

How do I find a good Airedale hunting pup?

By: Ed Weiss

The present classification of the Airedale places it in the small terrier group. But alas, the Airedale is not a small terrier, it is a hunting dog by history. Its classification and relative rarity has in recent decades masked the Airedale as a hunting breed. It's development was for sport. This legendary English dog from Yorkshire was bred by sportsman for sportsman, crossing local hunting terrier foundation stock to larger non-terriers for the purpose of increasing hunting versatility. They were wildly successful.

This new sporting breed was molded in its formative years by selection based on success as hunter of vermin, water rats, and running rabbits to capture. As a result of the increased size, speed and scenting ability, non-typical-terrier pursuits as a retriever of waterfowl and field hunter flushing game birds were quickly added to its hunting quiver.

Even the early Yorkshire men could not imagine that their "Waterside Terrier" would be found in America hunting big and dangerous game. There appeared no limit to what this new breed could do. He was at this time, as they say, "hard bitten". So it followed that his courage and ability to do whatever took him hunting lion with Teddy Roosevelt and serving as police and army dog.

Now it's almost ninety years since these exploits, and the Airedale used as a hunter has to a large extent been replaced by his development as a companion dog and participant in non-hunting venues, such as obedience, agility, and conformation competition.

However there still burns in the breed embers of the hunting past, and if you are a seeker of adventure, the hunting Airedale can still be found!

The search will not be as effortless as seeking a pup from known hunting breeders of pointers, retrievers, hounds, or spaniels, since there are no longer well established breeders of Airedale hunting lines. There are however breeders that have produced individual dogs that compete well in hunt tests and are successfully used in the field in both water fowl retrieving and game bird hunting. Observing these Airedales, talking to their owners and breeders is a great place to start.

The Hunting Working Airedale association gathers the largest number of like-minded Airedale folk and their dogs at the annual September Hunting Working Nationals. Airedales can be seen in all their glory – from the young, to veterans – retrieving ducks, flushing game birds and tracking

and baying raccoons. It is an event to fire up the imagination of what a pup from one of these dogs could become with training and a bit of luck.

Since observing a known hunting Airedale is not always possible, there are methods to improve your odds of finding your great pup, whether its parents hunt or not. To do this leads us into the very interesting study of canine drives and character and puppy evaluation.

Your pup is born with a personality and inborn desires and talents. They will be molded by experiences especially during its first eight weeks of life, but its behavioral foundation is immutable. These drives are the dog, and they would ensure its survival in a world without you. These “drives” are pre-programmed or inborn, and their strength will to a large extent determine your dog’s success in the field and attitude to its world!

This fundamental drive is prey drive. It is the engine of the dog. The passion, the energy and lust for the chase is prey drive. The actions that manifest this drive are stalks, chases, catches and shakes. This is the preordained canine choreography of the hunt.

Prey drive is triggered by the stimulus of motion or scent. This burning inborn drive is the essence of the predator. This searching and pursuit is the embodiment of prey drive. It will be unleashed by the flapping of a bird’s wings, or the bounce of a tennis ball.

So how does one find this drive, or measure its intensity in a puppy?

First as with many puppy tests, it is ideally done at 7 to 8 weeks. The pup is taken to a quiet place away from mother and littermates. Then you (accompanied by a note taker, since you will be testing a number of prospects) begin.

The tester should hold a delectable fresh chicken bone at one end. Bring it down to the pups level with either crouching or sitting in a chair, and dangle it front of the pup. If the pup is hesitant make a few motions until it moves forward. Pup will have a wide range of responses from ignoring to chasing and biting it and then working the bone to the back of the mouth and not letting go with resistance. An in-between response is following the bone movement then coming forward and licking, or slightly grabbing it with the front of the mouth.

Another example of prey drive is ball drive. This is self-explanatory, but the ball is prey as it bounces and rolls away from the pup. As with all puppy tests, confidence, energy and enthusiasm should be observed and recorded.

Other pertinent aspects of character that will determine the dog you will have is seen in the puppy as degrees of hardness or softness. The “resilient animal” dog that responds without fear or avoidance to even noxious events is a hard rather than soft dog. Correcting this dog as part of training will not result in persistent cowering or avoidance. The distress of a correction, whether it is a collar jerk or the struggle of a game animal, is momentary!

Sound shyness to thunder or gunfire, or other loud disturbing sounds, is transitory and will learned to be ignored. Soft dogs become upset with loud noises, and that makes training difficult, as they are often sullen and withdrawn after a correction. They are not into the game of training.

How this all melds can be seen with a heeling lesson. The ball crazy prey monster will be focused on a ball held in the right hand while he heels on the left. If the heeling is incorrect, as by lagging or forging, a collar correction given to this dog does not end the activity with a sulk. The correction rather is followed quickly after the lagging has stopped by throwing the ball. The memory of correction for the hard dog gives way to a happy chase. For the low prey drive dog, the ball chase is not a significant reward. For the soft dog, the collar correction has thrown it into a sulk for which a ball or even a food treat may not sufficient.

In puppy testing, a sense of the pup’s hardness or softness can be evaluated by dropping a pail or cake tin on a hard surface near the pup being evaluated. In this test the genetic predisposition to sound shyness and fearful behavior can be sampled or unmasked. In an older dog genetic predisposition remains, but can be heightened by a history that includes lack of socialization or rarely abusive or traumatic encounters. Remember, the pup is the starting point of the dog. What you do when you take it home in the first few months will have a profound effect. Socialization is your next step.

Socialization of puppies is well covered in a pamphlet produced by one of our club members: “The Puppy Headstart Program” by Corally Burmaster.

A standardized approach to puppy testing is presented on the Volhard system website (<http://www.volhard.com/pages/pat.php>). In addition, a Hunting Instinct Evaluation is available annually through the HWA.

Good luck with your Airedale puppy selection! Pups are all different, but perhaps with a little effort and thought you will get the pup that becomes the all round hunting dog and companion you seek.