

## Chesapeakes Aren't For Everyone - by James B. Spencer

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Ask any Chessie owner whether you should get a Bay Dog, and that will probably be the first statement he/she will make. The owner of almost any other sporting breed will normally give you an unqualified endorsement. You know the routine; great pet, outstanding hunter, perfect watch dog, smartest canine there ever was, beautiful, faithful, will fetch your slippers, set out your decoys, and even shoot your birds for you if you're having an off day. But Chessie owners will be more cautious, more circumspect. They'll tell you that their dogs can be difficult, that they are independent, and sometimes a bit cantankerous. Not for everyone: that's for sure. And there are always stories that go with the caution. The pro who had to use a garbage can lid as a shield when punishing a Chessie. The Chessie that "treed" two pros on top of their truck when they tried to use an electronic collar on him. And on and on. Not for everyone. Yet the very people who say this most often are fanatically devoted to the breed. If you doubt that, just make an unkind remark about the Bay dogs in their company. Then you will find out what they really think of the breed; best of foul weather dog on earth: tough, fearless, tireless; unbelievable markers: the only breed to have in the blind with you when the chips are down and the odds are against you: something special.

Special, unique, difficult to explain. That is the Chesapeake Bay Retriever. Developed in (the USA), the Chessie is all Yankee. There is not an English or European trait in his make-up, and perhaps that is why he is so difficult to define, for our canine frame of reference is English or European. To understand a Chessie, you must understand the American character as it has developed over the past four or five centuries, and particular as it evolved during the 19th and early 20th centuries, when the Bay dogs were developed. That is the American character which is reemerging now in the 1980s. Keep that in mind when I tell you about the Chessie. First off, the Chesapeake is a big, strong dog, taller and more powerful on the average than the other retrievers. I have been steadying my own young, 80-pound Bay dog, "Beaver", recently, and let me tell you, my left arm is now several inches longer than it used to be. "Beaver" hits the end of the belt cord like no dog I have ever steadied before. Sometimes I feel like I have lost a fast freight. However, these dogs were developed to retrieve duck and geese from the Chesapeake Bay all day and even into the night back when there were no limits, so their size and strength should be no surprise. Even today a wildfowler looking for a goose dog has a better chance of getting what he wants – a dog that will tangle with and subdue a tough, old crippled giant Canada – if he opts for the breed from the Bay. That is not to say that there are no good goose dogs from other breeds, for there are, but the odds are better on a pup if it is a Chessie.

The Chesapeake also has a coat more suited to really bad weather than other retrievers. His harsh, oily, outer coat hides a woolly, water-resistant undercoat, and the combination will normally keep his skin dry even after hours of retrieving. Most retriever breeds have double outer coats, but not like a Chessie's. The pungent aroma of this oily, outer coat may make him less than welcome in the confines of the living room, but it smells like perfume to a duck hunter when the dog brings in a cripple after a long chase. Originally, the dogs were dark brown, but the lighter "deadgrass" color was developed somewhere along the line to better camouflage the dog. However, dogs do not disturb the birds, so the only real advantage in all these shades is that they allow each hunter to choose his personal favorite. I like the dark ones; if you like the lighter shades, fine. We can both be happy. The overall conformation of the breed is functional rather than beautiful. For those hunters who feel that "handsome is as handsome does", the Chessie is gorgeous, above all the other breeds, for one look tells you the dog "can do." He is not as pretty as a Golden or as sleek as a Labrador, but he catches your eye nevertheless. He isn't the fleet-footed scat back or wide receiver, he's more the pulling guard, the linebacker, or the tight end, and he has his own poetry, his own métier.

The Chessie is mentally, as well physically, tough. He attacks a job with a single-minded determination and a sense of self-confidence that makes him difficult to dissuade. He marks well, remembers well, and has the cunning to deal with most situations that come up in a day's water-fowler, so he prefers to hunt with someone who will allow him some latitude. He seems to say, "You call and shoot the birds, and then leave the rest to me; I won't interfere with your job if you won't interfere with mine." Handling a Chessie with whistle and arm signals, especially on a fall that he thinks he saw, is apt to be difficult; even on a blind retrieve, you had better put him on the bird quickly or he will decide he can find it quicker on his own, and

turn you off. He is a free spirit who wants to do his own job his own way, without having the boss breathing down his neck all the time. The Chesapeake's love for water is so pronounced that sometimes it seems they would rather swim than walk. I have always introduced Golden Retrievers and Labs to water very carefully, after all, these breeds were developed as land retrievers in England and have only been adapted to American water-fowling in this century. True, both breeds have adapted nicely, but still a little caution first is a good idea. The Chessie was developed as a water dog from the start and takes to this medium like the other breeds do to land work. When he was a little puppy, my own "Beaver" dove into the first water I showed him, swam about 40 yards without once beating the water with his front feet, and tried to uproot a small, dead tree in the middle of the pond before returning to me. No cautions introductions needed for him.

The Chessie is a good friend and a bad enemy. If he has accepted you as one of his people, he will die for you or kill for you. He will protect you, sometimes when you don't really need it, which can be embarrassing. I remember a Saturday many years ago when I had lunch in Marge and Sam Wolsey's fifth wheeler which was parked at pro D.L. Walter's place. Sam and I were sitting on a sofa and Marge was in the kitchen. Their young Chessie jumped up on the sofa and sat between Sam and me. He didn't look to the left or right, just sat there staring ahead. As the three of us talked, I unconsciously reached up to scratch the dog's chin. Still looking straight ahead, he started a low growl that told me I had just made a mistake! I took my hand away, but that didn't change a thing. The dog continued to growl almost inaudibly – although I could hear him distinctly, believe me. I told Sam that his dog was about to have me for lunch. Then Sam noticed the growling, so he told the dog to go over to the other side of the room and lay down. The dog obeyed, but he never took his eyes off me all the time I was there. Later, I figured out what the problem was. The dog wasn't sitting on the sofa to be sociable; he was protecting Sam – since he didn't know me at all.

