

Just Labs[®]

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Don't Label

Your Lab

by Valerie Wolf

DIANE LEWIS PHOTO

Show Labradors can't hunt.

Just don't tell that to American Grand Champion, Canadian Champion, United Kennel Club Champion, Hunting Retriever Champion-Upland Hunter ReiMur's Juz Fulla Myself, Master Hunter, Companion Dog Excellent, Rally Excellent, Canine Good Citizen, Canadian Junior Hunter, Canadian Companion Dog, Canadian Working Certificate Excellent. Quite a list of accomplishments, right? That's because Fergus is at home both in the field and the conformation ring.

"While I am aware that some believe show dogs cannot hunt," Darlene Pado of ReiMur Labradors said, "I think that listening to and believing stereotypes limits a dog's potential. The only way to know what a particular dog can do is to evaluate them. Assuming performance based upon anything other than real experience with that dog is not helping the breed."

Many show Labradors also compete in Junior Hunter and Senior Hunter tests. However, once Fergus started running in Master Hunter tests, Pado started getting comments from people regarding "the big guy," as he was sometimes called. She remembered sitting next to two gentlemen who joked about the show dog, not knowing that Pado was his owner. However, at the end of the weekend, the only dog that that earned a passing score was "big guy" Fergus.

Pado said, "It is a great way to bond with my dogs and better understand what I'm breeding at the same time. I did have a lot of help with showing and training Fergus... he had a lot of potential, but I was fairly new to all of this, so while I have handled him to show points and Master Hunter passes, I have used trainers and professional handlers as well. My goal is to prove the dog and hope I can catch up as a trainer and handler myself."



Fergus. (Photo courtesy of Darlene Pado)

Greg and Sandy Meinhold of Everett, Washington, wanted a Labrador as a family member and as a companion that Greg could train as a hunting partner. However, after Diann Sullivan of Cedarwood Labradors

evaluated the puppy, she encouraged Greg and Sandy to show him in the conformation ring. This puppy became Hunting Retriever Champion, American Champion, Canadian Champion, B and M Meinhold Col. Hawker, Working Certificate, Canine Good Citizen, Master Hunter, Rally Novice. Had the Meinhold's only focused on Hawk's field abilities and their own comfort zone, they would not have enjoyed success in the conformation ring.

"When Hawk was a puppy, you could see he had natural talent for fieldwork" said Greg Meinhold. "I started tossing frozen pigeons for him in the house, and he took to it right away. But the conformation ring and the more advanced levels of field training were above my pay scale. We did not accomplish this alone. It really does take a village, and we could not have gone as far as we have without the help and support of our family and friends believing in Hawk."

"Behavior is affected by both genetics and learning," explained Dr. Amy Pike, board certified veterinary behaviorist and chief of the Behavior Medicine Division at the Veterinary Referral Center of northern Virginia. "It's the old nature versus nurture debate. Dogs, and humans, are constantly moving through life and learning what does and does not work to receive rewards. With the right motivation and rewards, any dog can learn a new behavior. Certain dogs may have a predisposition to being better suited to some types of work, but that just means it will take less motivation to ensure the likelihood of that behavior in the future."



Hawk running in his hunt test. (Photo courtesy of Sandy Meinhold)

Rescue Labrador retrievers are damaged goods.

Geneva Ledesma, Vice President of the Southern California Labrador Retriever Rescue (SCLRR) has faced unfair labels given to the Labradors placed through her organization.

"We'll get Labradors surrendered as aggressive, and the people will claim that the dog growled at their children," Ledesma said. "But what they forget to tell you is why the dog growled. Respect must go both ways. So that we can be fair as to the dog's future, we will often place the dog with an experienced foster family or a trainer to get an accurate assessment. Many times, in the right hands and in the right environment, the dog will not show signs of an issue."

In 2010, Ledesma found a young Labrador/pit bull mix abandoned at the San Bernadino Metrolink Station. Since the SCLRR cannot accept Labrador mixes, Ledesma adopted Dino herself.

