

# The Flatcoated Retriever Type and Function

by Edward J. Atkins

**The development of man's ability to shoot larger numbers of flying and running game required developing dogs for the retrieving function. During the middle 1600's the British Royal family and many of the nobility took refuge with the French aristocracy during the English revolution, and up to the Restoration. The French Royals had developed the sport of shooting large numbers of birds into a grand social pastime and when the British bluebloods returned to England they brought this with them. Various types of dogs were used to drive, locate or recover the game. Early prints of shooting scenes in France show many Spaniels, and some very sturdy setter like dogs retrieving.**

As the shotgun technology improved there was a need for a specialized retrieving dog to collect game from land and water. Each landed family or region developed strains of retrievers from whatever worked. The heavy type setter seen in the early prints seems to have been the basis of this development. These were crossed with working farm dogs ("collies") to make them more trainable, the shipboard dogs brought back from the Grand Banks of Newfoundland and Labrador to add strength and water working ability, and truthfully anything else that man or critter could perceive. By the mid 1800's the fashion was to favor solid black as the color for a retriever and this led to some standardization for conformation that suited the dogs to the work required. This can be seen in prints, paintings and bronze statues of dogs from the period.

When shows began the animals exhibited were the better-looking workers. Dr. Bond Moore a country doctor in the British midlands was also a show judge and shooting man. He was very instrumental in helping to standardize retriever shape, size and in providing the "right sort" to wealthy patrons such as S. E. Shirley, of Ettington, who was for the next 30 years the breed's great patron and also founded the Kennel Club. What evolved is a strongly built dog of medium size with a dense weather resistant coat that lay generally flat as opposed to being curly or rough. First referred to as Wavy Coated and then with the



*Painting of flatcoat by Reuben Ward Binks for the book, Gundogs, by Chalmers.*

current breed name, Flat Coated. In no manner should these terms be confused by a show trend to excessively groom for a smooth coat.

The one thing that separates a quality flatcoat from other retrievers is a very distinctive and practical outline. The head is long and clean with the strength to carry any game. It is a one-piece head with little distinction between skull and foreface and these are equal in length. Stop is slight and gradual but a down face or collie like head would be atypical. It is set upon a strong neck that flows well into the dogs back. This is essential for a proper front end and makes the back of the dog appear square while the overall profile shows a long (from point of the breast or prow to

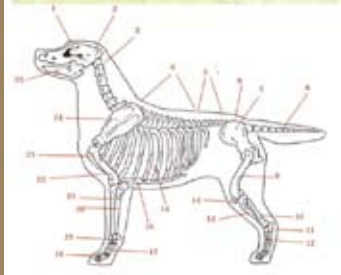
the last rib) deep ribcage that tapers up to a strong square loin. The forechest is only moderately broad but viewed from front or side will show a distinct prow. This prow is a physical structure not a groomed fluff of hair. The shoulder blade (top point of withers to shoulder joint), upper arm (shoulder joint to the elbow), and forearm (elbow down to the pastern or wrist) are each of approximate equal length. With the shoulder blade and upper arm set at about a 90-degree angle. This structure with the round well-arched foot and strong but sloping pastern of moderate length provide the shock absorber system to protect the integrity of the skeletal system and the internal organs.

over angulated must push in a constant uphill position, squandering needed energy for endurance and placing greater stress on the hips and spine.

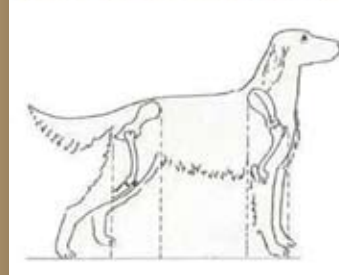
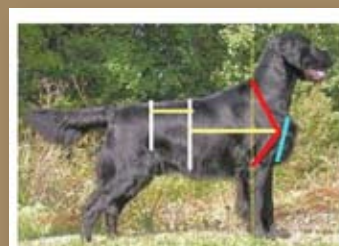
**I**n summary the flatcoat is a strong but elegant, medium size dog with substance and bone. Deep rather than rounded in ribcage with a very distinct blunted triangle shape formed by the level back, deep brisket with prominent prow, tapering up to the last rib to form a tuckup. A flatcoat is never compact or cobby, nor is it overly rangy (length of body). The general appearance of the breed; "showing power without lumber (excess



*Correct Flatcoat type and skeletal structure*



*Incorrect Labrador type with Labrador skeletal structure*



*Incorrect Setter type with Setter structure*

**W**hen standing approximately 65% of the weight is on the front assembly and in action over 90% of the concussion of striking the ground is absorbed up front. The proper front also allowing for a smooth ground covering action; the efficiency of fewer steps also minimizes shock to the system, and encourages both endurance and durability. The flatcoat topline should be generally level, never sloping or swayed. If the neck is properly set and shoulders set well into the back there will always be a very slight but perceivable dip just behind the withers. Any softness of back or longer than square loin region is seriously faulty and tends to render a hard worked dog unsound at a relatively early age. In this respect, upright shoulders, weak or upright pasterns, a soft back and loose loin region (open couplings) are as crippling to a worker as moderate hip disease.

**T**he rear of a flatcoat should be well muscled with angulation in balance with the shoulders. The second thigh or gaskins (knee to the hock) should be of a good length at least equal to the thigh (hip to knee), with hocks well let down (short). The optimum function for a retriever is to propel itself forward using the rear as an efficient lever not as a pushing instrument. Dogs that are

flesh) and raciness (higher stationed on legs) without weediness (slightness in bone or general build). Any attempt to stylize or change the shape of the dog by shaving, barbering, fluffing, etc is reprehensible and more often than not is a red flag calling attention to the very faults it seeks to hide. A bit of tidying of the ear fringes, throat and feathers should be the only grooming needed.



## Edward J. Atkins

has owned flatcoats and Chesapeakes since 1953, and currently uses the prefixes Wyndham in the USA and Wyndhamian in the UK. Over the years he

has bred many champions around the world from a limited-breeding program aimed at producing gundogs for his own use in North Dakota, a region noted for plentiful upland game and migrating waterfowl. In addition to horses and cattle, he has judged Chesapeakes, flatcoats and goldens since 1972.