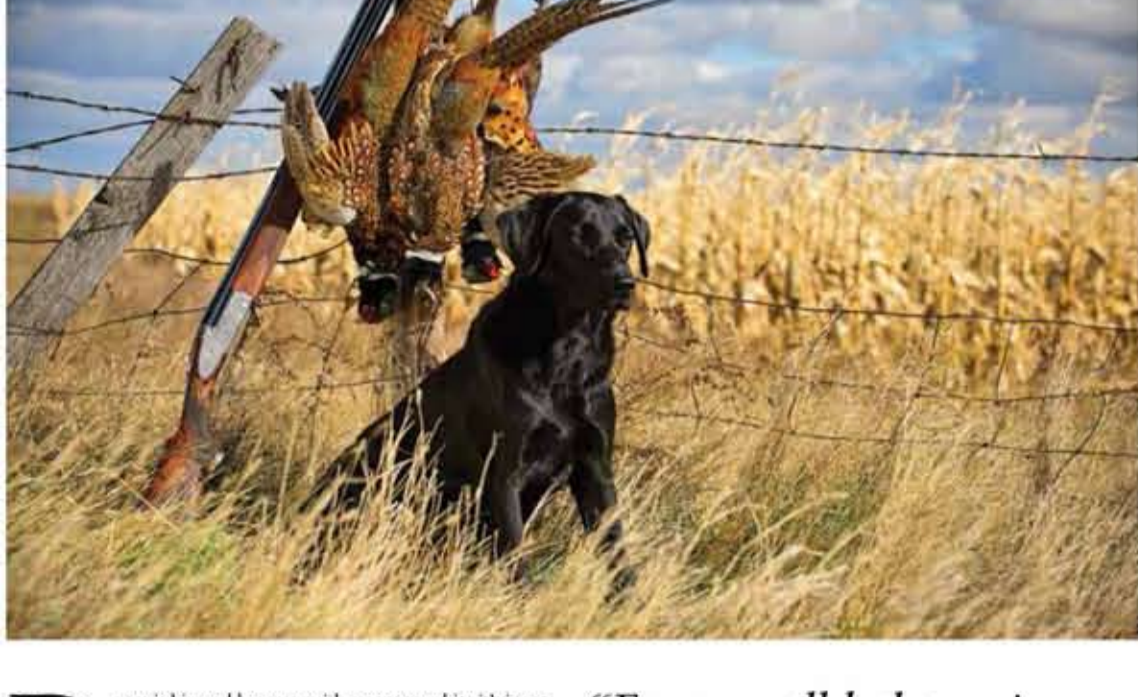


# LAB RAPPORT

Labrador retrievers are the most popular dog breed in the U.S. Here are reasons why they excel in upland hunting situations.

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**D**euce is big and brawny, with a coat so white it's inaccurate to refer to him as a *yellow* Lab—he's positively ghostly. When he's hunting, not only is Deuce's tail in constant motion, birdy; he also truly seems to have a smile on his face the whole time. We were after pheasants in a hilly region of Nebraska, working birds down a gully below a steep plowed field. German shorthair Gracie locked on point by the brushy fence line defining the hill's slope. Deuce kept close to his owner Trent Leichter, awaiting the signal to flush.

Deuce has the complete Lab package: outstanding nose, athleticism, drive to retrieve, marking skills, and desire to please—which go a long way toward explaining why a Lab makes such a wonderful hunting companion. As Lab breeder Rod Mack says, "For overall balance in an animal, the Lab is hard to beat."

On command, Deuce charged in front of the shorthair and a rooster busted skyward. The bird chortled on its way up, swung right, and alighted smack in the middle of the bare field before any of the hunters could take a shot. Now, the hunt *really* began. Trent walked Deuce up the fence line and gave him the "back" command. The overconfident bird watched us down below as the wind masked the sound of Deuce's movements. Trent's final command sent Deuce straight at the bird, straight toward us. The pheasant flushed at the last minute with no thought other than escaping the predator closing in. The bird flew right over our heads, a perfect setup for a neat shot-and-drop.

Almost universally, everyone knows and loves Labs. For the past 23 years, the Labrador retriever has been number one in

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the American Kennel Club's (AKC) ranking of the most popular dog breed in the United States. History suggests that New England farmhouses come with a Lab as standard issue for the front porch. Bill Clinton has a Lab, as does Vladimir Putin. Presenting an accurate assessment of the breed is tricky, unless and until we focus on the Labs professionally bred for their hunting abilities.