Understanding that protective quality is crucial to getting along with Chessies. If you don't know the dog, don't "violate its space" or that of its owner. Actually, that is a pretty good rule to follow with any dog of any breed. However, the rube who just has to show what a great hand he is with dogs runs a greater risk of ending up with a punctured epidermis if he takes uninvited liberties with a Chessie than he does with most other sporting breeds. On the other hand, the person who uses common sense allows the dog make the initial overtures, and even then takes it easy until the dog is comfortable will have little difficulty with most Chessies. Chessies form definite opinions about people and choose their friends cautiously. They have a strong sense of dignity, and insist that friend and enemy alike respect that dignity. Probably the best one-word description for the breed is "passionate". They love with great intensity; they hate the same way; and even their indifference toward strangers has a passion in it – their eyes say a steely, "You had better leave me alone, buddy. Because of this passionate nature, a Chessie is best trained by his owner, that on human being the dog accepts totally. The dog will do things simply to please that one person that no amount of punishment could induce it to do for anyone else. Sure, a good pro can train a Chessie, but it will not be easy. The reason the breed has the reputation for being tough, hard-headed, independent, and just plain mean is that they don't really give much of a hoot what anyone thinks except for that one special man or woman. A pro can use training techniques that works nicely for Labs, but the Chessie couldn't care less what the pro wants, so he doesn't respond like Labs do. Sometimes a pro can get rough enough to gain grudging compliance but more often the dog just endures the pain and continues to figuratively flip off the pro. The best way to involve a pro training of a Chessie is for the owner to train the dog under the pro's guidance. Most pros have a fee structure for this kind of work. It allows the Chessie to learn new ways to please the boss: it allows the boss to learn how to train the dog; and it saves the pro the problems he would have in motivating a dog that is passionately indifferent in the normal pro/dog relationship.

Now, I'll let you in on the best-kept-secret of Chessie training; they are a soft breed! Yeah, those tough critters that show no sign of fear or pain when subduing an equally-tough giant Canada, those weather-proof ice-breakers that seem not to notice the difference between an early bluebird day and a-late-season blizzard, those unbelievably tough Chesapeake Bay Retrievers are soft and sensitive to the approval or disapproval of their owners. In this characteristic they are the equal of the Golden retriever. Train a Chessie like you would a Golden, with lots of praise and appreciation, and your training will go easy. Use the harsher approach that works well with the Lab, and he will turn you off – in fact, he may turn on you if you go too far. Where the Golden will sulk and quit under too much pressure from his owner, the Chessie will brood and be resentful. Many of the most successful Chessie trainers have been women, because of their greater sensitivity of the animal's need for praise and appreciation. I have to chuckle when I hear someone say that the Chessie is the ideal dog for the hardboiled, heavy-handed, macho man. Actually, the Chessie is the

worst dog possible for such a person- the dog probably won't accept his training, and he may take the man apart if pushed too far. This doesn't mean that a Chessie won't accept correction. He will, but it should be within a framework of positive motivation (praise and petting) and the dog should understand what he did wrong. The owner's disapproval is heavy punishment for the dog – there's seldom any need for a whip or high voltage. If the dog is conditioned to work to please his owner, and if the owner shows his pleasure regularly with praise and petting, the withdrawal of those rewards plus a few unkind words are usually enough to convince the toughest Chessie.

One more important point: Chessies can be a problem around other dogs. While I've seen Chessies romping and playing together like a bunch of lap dogs, I am not anxious to allow my own Chessie, "Beaver", out with dogs he doesn't know well. He's fine with kennel mates, and he has never been in a fight with any other dog - but I want to keep it that way, so I am very careful with him. It may seem that I am saying, "Chessies are not for everyone", just as so many other Chessie owners do. Maybe, I am too, but my intention is not to disparage the breed. I want to make sure that each Chessie pup is properly matched with a suitable owner, one who understands ALL the breed's characteristics and finds them not only acceptable but fascinating. I have seen what too much popularity has done to the Lab and Golden, and I don't want to have any part of giving serious Chessies breeders those same kinds of problems, believe me. Right now the Chessie is a distant third to the Lab and golden in the annual AKC registrations. That's fine, as long as there are enough Bay puppies to take care of all the people who really need them and wouldn't be satisfied with any other breed.

Who is the ideal Chessie owner? Well, first he/she should be a dedicated wildfowler, a fanatic rather than a dabbler. A practical bent of mind is an advantage, too. For example, when someone asks you what is the most beautiful shotgun ever manufactured, if you're stuck trying to decide between the boxy, old Browning Automatic and the exposed-hammer Winchester Model 97 pump, you're probably Chessie material. The Golden owner will name an English side-by-side, and the Lab man a Japanese Over/Under. The Chessie person admires a gun that can take it and take it and still knock the next duck or goose stone dead. Then he/she will be determined to do the training rather than farming it out to a pro. Finally, he/she will accept the passionate, protective nature of the breed and be willing to see that these traits do not get the dog in trouble. That means having proper kenneling at home, and maintaining reasonable control while training and hunting. I guess what I am saying is that Chesapeake may not be for everyone, but they just might be for you.