

## Our story

Growing up on a small farm in southern Minnesota, I've had dogs my entire life. I didn't start out with a hunting dog, but hunting became my addiction at 13 years old when I shot my first pheasant (missed a lot before that). At that time, I had never seen a hunting dog in action, but I yearned for one, so at 16 I bought a one year old gorgeous golden retriever. I obedience trained her, and discovered I had a knack for it. She was a great companion, but didn't have the slightest interest in flushing pheasants, and certainly not retrieving one. Everybody noticed her though, as she was truly show quality, so I had her bred to another fine looking dog and raised and sold nine beautiful pups that never had a lick of instinct for hunting.

When I went off to college, I knew I couldn't take care of my golden, so I gave her away to a young farm kid who needed a good companion. I was without a dog for the first time in my life. I was still addicted to hunting, and still longed for that dog that shared the same desire. Despite my parents trying to convince me I didn't have time for a dog, I was constantly on the lookout for the one of my dreams. On happenstance I found a young black lab at an animal shelter that seemed to take an instant shine to me. She was a beautiful dog that obviously loved to please, so I took her home and made plans to have her spayed, as required by the animal shelter. It was hunting season when I took her home, so I immediately set out to see if she had the instinct I had hoped for. To my delight, she took to the woods and fields and instantly started producing with no training. That was it. I knew from then on that Labradors would always be a part of my life.

A problem arose. In only a couple of months of training and hard hunting, that dog became totally infatuated with me and completely intolerant of anyone who took my time away from her. It's true, ask my girlfriend (now my wife, Sandy). When I had left her in my apartment to visit home one weekend, she aggressively pinned my roommate in the bathroom for a day before he could escape. I'll never know what was mentally wrong with that dog, but it was a flaw I didn't know how to correct, and despite her good points, I had to take her back to the shelter.

I was back to looking for another dog, and my love for labs was still strong. I decided to spend more time researching for the next dog, and was convinced a young pup from registered stock was the way to start. I read everything I could about puppy selection and training, and perused every classified ad I could find. I looked at a lot of litters in my price range at the time, offered by "professional" breeders. I was disappointed with what I found. Not that I was extremely picky, but it seemed impossible to find a reasonably priced (remember, I was in college) pup that wasn't badly cowhocked, didn't have a severe underbite, or have parents without obvious displaysia. I finally saved a little more money and ended up buying a chocolate pup that was a great-granddaughter of River Oaks Corky. Man, everyone thinks they have, or had a dog that was the finest ever produced. Not so, I had that dog.

I didn't take Ozzie to field trails, or hunt tests or pheasant competitions, but many people told me I should have. Ozzie was a phenomenal retriever that did things that amazed people, from retrieving ducks underwater to actually retrieving two live red fox to hand in one day. She retrieved thousands of pheasants, hundreds of waterfowl and grouse, and yes, two fox in her 11 years, but unarguably her most amazing accomplishment was that she continued to do it after becoming completely blind at seven years old. Ozzie had progressive retinal atrophy. We found out when she started bumping into things at five years. Even so, from seven to ten years old, she had a sixth sense for obstacles and would jump downed trees and still find the birds, it just took a little more time. She never lost her incredible drive, but I had to pull her out of the field at 11, it was just too much.

When Ozzie was three and four years old, I tried to have her bred to another excellent field dog, but fortunately, she always refused him, even when we kept them together throughout her cycle. Despite her great qualities, I would have felt terrible passing on her defect, and having someone else experience the heartbreak of watching their dream dog deteriorate.

When Ozzie was a year old, Sandy bought a chocolate lab pup with very good bloodlines originating from well known field trial dogs. When Ellee was six months old, she was badly injured when playing keep away with a friend's young lab. The older dog rammed into her, rolled her over and fractured her leg. Not long after spending thousands to have the leg repaired, somehow she broke another leg. During those repairs, we found out she had thinner than normal bones, which was likely congenital. We immediately had her spayed. The pins she had in her legs caused arthritis, and she would get very sore when worked too much. For that reason, we never really hunted her, however at 11 years old and less than a year from her death, she retrieved her first pheasant. She seemed extremely proud that day, as were we.

Loving labs like we do, when a close college friend announced his marriage in Alaska, it seemed appropriate for us and some other good friends to buy two lab pups for him and his new wife. I was not involved in researching the litters the pups came from, but was assured by my friend that both pups were from excellent stock and came with solid health guarantees. The Alaska couple were ecstatic with their family additions, but soon found out that one had a problem, a severe problem now called centronuclear myopathy. This pup had to be euthanized within a few months of our gift. The breeder did not provide a guarantee against this defect, and for all I know kept breeding the same parents.

After years of having had first hand experience with back yard breeders and a full gamut of canine health problems, Sandy and I decided to start our own breeding kennel, and to do it right, so that others didn't have to share in our experiences. We had been without a dog for almost two years, and we set out to find the right dog to start it. We strived to find a pup with excellent conformation, strong hunting instincts, and of course, all the health certificates available. With 17 years of training experience, I was confident I could run the dog in hunt tests through the master hunter level, and of course, we would obtain all the necessary health certificates.

We chose a beautiful pup from a sire with a long line of show champs and a dam with an excellent hunt test and field trial ancestry. Effie turned out to be an excellent combination of these two lines. She's gorgeous, loves to train, and is a natural hunting machine. In her first year in the field, she retrieved over a hundred pheasants for friends and I, and she obtained her Junior Hunter title before two years of age. At 24 months, her hips and elbows passed the test and we had an appointment for her CERF. We eagerly began looking for the right stud to implement the next phase of our plan. Our world came crashing down when the ophthalmologist told us she had retinal dysplasia. How could that be? We were very careful. A second opinion yielded the same result, and Effie was spayed. The breeder was as surprised as us. It was his first problem in years of breeding. Canine health was his primary concern as well. He honored his guarantee.

Why have I just made you read two pages of the trials and tribulations of our canine career? It's simple. To show you that despite the problems we've encountered, we absolutely love the Labrador breed, and we are tirelessly committed to producing sound healthy puppies, so that hopefully you won't have to experience the same heart breaks we've endured in the past. Though our kennel is small, we are not back yard breeders. We've learned the hard way, and have no desire to produce excellent hunters with unknown health issues. We provide the professional service you expect with top quality dogs. It's not about the money to us. It's about improving the breed. We want you to be totally satisfied with the health and performance of your dog, and if you decide to enter the breeding arena, we hope that you will carry on that mission as well.

Thank you for your interest in Whittlesey Valley Retrievers. Please review our website, and feel free to contact us with any questions.