

The Pet Buyer's Guide to Finding a Golden Retriever

By Cheryl Minnier

Your Search Begins...

The Golden Retriever is the 2nd most popular breed according to the American Kennel Club. That means that everyday people begin their search for a Golden Retriever who can become a healthy, stable member of their family. However, finding that puppy is not as easy as it once was. The days of opening the newspaper or stopping at a roadside sign and finding the dog of your dreams are long past. This article can help you make more informed decisions about finding a puppy.

Today several problems plague our canine friends and any breed that reaches a certain level of popularity will face many challenges. Whenever it *appears* that there is money to be made breeding dogs, there will be people who will do it without the knowledge, skill and dedication that it takes to produce quality dogs. This can lead to puppies being born that have physical and/or temperament problems that make them unsuitable for family companionship. It can also lead to poor placement of puppies that results in adult dogs needing new homes. To maximize your chances of finding a wonderful companion, it is recommended that you purchase a puppy from a responsible breeder or consider an adult rescue dog.

Problems, What Problems?

Goldens should be healthy, stable dogs but unfortunately there are several problems that can occur. Among them are:

Canine Hip Dysplasia (CHD) and Elbow Dysplasia (ED)

CHD is a malformation of the hip joint that can cause pain and lameness. Symptomatic CHD may respond to medical treatment but this treatment will have to be lifelong. For dogs that do not respond to medical management, surgery is usually recommended at an estimated cost: \$500-1500 per hip. Often owners facing a dog in severe pain will have to consider the option of euthanasia. Elbow dysplasia is a group of malformations of the elbow that can also cause lameness and require surgery that may or may not be effective.

Cataracts or other diseases of the eye

These may result in impaired vision, blindness or severe pain.

Subvalvular Aortic Stenosis or SAS

This condition involving the main blood supply from the heart often proves fatal. Dogs affected with SAS can die suddenly before the age of 2. There is no known cure.

Hypothyroidism

Dogs who don't produce enough thyroid hormone, or whose bodies produce antibodies to the hormone, often have poor coat, are overweight and have skin and possibly temperament problems. Treatment consists of daily medication for life.

Allergies

While people suffering from allergies have respiratory symptoms, dogs usually have skin and ear problems. One of the most frustrating canine ailments; inhalant, food or contact allergies can produce constant itching and frequent ear and skin infections. Treatment is varied and often ineffective.

Seizures

Idiopathic epilepsy affects some Goldens who may have seizures of varying severity. Treatment usually consists of

medication given daily. If the point is reached where medication can no longer control the seizures, euthanasia is often necessary.

Temperament Problems

Goldens should be happy, responsive and eager to please. Variations in temperament ranging from extreme shyness to aggression are being seen with increasing frequency. Aggression in a Golden **SHOULD NOT** be tolerated and an aggressive Golden **SHOULD NEVER** be bred. Many experts consider temperament a hereditary trait.

Early Onset Cancers

Unfortunately there is early evidence that some forms of cancer which strike young dogs may have a hereditary factor. Cancers of the lymphatic system, bone and blood are becoming more and more common in dogs.

Bleeding problems – Some Goldens suffer from a condition similar to hemophilia known as VonWillebrand's disease. This is a problem with blood clotting that can have serious implications.

But He Has AKC Papers!

AKC registration **IS NOT** an indication of quality. It simply means that both parents were registered with the American Kennel Club. There is far more to producing a quality puppy than simply registering it with the AKC.

What is the GRCA (and why do they care)?

The Golden Retriever Club of America or GRCA is the parent club of the breed in this country. The parent club looks out for the breed, working to make sure that Goldens remain the wonderful dogs that responsible breeders have worked to develop over the years. All breeder/members of the GRCA are required to sign a code of ethics when they join the club and yearly at renewal of membership, promising to uphold the standards the club has set forth. Obviously, the best place to begin your search for a good breeder is through a local member club of the GRCA.

The Rescue Connection

Puppies are little mysteries. Purchasing a puppy from a responsible breeder is the single most important step you can take to increase the chances that YOUR puppy will meet your expectations; however, adult dogs are no longer mysteries. What you can see is what you get. At times an adult Golden will find itself in need of a new home. Enter the dedicated Golden lovers of rescue. These folks work tirelessly to rehabilitate and provide temporary care for unwanted or abandoned Goldens. So if a puppy is not your first choice and an adult Golden appeals to you, you can look for the Golden rescue near you and apply to adopt a rescue Golden. Remember, while buying a puppy from an irresponsible breeder is often a crap shoot – an adult rescue dog, who may or may not have been irresponsibly bred, is a known quantity. Any problems likely to develop are usually apparent and rescues will screen dogs for health and temperament problems. For a list of Golden rescues across the country [click here](#)

The Smell of Puppy Breath...

If you think a puppy might be in your future there are several factors to consider in determining if you are ready to make the commitment to a new family member. **You should be sure that:**

- You are ready to take responsibility for the dog for its lifetime and not just until your circumstances change.
- You can provide either a fenced yard or make the commitment to walk the dog on leash, keeping in mind that Goldens need LOTS of supervised and safe exercise. You will also need to incorporate your dog into your home. Goldens DO NOT make good "outside only" dogs! And if they are allowed to roam free, their friendly nature makes them an easy target for everything from thieves to automobiles.

