

Jekyll or Hyde?

Black-hearted psychopath or the ultimate bird-dog?

Nick Horten looks at the real Chesapeake

AS I write this, my old Chesapeake Bay retriever bitch lies across the threshold of my study, strategically positioned so none may leave or enter without her approval. Though her guarding instinct remains as strong as ever, at 14 years of age she sleeps so soundly now that a stranger would have to step on her tail to get a reaction. Cussed to the last, I suspect she won't die in her sleep but will force me to make that awful phone call to the vet, feared by every dog owner when their shooting companion's quality of life becomes a burden.

The mere mention of the Chessie in wildfowling circles usually produces an extreme reaction. Their aficionados swear that they are the ultimate duck and goose dog, while their detractors, usually people who have never owned one, class all Chessies as black-hearted canine psychopaths. The truth, of course, lies somewhere in-between.

I bought my first Chesapeake Bay retriever in 1976, a dog that gave me more reason than most to remember it, and left me quite literally with an indelible impression of the breed. My second was the now-aged Seeker, which I was given by her original owner when she was two years old. Perhaps because I had nothing to do with her early training, she was the first rock-steady and handleable dog I owned. She was everything a good Chessie should be, giving 10 years' sterling service on the marsh without ever letting me down. Of all the gundog breeds, the Chesapeake has the strongest guarding instinct. So it was that I found myself invited for a day's fowling on the east coast. When I rendezvoused with my host, he remarked, "You've got one of THOSE, have you!"

Jumping to the breed's defence, I explained that most of what he had apparently heard was grossly exaggerated. Halfway through the day we had to move position, which meant gathering in the decoys as the tide rose and adjourning to a high spot on the island. Now, from Seeker's point of view, more than three decoys together constituted a pile – and a pile needed guarding. After all, she reasoned, my host might have been about to steal them... So, by now presiding over a heap of gear consisting of a dozen decoys, decoy bag and gun, she felt entitled to bite



Some call it the ultimate fowling dog, others call the Chesapeake Bay retriever a thug

him on the backside when he came to help me. For his part, my host behaved like a perfect gentleman and said no more about it, though I wouldn't have blamed him for barking, "I told you so". Have I ever been invited back? Well, what do you think?

That minor lapse of etiquette apart, Seeker was a first-class gundog who has thoroughly earned her retirement place in front of the lounge fire. My third Chesapeake was rather less successful. One morning, when he was about two years old, he decided for reasons best known to himself that he was going to kill my wife's Labrador. The wife and I were in bed asleep, with the two dogs lying on the bedroom floor, when the fight broke out. Since I sleep *au naturel*, I hesitated about intervening in this maelstrom of tearing teeth and flying fur.

My wife, however, is made of sterner stuff. She felled the Chessie with a slashing right hook, then hurled all 90lb of it across the room. Taken in by the Breed Society Rescue Group with the hope that he

might find a place with the police or Army, he attacked two of the kennel staff in as many days. On the third day he was, quite rightly, put down.

I will carry a reminder of my first Chessie with me until the day I die. It happened like this. Bay was a medium-sized dog weighing about 85lb. A moderately efficient gundog, any faults he possessed were due to my inexperience as a trainer. He was an accomplished performer with dummies and one day we were going through some training exercises in an open field a short drive from home. When I whistled him in from a distance, he charged towards me. Normally, he would jink at the last moment, turn behind me and sit at heel. Unfortunately, neither he nor I took the slippery wet grass into account, so although he jinked, his momentum carried him straight on.

Being hit in the knee by 85lb of bone and muscle travelling at about 30mph is an unpleasant experience. I flew up in the air and landed in a heap on the ground, with my left knee dislocated and the shin bone cracked vertically for 6in, just below the joint. Even the dog was stunned, staggering around with a glazed look on his face for 10 minutes afterwards.

The drive to the hospital was one of life's minor nightmares of pain. I cried most of the way there, particularly when obliged to change gear. Operating the clutch pedal with a broken leg was decidedly unamusing. A surgeon put 15 blanket stitches in the incision and a nice, shiny surgical steel screw through the lower leg bone, and I was as right as ninepence – albeit that three months passed before I could walk properly.

After this incident, I became assistant secretary for Chichester Harbour Wildfowling. In one of the club's newsletters, I mentioned this incident. Early the next season I was walking along the sea wall with Bay at heel, when I saw a fowler walking towards me. He stopped, looked at me, looked at my dog, picked up his spaniel, shoved it in to a capacious gamebag, and scurried off. Perhaps he thought I had trained the dog to incapacitate other fowling. My Chesapeake's reputation seemed to precede it.

Would I have another Chessie? Yes, without doubt. A good one is worth its weight in gold. The physical scars are healed, but if someone else's Chesapeake runs towards me, it requires willpower to stop myself from sliding the safety catch off. You can never be too careful! ■