Rod Mack, owner of Diamond Brook Kennels in Brandon, Vermont, has been training a variety of working and hunting breeds for decades, competing in obedience trials, pointer trials, tracking competitions, and now retriever trials and hunt tests. He says that nose, marking ability, and biddability top the list of attributes he strives for in his Labrador breedings.

"Of utmost concern to our breeding program is what is between the dog's ears," Rod explains. "We look for animals that can remember where a bird has fallen, get to it looking like they can and were meant to, have the courage to face environmental hardships, hunt because it is in their hearts, train like they might miss something if they don't, and hunt like they are a member of a team."

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Anyone observing Rod's black Labs, Rage and Hannah, working the pickup shift at a tower shoot at the Dutch River Club in Salem, New York, could tell that they love their job. Labs in Hanah sat alert, keyed-up with eyes on the sky waiting for the pheasants to drop their way. Tense with anticipation, they clearly wouldn't dream of leaving Rod's side until released for the retrieve. In motion, they were nothing short of stunning—thick coats shimmering in the sunlight, muscles working with athletic vigor. What struck me most was how the dogs kept their exuberance in check waiting for the release, an example of pure teamwork between gun dog and handler.

The Labrador retriever descended from Newfoundland's St. John's water dog that helped pull in fishing nets in the 1800s. Labs joined the English Kennel Club registry in 1903 as a distinct breed and were first registered by the AKC in 1917. Today, two types are generally recognized: the American Field Bred and the British. The American Labs are longer-legged, lankier, faster in the field, and more agile; the British Labs are shorter, blockier, and more relaxed.

A fixture for duck and goose hunting, the Labrador retriever also is a cooperative upland flusher better suited to the open ground of pheasant, prairie grouse, chukar, and Huns than thick ruffed grouse woods. Put a steady Lab and a steady pointing

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dog in a pointing-flushing-retrieving combo, and you just may have the best bird-dog show around, be that in a quail field, pheasant run, or ptarmigan cover.

Pointing Labs, while still controversial in the pointing-dog world, are gaining credence. All dogs have some instinct to stalk, point, or pause when on game. Labs showing the strongest

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pointing instinct form the base for the pointing Lab lines. As more Labs displaying a strong point are bred into the lines, the pointing instinct intensifies. Relatively new, the breeding and training principles of the pointing Lab are still being developed.

Labs' water-resistant double coat comes in three colors: black, yellow, and chocolate, with "fox red" considered a subcategory of yellow. They all shed. The black coat is dominant, and chocolate is based on a recessive gene. Unfortunately, some kennels breed for color, which means other traits—drive, biddability, conformation, nose—become less important. For a chocolate Lab, the best balance of traits comes from a black-to-black breeding, with their recessive chocolate genes producing the color (as opposed to breeding two chocolates together). Males should weigh in from 65 to 80 pounds, females from 55 to 70. Lab heads should have a broad backskull and prominent stop. A deep chest and tail that is thick at the base are two other important physical attributes along with webbed feet—the components that make the Lab a swimming machine.

Brett Arnold's High Country Sporting Dogs in De Beque, Colorado, breeds a few select litters each year, many based from the Grand River Retriever lines known for their hunting ability and agility developed in dusky grouse high country. Brett's training experience has brought dogs under his tutelage many titles in hunt tests and trials including master-level retrievers—the highest

designation for competition retrievers. Brett and his son Robbie are among the top father-son training teams in the country.

"Labs have a working mind and a desire to work with their handler, unlike the greater independence you see in a pointer," Brett says, adding that their desire to retrieve is huge, and as a trainer, he can build everything off that drive. "It's amazing what you can do with that. Our first test of a pup comes at five or six weeks old. When we see them retrieving at that age, we know their training level is high. No dog is a 'handling' dog like a Lab is."

According to Brett, checking pedigrees for working hunt test titles can help determine the quality of a prospective litter. "It's not just about the parents looking good, it's about finding proven lines—the healthiest and the ones showing easiness in training," he says.

Robbie Arnold uses the words "hunting companion" to describe the Labs' exceptional handling. When he puts Regan, Rowdy, and Angus through their paces at The High Lonesome Ranch in Colorado on a warm October day, the brilliant blue Colorado sky provides high contrast between the Labs' onyx coats and the golden wheat grass. The dogs quarter back and forth, covering the fields in a pattern woven to a loom of scent. Watching the Labs work with Robbie—from search to flush, retrieve to presentation—it's clear that hunting companionship is as rewarding to the dogs as it is to their handler. ♣

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