

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE FLAT-COATED RETRIEVER

By Karen Peterson



Mr. G. Reginald Cooke's Worsley Bess, from a painting by Maud Earl, ca. 1897

became known as Wavy-Coated Retrievers, distinct from earlier established Curly-Coated Retrievers. The Wavy-Coat was introduced to the show bench in 1864 at Birmingham, with retriever classes open to all, and Curly-Coats competing against Wavy-Coats of black, and also brindle, black and tabby and red.

Breed development emphasized selection for working traits: intelligence, nose, ability to follow the trail of wounded game, aptitude for carrying, combined with a soft mouth, strength and courage in water, obedience, steadiness, and desire to please. There was also a preference for medium-sized dogs, easier to transport in a dog-cart and requiring less food, and showing greater endurance in the field than heavier dogs.

More attention to conformation traits resulted from the influence of S.E. Shirley, founder and first President of the British Kennel Club. Wishing to improve the breed type of the Wavy-coat for the show bench, in establishing a dual-purpose breed, he started with black retrievers from his father's kennels at Ettington Park, and selected from the best available in other local strains, attempting to eliminate the

The introduction of shotgun use for hunting in the early 19th century brought a need for biddable dogs to work alongside the hunters, flushing game within gun range, and retrieving on land and in water. The Flat-Coated Retriever was one of the breeds developed on the estates of landed gentry in the British Isles, to work on upland game and waterfowl.

ORIGINS

The term "retriever" referred to function, rather than to a particular breed, and dogs were selected and crossed from various hunting breeds—setters, spaniels, including water spaniels, St. John's or Labradors, and other "Newfoundlands" brought by maritime trade. Other dogs adept at the work were mixed in, including mongrels of unknown parentage. Interbreeding was also done with sheepdogs, to improve biddability.

By mid-century, lines of retrievers—breeding more or less true to type—



Stanley and Kathleen O'Neill, with Pewcroft Flat-Coats



Miss Phizacklea, with Atherbram Flat-Coats photo credit: Fall

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“coarseness” of Newfoundland influence in heads, and the spaniel and water dog waviness of coat. Credited with fixing breed type by flattening the coat, refining and lengthening the head and minimizing stop, he is assumed to have used collie crosses to do this.

HEYDAY, FOLLOWED BY DECLINE

Controversies among Mr. Shirley’s contemporary fanciers illustrate the

challenges of maintaining a dual-purpose breed. Some sportsmen condemned the flatter coat as less resistant to water, thorns and briars, claiming these dogs were inclined to shirk heavy cover. Others credited the setter-like strain as having a keener sense of smell than others, while deploring setter influence on head type. But by the 1880’s, various prevalent “types”—“Labrador,” “setter,” and “collie”—were

fairly thoroughly combined. Variably referred to as Flat-Coat or Wavy-Coat, the breed’s elegance and working ability made it the fashionable shooting dog among wealthy sportsmen for decades, as well as a favorite of gamekeepers.

On the show bench, only black dogs had a chance of winning; brindle and tan markings were bred out. Golden-colored puppies, produced from black parents, were often bred

from, as the prepotency of black had already been noticed. (The Golden retriever strain was not recognized as a separate breed until 1911.) Liver-colored coats gained popularity after 1900, following a liver Flat-Coat's field trial win. Dual-purpose Flat-Coats did well in early, turn-of-the-century field trials, and were only later overtaken in prominence by Labradors.

For some years after the Kennel Club recognition of Labradors, in 1902, retriever classes at benched shows continued to be open, regardless of pedigree, with entrants deciding whether their dogs most resembled Flat-Coats or Labradors. Some interbreeding continued (at first, partly due to the shortage of Labrador lines, and later, due to the devastating decline in Flat-Coat numbers during each of the World Wars).

Flat-Coat prominence declined with increasing popularity of Labradors and

Goldens. The influence of H. Reginald Cooke was another factor. His Riverside Kennels, founded in 1881 and sparing no expense in breeding to and purchasing the best, dominated show bench and field trial wins for over six decades, inflating the prices, and discouraging others. On the other hand, his continuing dedication to Flat-Coats and dual-purpose breeding turned out to have a stabilizing effect through the difficulties of the War years.

POST-WORLD WAR II

The hardships and dislocations during World War II, along with the mobilization of Flat-Coat-owning gamekeepers, prevented all but a handful of breedings for years. Post-War breeders faced enormous challenges in picking up Flat-Coat lines from a diminished and aging population, during a time of continued food shortages, difficulties in communication and

transportation, and rampant dog disease. Survival of the breed became the priority over breeding for type and quality.

Fortunately, the Atherbram Kennel, established by Will and Winnie Phizacklea in the early 1920's, carried on through the War, providing much of the stock for post-War breeders. Stanley and Kathleen O'Neill's Pewcroft line also continued, and Mr. O'Neill worked unsparingly to search out other lines and assist other breeders. The current Flat-Coat population world-wide, in Great Britain and North America, as well as significant numbers in Scandinavia and the European Continent, derives from the few surviving lines. Dr. Nancy Laughton's Claverdon Kennel, and the "W" Kennel of Colin Wells, head gamekeeper on the Belvoir Estate, must also be mentioned, for their influence in the U.S.

