have revealed faults such as to preclude some of the dogs as breeders.

A good working Flatcoat is still renowned for his ability, and in game finding is second to none. Many today are seen “piking up” at formal shoots and those that are under reasonable control and intelligently worked by their handlers are very welcome and earn the praise given to them in the field.

Perhaps the Flatcoat possesses great charisma which endears them to so many who experience this and because he carries the exuberance of youth into adult life, maturity comes later than in the Labrador, but this has its compensation in a longer active life in the field. However, patience is needed on the part of the trainer and he must realise that the Flatcoat’s natural working ability makes him self-reliant and tend to work independently, so it is essential that he must be well discipline in basic obedience and hand training before the important step of introduction to the shooting field is taken.

Nancy Laughton

**Flatcoat Revival** by Dr. Nancy Laughton from Letter to the Editor, Shooting Time and Country Magazine, July 18-24, 1985.

Sir, I must compliment Mrs. Louise Petrie-Hay on her excellent article on some aspects of gundog training (June 27). However, my main reason for writing is to respond to Miss P. D. Chapman’s letter on flatcoats (June 13).

I am pleased to hear that she support the working flatcoat to a degree. She expressed the opinion that to breed selectively to maintain and improve working ability would result in the flatcoat type being lost. With this I disagree. Flatcoats have arisen from a very narrow breeding base: very much aggravated by the last World War, by the late 1940’s, breed numbers were exceedingly low. At that time we older breeders had to seek out, from all over the country, all possible lines (many of which had been lost completely) to save the breed. From this effort type has been re-established over the years and, in my opinion, improved greatly.

I agree that in selective breeding to maintain working ability it is also necessary to keep a good conformation as this goes with working physique, the main details of which closely stated in the original, then Retriever Variety standard, drawn up in 1924 by the original club of the working flatcoat, the flatcoated Retriever Association (who showed their dogs only occasionally). All the frills and fancy standards, have added nothing to the working ability of the flatcoat. An extreme example (which admittedly spoils the dog’s expression) is a sub-standard lightness of eye; dogs with these are



not known to be associated with indifferent work. In fact, many sporting owners have asserted that these dogs possess excellent marking ability and neither do lighter-eyed dog show any defect in temperament.

Other sundog breeds, such as the HPR's, and even Labradors, have lighter eyes than flatcoats and work none the worse for them.

The group of flatcoat patrons which is now striving to breed selectively for working ability has in mind the above-mentioned conformation, good temperament, soundness and stamina in their stock; but they have no antagonism against the people who disagree with them, only deep regret that they do not appreciate how low the breed has sunk in the eyes of sportsmen, who value a really good game-finding sundog (which the flatcoat undoubtedly is) which is quiet in the field under good control and tender with game.

As Miss Chapman says, quite a few flatcoat owners pick-up in the shooting field and are acclaimed for their gam-finding ability, but, unfortunately, many of their owners fail to study and understand the etiquette of this sport; their dogs are not always under good control, some whine, some damage game and the owners seem oblivious to these faults. Many are not interested enough to try seriously to inform themselves of how to train their dogs to a proper standard of field work and how to eliminate serious faults by selective breeding. Help is a hand from various quarters if the handler is keen enough to seek it.

Miss Chapman compares the relatively small number of flatcoats with much larger numbers of gundog breeds. For example there are many more labradors than flatcoats, but the labradors that are the good workers have been selectively bred over very many years for this ability. This also applies to golden retrievers and spaniels. In contrast the great rise in flatcoat numbers has been brought about by its popularity as a companion, a pet and a show dog, all unfortunately, associated with commercialism. The majority is never tested in the field. Show-winning bitches are mated to Show Champion dogs with no thought for work, which should really be tested for at every generation in a working sundog.

We older breeders spent our money without financial reward, but solely for the love of the breed. We implore present owners to think more of the welfare of the working flatcoat and think deeply.

Nancy Laughton (Dr),

Henley-in-Arden, West Midlands