

BREEDER FEATURE

Maureen Gamble, *Nimloth Labradors*

(Editor's Note: Maureen Gamble laughs that she has 35 years of anonymity in Labradors. Though she doesn't advertise, and never pushes or promotes, and through a very limited breeding program, her dogs have been the foundation for 2 support dog programs, search and rescue, drugs and explosives, and a dozen successful show kennels. Her excellent article regarding the "Drag of the Breed" can be seen at www.Nimloth.com)

LAB REPORT: What exactly do you breed for? Describe your perfect Labrador.

MAUREEN GAMBLE: Balance and moderation. We lose focus on this when we fixate on one thing; when we breed for one of any specific features, we lose the foundation of what we're breeding. The Labrador's head, coat, and tail distinguish it from the generic dog, but first you have to have these on the body of a sound, well-balanced athlete. When you think of a breed and look that dog in the face, what looks back? For a Lab, this has a great deal to do with eye shape and color, ear placement, etc. The head differentiates this dog from a Rottweiler or a hound. A beautiful neck is the product of both shoulder lay-back and lay-on, as well as correct placement of the head and a clean throat.

As for fronts, so many factors go into good ones--shape of the bones, size of the bones, lay-back and lay-on. They're the hardest parts to

keep correct. Sixty to 90 % of the dog's efficiency in motion is due to the shoulder.

As per body style, the ideal specimen is the square, short-coupled Lab, which again, differentiates him from the generic dog. The standard calls for a dog with length from the point of the shoulder to the point of the rump being equal to or *slightly* longer than the distance from the withers to the ground (with equal being the first stated preference).

He must have stifle angulation that is not extreme, but adequate to the job for which he was bred. Labradors were bred to move like a water dog, not a Pointer.

"The Labrador is a gymnast, not a long-distance runner."

Different breeds have differently built hindquarters. We're used to seeing sporting breeds that are running dogs. In a running dog, the length of the tibia/fibula--second thigh--is longer than the femur. On a Labrador, these should be equal. The Labrador is a gymnast, not a long-distance runner. A lower leg that is the same length as the femur gives the dog more spring and ability to change directions more quickly, as well as more second-thigh muscle. We want power and agility, and don't necessarily need the long stride and endurance. If he has a fairly short femur and a fairly short lower leg bone, he can't

have angulation. A longer thigh and longer lower leg, with a shorter hock, gives the appearance of angulation and more spring.

A short hock also gives a lot of direct drive to the power, especially in water. The longer the hock, the less efficiency you have for a swimming dog. A long hock creates drag in the water.

Balance is often hard to see if you get caught up in the details. So if you ever look at a dog's photo and wonder why he looks out of balance, turn the picture upside down. You'll see the forest, instead of just the trees.

LR: Talk some about your breeding philosophy--did you always know what you wanted, or did that develop?

MG: My philosophy came about fairly early. When I started breeding Labradors, I had to build a blueprint in my mind. By my second breeding, I knew what I wanted my Labs to look like. Often people change their models, but I was fortunate that a dog was around when I began who had the breed features of the standard as I interpreted it.

"By my second breeding, I knew what I wanted . . . I'm still breeding my same blueprint."

Sandylands Midas (with a little longer neck) epitomized the standard for me then, and is still my ideal Labrador. I'm still breeding

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my same blueprint. Every few generations, we get "that puppy" with great consistency. We get it not necessarily directly--it skips generations. The last one I showed was Ch. Nimloth Jumpin' Jack Flash, and I have it most recently in a bitch with my current puppy, Nimloth JeNe Sais Quoi.

If you build a gene pool in which that's a possibility, and breed consistently, you're gonna get "that" dog.

We're like cooks, building a stew. You have to decide which ingredients you want; i.e., you have to pick apart your ideal dog, and use those ingredients. With each generation, you add more to your stew (when you go out to other bloodlines). Every so often you're going to ladle out a spoonful and get what you started with. So where you start is very, very important!

My definition of a breeder is a lifeguard for the gene pool.

As guardians of the breed, we do our breed and ourselves a disservice when we start beginners with mediocre dogs. All we've done is to train their eyes to like the mediocre. And they will then continue to breed just that--mediocre. If you let them start out with quality, they will never breed down. If we stop thinking of novices as dilettantes, and see them as future guardians of the breed, we'll



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reap a much greater protection of our breed over time.