"I knew the reputation of the pit bull breed, but saving a dog was more important to me," Ledesma said. "I saw Dino and never saw the label. If you show caring to a dog using love and kindness, I believe the dog will blossom. It's been eight years since Dino joined my pack, and I couldn't be happier with him."

Dr. Kelly C. Ballantyne, Clinical Assistant Professor of Veterinary Behavior at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign said, "Labeling can do a disservice not just to Labradors, but to every breed and species. Common labels used for animals include stubborn, territorial, aggressive, bossy, dominant. Not only are these vague descriptors that can mean different things to different people, once an animal is labeled in this manner it often ends efforts to change the underlying behavior." Dr. Ballantyne continued, "If rather than labeling animals we carefully observe and describe the behaviors we want to change, the consequences of the behavior, and the situations they occur in, we can come up with a plan on how to teach the animal what we want them to do instead."

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Chocolate Labs are stubborn and untrainable.

Just don't tell that to my dog, Allendale's No Matter What, Companion Dog, Beginner Novice, Rally Novice. Drago earned his Rally Novice obedience title at eight months and 24 days.

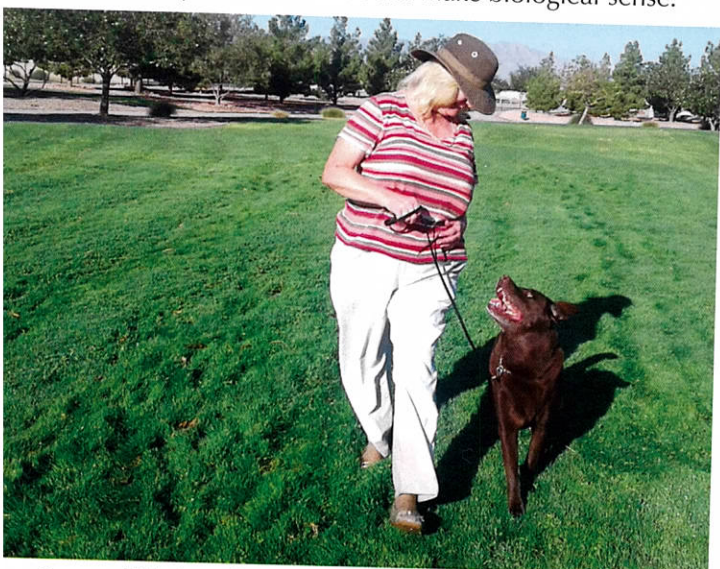
Had I listened to folks when they told me that an intact chocolate male puppy could not concentrate long enough to compete in obedience, I would not have recognized how much natural obedience talent my dog had. Now, it isn't always easy training Drago. His spirit and drive might be seen by some as a challenge, but channeling those traits in a positive way gives him a confident attitude when we compete in the obedience ring.

Today, at nine years old, Drago is still training, still competing, and still loving every minute of it. It's been a wild ride and he has taught me more than I ever taught him.


Deb Quast of Journeyman Labradors said, "We raise and train chocolates and find no difference in ability to learn."

Windy River Scout, Canine Good Citizen, Rally Novice was Quast's first chocolate Labrador. Scout earned his Rally Novice title at 10 years old, proving that both young and mature chocolate Labs are contenders in the obedience ring.

Dr. Leticia M.S. Dantas, DVM, MS, PhD., Diplomate of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists and faculty responsible/in charge of the University of Georgia's Veterinary Hospital's Behavior Medicine Service points out: "Being a veterinarian and scientist, my response to labeling is always a scientific one because it's simply foolproof. Any normal and healthy dog of any breed can learn at any age. The brain is an extremely flexible and dynamic organ. Both puppies and senior dogs are capable of learning and changing behavior. Labeling a dog in terms of what they can learn does not make biological sense."



Drago and Valerie Wolf practicing heeling. (Photo courtesy of Vicky Dornon)

When we remove the labels, an exciting new world of fun and opportunity opens up for you and your Lab. A world where anything is possible – in the show ring, in the field, or in the home. 



Drago performs a touch command before an obedience training session. Wolf likes to use a touch marker to get Drago excited about the session because obedience can be boring to the dog at times, especially heel work. (Photo courtesy of Vicky Dornon)

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