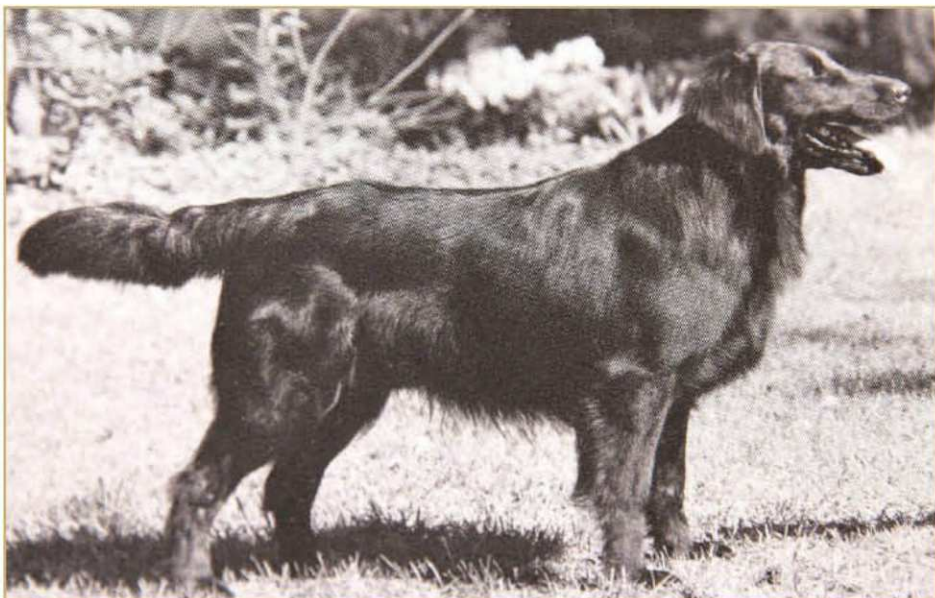
FLAT-COATS IN THE U.S. The AKC recognized the breed in 1915, but no lines come down from before 1953, when Stanley O'Neill sent Pewcroft Prefect (Doc) to Homer Downing, of Lyndhurst, Ohio, following a lengthy correspondence. Doc became the breed's first UDT, and sired a litter out of Atherbram Stella UD in 1957, under the Bramcroft prefix. Stella was not admired for her looks, but had been selected for her pedigree. For some years, British breeders guided American breeding programs through their selection of dogs to export, also fostering a dedication to dual-purpose breeding. The early imports are now so far back, current Flat-Coat owners may be unaware of the extent of their influence.

Homer Downing, with Atherbram Stella UD and pup



CH Athercroft Blac Is Beautiful, the first Flat-Coat to go Best In Show





CH AFC Jon-Lee's Spring Valley Atari WCX -- Atari -- (CH Spring Valley Riparian CDX WC x CH Wyndham's Neferlity CD) owned by Eleanor Bertz -- The only AKC Amateur Field Champion Flat-Coat, and the only Flat-Coat to qualify and run in a National Open, also a Group placer.



CH CFC CAFC Curlee Hill Blac Pacinko CD MH WCX -- Mikan -- owned by Margot Hallett

To mention only a few: CH Claverdon Duchess CDX, a liver bitch sent to Sally Terroux in 1958, and bred to her male from the Downings' first litter, CH Bramcroft Dandy UD (the breed's first bench champion and a Group placer, also a stylish and high-scoring obedience competitor), which produced foundation stock for her Terrcroft—later, Mantayo Kennel.

Rab of Morinda WCX *** — brought over in 1955 by an American serviceman and his British bride, Ed and Dorothy Moroff—a renowned field trial competitor, whose placement in an All-Age stake was not equaled for years. Four generations down from his breeding to Jet of Lilling, CH Athercroft Blac Is Beautiful (Mosey), owned by Glenn and Bonnie Conner—became the first Flat-Coat to go

Best In Show, in 1973, and she produced foundation stock for many other kennels.

CH Halstock Javelin—first Flat-Coat to win a Sporting Group—and CH Black Jet of Wyndhamian WC, both imported by Ed Atkins, who also bred, with Brenda Phillips, in England, the Wyndhamian “C” and “D” litters, out of Colin Wells' Wood Lass, influential on both sides of the Atlantic.

CH Claverdon Gamble CD WC, imported by Elizabeth Reed in 1969. His breeding to a Mosey daughter, sired by CH Wyndhamian Dash, produced the breed's first North American field trial champion (of only three)—Margot Hallett's CH CFC CAFC Curlee Hill Blac Pacinko CD MH WCX.

CH Torwood Peerless CDX WCX, imported by Valerie Bernhardt in 1979, a Group winner and influential sire; and his litter sister, CH Torwood Poppy CD WC, a foundation of Helen Szostak's Grousemoor lines.

In 1960, the Downings, Moroffs, and Sally Terroux founded the Flat-Coated Retriever Society of America (FCRSA), which has close to 900 members, and continues to promote the selective breeding of dual-purpose retrievers, out of conviction that the breed's characteristic temperament depends on retention of its working traits. Two of FCRSA's most prestigious awards are the Bramcroft Obedience Trophy,

honoring Homer Downing and Doc, and the Field Trophy, established by the Moroffs and administered by long-time field trial competitor Elizabeth Millikin. The focus on dual-purpose breeding can be seen to have kept the breed from holding its own against Labradors in field trial competition, and may also have held it back until recently in Sporting Group competition. But it has also resulted in a very high proportion of Flat-Coats earning both bench championships and hunt test and other working titles. ■

Sources:

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Flatcoated Retrievers, Brenda Phillips, Kingdom Books, 1996;

“Significant Flat-coated Retrievers, 1953-1978,” Vernon Vogel, in the 1982 Flat-Coated Retriever Directory of North American Dogs

Photos from the collections of Elizabeth Millikin and Sally Terroux, and from the 1986 Flat-Coated Retriever Directory of North American Dogs

About the Author:

*Karen Peterson is a writer, mostly of fiction, living outside of Chicago. She has had Flat-Coats since 1988, and has become increasingly drawn to field work. Her homebred bitch (actually, co-bred with Lori Kunz) — Artie Sun's Caldera at Thira WCX *** — won the FCRSA Field Trophy in 2009 and 2010.*

