

Popular Dogs: Labrador Retrievers

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Virginia Parker Guidry

A Lab is a Lab is a Lab, right? Actually, three types of Labrador Retrievers exist, says Mary Weist, breeder, AKC conformation judge and president of the National Labrador Retriever Club. Before you can choose a breeder or a pup, you must first decide what type of Lab is right for you. There's the English type, a square-faced, thick, heavy-set dog with a distinct otter tail; the American bench type, a taller, thinner-bodied dog with a longer face; and the field trial type, a dog bred for working ability alone that can be either type, or somewhere in-between.

"There are definite personality differences in the three types of Labs in this country," Weist says. "And much difference in their activity levels. You just have to pick the one that's best for you." For example, Weist says, "The field trial dog is an active, strong-willed dog-and it needs to do its field trial work. The American-type bench dog is not as active and not as strong-willed; however, it is still more [active] than the English-type dog, which is a quieter, easier-going dog.

"If you're a soft-hearted person, go with the English-type dog. If you're a little stronger willed, then the stronger-willed dog wouldn't be a problem for you," Weist emphasizes. In other words, know your own temperament and then match it up with an appropriate type.

Bed Warmer or Hunter?

After you've decided on the right Lab type for you, consider what you plan to do with the dog. Will it be primarily a companion or a guide or therapy dog? Will the dog be used for drug detection or search and rescue? Will the Lab be a gun dog or compete in obedience or agility? Or do you have some combination of any of the above in mind?

"Know the purpose for the dog, and be true to the purpose," says Labrador enthusiast and AKC hunt test judge Nick Mickelson. Know your goals, mission and primary use of the dog, then find breeders who are breeding that sort of dog.

"First, you have to decide if you have a specific purpose for the dog or if you're looking for a pet," Mickelson emphasizes. "If you're looking to buy a pet, you don't need to be nearly as careful about choosing a dog with a background proven in any particular venue. It's important for people not to buy a dog because it's pretty, because it's yellow, because it's cute. It's more important to buy a Labrador puppy because it has a proven heritage of being able to satisfy them for the use they intend."

Real-world owners aren't always sure of a purpose, though; they just know they want a Labrador. That's why long-time breeder Marianne Foote suggests prospective owners first learn about the many careers available to the Lab. "That is more specific to the owner to decide what their activities are going to be with the dog," Foote says. "And, I know not everybody can predict that. People get dogs, then get interested in doing some of these activities after they get the dog. It would behoove them to educate themselves as much as possible on the different dog sports available to them."

Choosing a Puppy

The prospective Lab owner's best friend is a reputable breeder, one who breeds healthy, quality dogs. In fact, choosing the right breeder precedes choosing the right pup. The reputable Lab breeder knows his or her pups better than anyone and can best match a pup's personality and abilities with an owner's personality and expectations.

"I would rely heavily on the breeder's advice," agrees Christopher Wincek, breeder and secretary for the Labrador Retriever Club. "They live with those puppies for eight weeks, and they know the puppies that are vocal; they know the puppies that are precocious; and they know which ones are naughty and which ones are submissive."

Ginger Watkins, breeder and National Labrador Retriever Club secretary, backs that belief: "I think you need to rely on your breeder's expertise in evaluating puppies. Frequently, the puppy that runs up and says 'hi' may not be the one you want to go home with."

But you want to choose your own puppy. Why allow the breeder to help? Again, the breeder, who has probably shared his or her home with mother and pups since their birth, is in the best position to observe the pups and determine

temperament. It's unlikely an inexperienced buyer, or an experienced dog enthusiast unfamiliar with the breed, can make the same determination in a 30-minute visit to the kennel. "It's very hard for a prospective pet person to come into a kennel and to know personalities of puppies," Weist says.

Finding a Breeder

Where's the best place to find reputable breeders with quality pups? "Probably the best thing to do is throw out the newspaper and save it for your puppies," Wincek says. "The newspaper is a haven for backyard breeders." Wincek defines a backyard breeder as someone who breeds because they believe their dog needs to have a litter to "feel complete" or because they want to make a quick buck. They may be "breeding dogs that are purchased from good breeders," he said, but they are usually "breeding dogs without a lot of knowledge about breeding."

Reputable breeders also suggest avoiding buying a Labrador pup at a pet store. "Labradors are the No. 1 AKC registered dog right now. They're also the No. 1 overbred, poorly bred dog right now," Watkins says. "If you're not talking to the breeder, and the mother's not there, I'd avoid the situation."

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