

SPORTING GROUP

for speed, agility, hunt drive, scenting ability, surefootedness and control, and responsiveness to the handler's direction.

The AKC, UKC, and BHA offer titles to dogs who pass various levels. Beginning with Instinct, the dog must find, one rat, in one minute, demonstrate he can tunnel and climb, and ignore an empty canister and a canister with rat litter once to earn a RAT title.

The classes increase with difficulty, adding obstacles, additional diversions, and more rats to find as the dog progresses. For the Novice title, RATN, the dog must pass the test three times by finding one rat in two minutes, with one litter container and one clean. To earn the RATNX title, the dog must pass 10 times, under two judges. To earn the Open title, RATO, the dog must find two rats, with two litter containers and one clean container in two minutes, 30 seconds. The RATOX title requires 10 passes under two judges. The RATS title requires three passes by finding four rats, ignoring three rat-litter containers and one clean. Again, for a RATSX title, he must pass 10 times, under two judges.

The ultimate challenge is Master (RATM). For this the dog must find one to five rats from eight tubes and ignore the remaining litter-tubes. He must take five tunnels with two turns and complete it in four minutes 30 seconds—and he must complete this five times

under two different judges. The super dog can complete this test 10 times for a RATMX title. For more fun, a competitor may enter the “Crazy 8” class, where the dog earns points and gets deductions to earn titles.

Safety of the rats themselves is of the upmost importance. They are hidden in secure, aerated tubes with litter and bedding, and limited in the time each is used in competition. They are kept in a safe, comfortable place away from the dogs when not in use. A chief “rat wrangler” is in charge of the rodents' health and safety during the competition.

A friend invited me and my 11-year-old Chessie, Zazzy, to come see what this fun game was about. After introducing Zazzy to the rat, my friend set up an instinct test for her. In barely a minute, Zazzy figured out that she was looking for a rat hidden in the bales of hay. Ears up, tail wagging, and nose down, she trotted around the bales of hay, ignoring the blank canister and the canister with rat litter. She found the rat hidden on top of the bale. For the second hide, she went right to the canister with the live rat like a true hunter.

With their natural hunting instincts, this is a game Chessies love to play!

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Curly-Coated Retrievers

WHY CHOOSE A CURLY?

There are many reasons to choose a Curly-Coated Retriever, but also a few things that might challenge a new owner. I shall discuss the challenges first, followed by the attributes.

I have found that nail care may be difficult for most Curlies. They appear to be particularly sensitive regarding this. My first Curly introduced me to that challenge. Fortunately, after she had been anesthetized twice for nail care, a wise groomer suggested that I use a large shop file and do one nail per day, with treats offered. That worked well and progressed to a foot at a time. Other Curlies have responded to different methods over the years. My advice is to start with nail care very early and slowly.

Another possible challenge for some Curlies is shyness that can occur during puppyhood. Today, with all of the wonderful activities offered, one may socialize your pup well by taking her to as many gatherings as you can. Walk your pup around, meet people and other dogs, enter pup in puppy class, and progress to all sorts of activities as pup matures.

On the plus side for choosing a Curly, a good first for me is that mine have always settled well in the house and when outside may dash about. I do appreciate the fact that when

one of mine is running toward me at break-neck speed, she will veer off and never bash into me!

David Ferguson, a longtime Curly owner, agrees with me regarding their ability to be settled or not in the appropriate situation. In 2007 he wrote, “Curlies are a perfect combination of sporting dog and companion dog. Although they love to be outdoors, they love to be with their people.” They are not a breed to be shut outside all day.

A Curly-Coated Retriever may be a bit reserved but also well mannered. I shall say, however, that I have noticed during the past four or five years, that our breed is more of a blend of happy, outgoing, tail-wagging extroverts as well. As regards those who are a bit more reserved, David sums it up well when he says, “In general, the Curly temperament is unique among retrievers. They are very loving and devoted to their people, but open to meeting new people. They do not get in your face when meeting new people but are not hostile.”

In the future, I shall give more reasons for choosing a Curly-Coated Retriever. Thank you, David, for sharing your expertise in this column and future ones.

—Ann Shinkle,
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