LR: Do you breed based more on phenotype or genotype?

MG: It's a combination. When I first started breeding, I had very high-minded goals of doing so to improve the breed. Then, I was struck with the understanding that I'd never breed enough numbers to make a difference! And, who was I to think I could decide how to improve it? Instead of breeding for improvement, I took the physician's vow: First, do no harm. I breed to preserve, while refining little things. I make certain my choices don't have a long-term negative impact. I've been very conscious of health issues, and have always done health clearances, even before those were popular. You have to pick not only features, but have to know what a pedigree will bring with it--even 5-6 generations back. Some lines I avoid because I haven't seen anyone else eradi

cate the problems that come with them, so what makes me think I can? Plus, a breeder can't make sense of a pedigree unless she knows the dogs involved. A dog may be wonderful, but what other ingredients are we putting into our stew? You have to invest a lot of time and research into the pedigrees. LR: What are the biggest problems you see with good breeders?

MG: Myopia--plain short sightedness. So many are breeding for specific features without seeing where they're going. You have to look at your dog as a projection forward--what impact will it have on the future? We get so caught up in what wins. But what can the dog add to the gene pool?

"The drag of the breed is always toward the generic, all-purpose, indistinct dog."

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Breeder Feature Cont'.

We have to pay special attention to the standard. Body proportion is most important. The drag of the breed seems to opt for longer backs--and especially longer loins. The generic dog is somewhat longer than tall, with more length and flexibility in the loin for running instead of swimming. So, overall, the drag of the breed is toward a running-dog conformation, with length of loin and all the off-square proportions that go with it (longer head, longer tail, less width, etc.).

Plus, we have such diversity of type within the breed and in the ring that it makes the mentoring of judges difficult. For a judge to sort out which dog conforms to the actual standard is often difficult.

We must, as breeders, be proactive.

If we see a problem, instead of complaining about it we must find ways to fix it and *do* those things.

LR: How important do you believe hunt tests are?

MG: Labradors have to retrieve.

This is a form-to-function breed.

But we have problems with the hunt tests in general, especially in the set-up of them. Not enough obedience people were involved in the beginning to set up a non-competitive venue. People who developed the tests were avid hunters and field-trial people, and designed them as competitive events. As long as we make it that way, fewer dogs that excel will be conformationally like the standard. We have to look at how we use the Labrador, how

we hunt--which is very different over here than abroad. Even the working dog here isn't the same dog that was developed in England.

LR: How do you feel about splitting the breed?

MG: You first have to define where, how, and what would be the features or set of features that would be so different as to require a different breed.

Then, what would you accomplish? Other breeds that have been split have very specific reasons for doing so. That is not true in Labs. We have good breed type, and not good. But the breed is still the breed.

"We need more good Labradors, being sorted out by experienced judges."

The most frequent reason I've heard for splitting regards size. Even though I don't agree with a disqualification based on that, it is *no* reason to split the breed.

We don't need a Specialty type and an all-breed type. We need more good Labradors, being sorted out by experienced judges who know how to separate the wheat from the chaff.

We may use this breed for a variety of purposes, and the form will change somewhat with each one. But if we're breeding Labrador Retrievers, we must follow the standard and breed what the dog was developed to do. If I can produce good, healthy, sound Labradors, they'll find their niche. * * *

SPECIALTY CALENDER

Cont'.

January 22, Saturday

**COASTAL SOUTH CAROLINA LRA,
LADSON SC**

January 23, Sunday

**COASTAL SOUTH CAROLINA LRA,
LADSON SC**

**February 5-6, Saturday-
Sunday**

**LRC OF THE PIEDMONT, CHARLOTTE
NC**

February 12, Saturday

SAN DIEGO LRC, SAN DIEGO CA

February 13, Sunday

SAN DIEGO LRC, SAN DIEGO CA

February 18, Friday

**GREATER ATLANTA LRC, ATLANTA
GA**

February 19, Saturday

February 26, Saturday

HOOSIER LRC, INDIANAPOLIS IN

February 27, Sunday

HOOSIER LRC, INDIANAPOLIS IN

March 11, Friday

**SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY LRC, STOCK-
TON CA**

March 12, Saturday

**SAN JOAQUIN VALLEY LRC, STOCK-
TON CA**