

Judging Conformation for FIELD ABILITY

By Jodi Quesnell

When judging GWP's in the show ring, it is unreasonable to ask a judge to determine the field abilities of a dog—that is what field trial and hunt test judges are for. But, we do ask our conformation judges to determine which dog is most suited to field work—based on the breed standard, our blueprint for the ideal hunting dog.

With this in mind, judges need to visualize how each dog might perform in the field, and award placements based on which dogs would be the best to take on an all-day hunting trip in tough brush.

A dog that doesn't move soundly, who has inefficient movement, who "pitter-pats" would probably not be able to hunt hard all day. That dog will tire out a lot quicker than the dog that has an easy, effortless gait, with plenty of reach and drive. A sound-moving, well-built dog must be a top priority for any serious hunter who plans to hunt all day, possibly a number of days in a row.

A dog that isn't balanced (equal angles—front and rear) will have inefficient movement, and will tire out more quickly than a dog that is balanced, regardless of the amount of angle the dog has.

Now, what about the all-important coat that breeders are constantly preaching about? Picture the dog with the beautiful, long furnishing running through the sagebrush, thick brambles or a field of cockleburs. The hunter that owns that dog will spend the evening pulling, brushing and cursing his dog's coat. Or maybe there's snow on the ground and it's cold—the long

furnishing will collect snow-balls, possibly even between the toes, causing the dog to go lame. And, when the dog with the soft coat goes into the freezing lake for a retrieve, the cold water will instantly hit his skin, making him very cold, and very likely to stop working. The dog with the soft coat will also suffer more cuts and scratches because tough brambles will cut right through his coat and to his skin.

What about the dog that's standing in your ring with the shorter, but wirey coat and minimal furnishings? When he runs through the field of cockleburs, the burrs won't stick to his coat, and the one or two persistent burrs that stick to him will most likely get

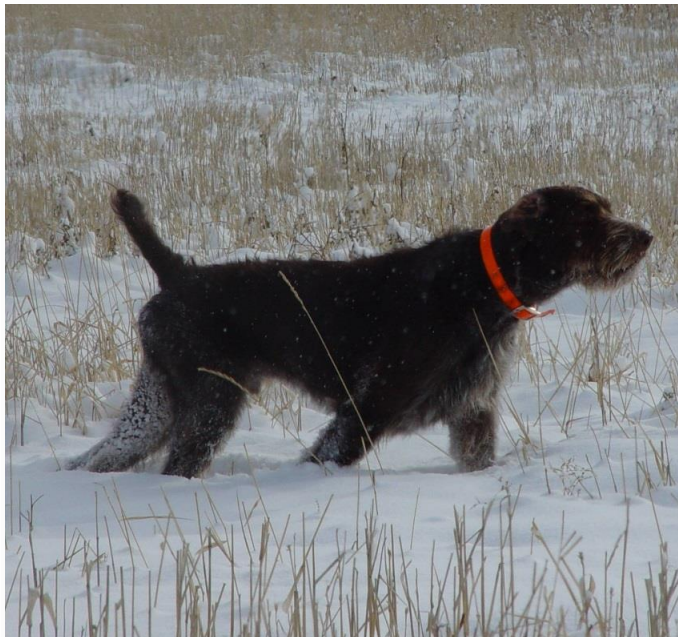
pulled out by the dog himself, while he's riding in his crate at the end of the day. The hunter with this dog will be able to enjoy the evening relaxing with his dog.

What about if the shorter-coated dog has to do a water retrieve? Well, his wirey dense coat will repel the water, similar to a Labrador (or a duck.) He will shake-off the cold water when he gets to the shore, and will be happy to continue hunting. And, if he's running through the snow you can be sure he

won't be collecting "snow

balls" in his coat! And his dense coat will act as a shield against the tough brush, so he won't be all cut-up at the end of the day.

And, let's talk temperaments a while. Our ideal hunting dog will have a bold, confident personality so he can work independently, at a distance from the hunter. A needy, insecure dog will stay too close to the hunter to be of any use in the field at all. And,



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what about that dog that jumps out of his skin when he hears a loud noise outside the ring? He's most likely sound-sensitive which will render him completely useless



when the hunter fires his shotgun. A dog that shows aggression towards other dogs will mean that the hunter will never be able to hunt with his buddies who also have hunting dogs—

after all, nobody wants to hunt with a guy whose dog is continually interfering with the other guys' dogs.

What if the dog doesn't like other people? Imagine that your dog has disappeared over the ridge, where your buddy is hunting. You ask your buddy to get the dog for you, and the dog runs away from him, and in the opposite direction as you. Now you've got to spend your time hunting for your dog, instead of hunting *with* your dog for birds! Not to mention, who wants a hunting buddy that none of your friends can touch? That's not a dog to be proud of. Also, remember that hunting season is no more than 4 months out of the year—the GWP will be a member of the family when not hunting, so he better have a temperament you can live with!

For a hunter those are the “biggies”—Temperament, coat, movement and overall soundness.

Another thing a hunter will look at is tailset. GWPs will not be quite as beautiful as a setter or pointer when it's pointing, but we want certainly don't want a tail that is set too low, or too high (terrier tail—yuck!) We want our dogs to look good when on point.

GWPs should have good feet—after all, when running all day, the feet are shock absorbers, and good thick pads will serve a dog well when he runs through a cactus patch. Splayed feet will eventually lead to a dog that completely breaks down, and cat feet will not be efficient shock-absorbers.

Size is important—too small, and he can't handle a goose, and too big and he'll tend to “break down” quicker. And a dog that is too “course” with heavy bone will not be very agile in the field. A dog that is too fine-boned will not be the “brush buster” that hunters need, either.

A strong, solid jaw is needed for a GWP, which is expected to retrieve as part of his job description. The rectangular jaw is the perfect shape to carry a large bird, such as a pheasant or a duck. The jaw is balanced by the rectangular shaped skull. The strong neck and good shoulders are also necessary for a dog who is expected to do multiple retrieves.

Correct ear-set and dark-brown eyes give the dog a pleasing expression, but aren't as critical to a hunter. And coat color is a “personal preference” with different people believing that certain colors are more visible in the field, depending on the conditions—I think that I can see my solid livers in the field the best, unless their in the rimrocks looking for chukkar. Others prefer the visibility of white coats, unless they're hunting in the snow. And, of course there is the infinite combination of liver and white hairs that creates our liver roan, liver spotted and liver ticked dogs. For a serious hunter (and judges), color should be of minimal concern.

So, the next time you're looking at a class of GWPs in the show ring, picture those dogs working in the field, and consider how each virtue and fault will affect the dogs' performance in the field, and then select the dog that *should* make the best hunting companion.

And, if you're a hunter, looking for your next hunting buddy—whether you're looking for a puppy or an adult dog, you should consider the dog's conformation, and how it will affect performance in the field.

