

Popular Dogs: Golden Retrievers

Discover the breed characteristics of the Golden Retriever.

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The Golden Retriever is a fabulous breed: intelligent, sensitive, devoted, talented and fun. It's hard not to appreciate such positive qualities, however, what's equally fantastic, say breed enthusiasts, is training these golden dogs. Achieving the goal of a well-trained, well-socialized dog isn't necessarily work-it's a delight! "It's a wonderful breed to work with and a wonderful breed to train," says career army officer and AKC judge Thomas Kee.

Why are Golden Retrievers so great to train, and why do Golden enthusiasts gush when the topic of training comes up? It begins with a magic word: please. Golden Retrievers have an innate desire to please people. They're born with it and carry it in their hearts until they die. The desire to please, say breed enthusiasts, makes the breed "highly trainable" and a pleasure to work with. "They are so anxious to please, from the time they start walking and climbing out of the whelping box, they just want to please people," says professional trainer and behaviorist Nancy Rinehart.

That pleasing nature has led the Golden Retriever into very special roles. In fact, it's the reason Golden Retrievers (and Labrador Retrievers) are a favorite choice as guide dogs and assistance dogs, says Kee, "because they are so trainable. But it's more than that. Some breeds are bred to be able to work with man, but away from man; for example, Australian Shepherds, which are a wonderful breed. Golden Retrievers and Labrador Retrievers are bred to work with man, by man. They have to be around people. They're incredibly social-they seem very driven to please."

It's no accident that Golden Retrievers dominate the obedience ring. It's a natural outlet for a breed that loves to please and loves to work. Also, they have a natural field ability and do well in hunt tests and field trials, and perform very well in other sports, especially agility. "They take to it [agility] like you wouldn't believe, and they love it, says Kee."

These rave reviews should be encouraging. You are, you might say, the owner of a "gifted" companion. When it comes to schooling, Golden Retrievers are A students. Of course, it also means that the job of teaching your Golden to be a well-mannered companion or skilled competitor is probably going to be harder for you than for your dog.

New Dog, New Tricks

The dog learns to find pleasure in doing something with, and for, someone. Eventually, the dog performs the activity for the pleasure found in doing the activity, not the reward. However, Kee says he learned the hard way about how important early training is. As a novice owner, he confesses he did not begin training his Golden (or Labrador Retriever), early enough. "It took me three years to make up for that."

Enthusiasts suggest enrolling in a puppy kindergarten class as soon as the veterinarian gives the okay, usually at 12 to 14 weeks old, after the second set of puppy shots. If you have the pup prior to that, spend a lot of time holding it, petting it and introducing it to people (not other dogs, due to the risk of disease).

Introduce your puppy to new situations so it learns not to be afraid. Follow up puppy kindergarten with advanced puppy classes. Puppy training should always be short, fun and structured, says Kee. Emphasize fun and reinforce the positive; correct, but don't punish. "It's always a game, minimizing any kind of negativity."

Adult training should be the same, says Kee, but corrections are different. The adult dog looks at you as a pack member and may challenge your leadership. Owners must address those issues in training.

Sit, Stay, Come

Which training commands are essential for the successful companion or competitor? For many Golden enthusiasts, "come" tops the list of the five basic commands recommended for every "civilized dog" in the AKC Complete Dog Book: "sit," "down," "stay," "come," "heel." "Come" is especially important for Golden Retrievers, says professional trainer and behaviorist Nancy Rinehart. "They are so outgoing, and so friendly, they will go with anybody. You want a really reliable "come" here."

The Golden is said to be so friendly, says Rinehart, that it might even welcome a robber into the house, show the robber where the jewelry is, then wave goodbye. "One of the funniest things I've heard about Golden Retrievers is they're the best

watchdogs-they will watch somebody come in and totally strip your house."

That aside, a reliable "come" safeguards the dog. "The number one command I try to reinforce with my students is the 'come' command," says Kee. "The reason is, that's the one command that can save your dog's life." An immediate and unquestioned response to the "come" command could stop the Golden from walking into traffic or prevent a tangle with an aggressive dog.

An additional safety command is "leave it," which tells the dog to drop or leave something alone. Following the "come" command, says Kee, you need a way to keep a dog stationary.

Off is another command favored by Golden enthusiasts: "off" the furniture or "off" Aunt Mildred, the elderly relative who's too frail to endure a Golden's love for jumping up on people to show affection. "It's a real important command, especially with Golden retrievers; they want to be with you," says Rinehart. "They're like Velcro dogs. They want to be with you all the time."

Golden retrievers have a tendency to be vocal dogs, according to Rinehart, so a bark only on command may be in order. "They're very talkative. Some people that don't understand Golden retrievers are put off by that."