- You are prepared to invest the time it takes to train your new puppy to be a responsible canine citizen. Golden Retrievers are wonderful, but they do not come fully trained!
- You can put up with the shedding, retrieving (and this includes everything from underwear to Tupperware!) and high energy of a growing puppy.
- You can afford the veterinary costs associated with having a dog, including regular exams, vaccinations and heartworm preventative.
- You have considered the grooming needs of a Golden. While they are not extensive, a well-groomed Golden is less likely to have skin problems and will track in a lot less debris!
- You are not planning on adding a dog simply to teach your children a lesson on responsibility. While children can and do become terrific dog owners, parents need to make sure they are ultimately responsible.
- You are prepared to put some time and effort into finding the RIGHT puppy for your family. You will need to resist the impulse to support puppy mills or irresponsible breeders. You will also need to find a breeder that you feel comfortable with. One you can turn to with questions, problems and concerns.

What Questions Do I Need To Ask?

Think of finding the right breeder as entering a partnership. This partnership will last for the lifetime of your puppy and hopefully beyond. While it may take some time and patience to find someone you feel comfortable with, the end result is definitely worth the trouble! There are several questions you can ask breeders that will help you to determine if this breeder espouses the highest standards. While you may not find a breeder that can answer yes to all of these questions, you should expect an affirmative answer to most.

1. Will the breeder agree, in writing, to take back the puppy **AT ANY TIME, FOR ANY REASON**, if you can't keep it? This is the hallmark of a responsible breeder.
2. Do both the parents have OFA numbers for hips and elbows? To get an OFA hip number, the dog must be at least two, have had an x-ray of its hips and have the x-ray interpreted by the Orthopedic Foundation for Animals. If the radiologists at the OFA determine that the dog does not have visible signs of hip dysplasia, they will assign it a number and a rating. The rating will be either *excellent*, *good* or *fair*. A numbers, indicative of pass/fail is also given for elbows. You should ask for copies of all certifications. This isn't a guarantee that your puppy won't develop CHD or ED, but it is the best screening tool we have available. PennHip™ ratings are another tool that can be used to evaluate hips. Each hip is given a number and a number less than the breed average is considered favorable. The current breed average is .56.
3. Do both parents have current CERF certificates or proof of normal eye exams from an ACVO certified doctor? CERF is the Canine Eye Registry. Exams should be made within 18 months prior to breeding and are repeated yearly. These exams can detect eye conditions that can lead to blindness.
4. Do both parents have heart clearances? This is a statement by a canine cardiologist or internist with cardiology training that the heart is free from any murmurs that might indicate SAS. If there is any question, a Doppler Echocardiogram should be done. Again, ask to see the letter.
5. Are the parents free of allergies, seizures and thyroid normal? Not all breeders currently check thyroid levels, but if there are any symptoms, blood tests should be done.
6. Are both parents temperamentally sound? It should never be necessary to make excuses for a Golden's temperament. "He's just a little shy" or "She just doesn't like kids" should NOT be said about a Golden!
7. Does the breeder have information about the grandparents, siblings and other puppies produced by this pair? A conscientious breeder will look for depth in a pedigree. For instance, knowing the OFA

status for several generations as well as the longevity of grandparents and their siblings, is a helpful way to predict what the health of the litter will be. Don't be intimidated by pedigrees – a responsible breeder will be happy to explain what you are looking at and why it is important.

8. Will the puppy be sold on a limited registration with a spay/neuter contract? As you can see, breeding involves LOTS of work and is not for the newcomer! A caring, responsible breeder will be interested in seeing that carelessly thought out litters or accidental breeding can't happen. There are numerous health and temperament reasons for spaying or neutering your pet. Have the breeder discuss these with you.
9. Is there a written guarantee covering the puppy for hereditary or congenital defects? Not all responsible breeders offer a guarantee but many offer partial or full refunds, or another puppy if yours develops a problem that interferes with its quality of life.
10. Is the breeder involved in competition? Most serious breeders compete on some level with their dogs to see if the stock they have is really worth perpetuating. Conformation competition judges the form and function of the dog as it gaits for the judge. Dogs compete for "points" and after accumulating 15 points a dog becomes a Champion. Champions will have the initials Ch. before their name. Obedience is another area where dogs are tested. Some obedience titles include: CD, CDX, UD and the coveted OTCh. The first three are found after the dog's name and the last is in front. Field work is also a natural arena for Golden Retrievers. Field Champions wear the letters FC or AFC before their name and other field titles include JH, MH, SH, WC and WCX. Field dogs can also earn stars (***) after their names. There are more titles in areas such as agility, versatility as well as the Outstanding Sire and Dam awards from the GRCA. Most breeders will be more than happy to explain all of these and tell you their plans for obtaining them! Most dogs in a promising pedigree will be titled. The claim of "Champion Lines" means nothing if there is only one or two Champions or they are all back three or more generations!
11. How many litters has the Dam (mother) had? If a female Golden is bred every season repeatedly it may be an indication that profit is the breeder's primary motive.
12. Why was the breeding done? "To teach the kids about the miracle of birth", "Because we thought having a litter was something she NEEDED to do", or "Well, our neighbors had the boy dog and we figured we could make back the money we spent on our female" are **NOT** good reasons for breeding! ***A note about "Both Parents on Premises" claims: Many ads in newspapers tout this as though it were a plus. Having both parents may simply mean that instead of the most complimentary sire (father of the puppies) being chosen, the closest one was used. You should always receive information on BOTH parents, but many breeders will send their females out to be bred or even fly in semen to get the best possible results. You should however, always be able to be in touch with the sire's owner, see pictures or videotape of him or talk with other people who have his puppies.
13. Does the breeder seem knowledgeable about the breed and the art of puppy raising? (And it is an art!) Does he or she seem willing to answer your questions – do you get the feeling that he or she will be available on an ongoing basis? Will he or she help you to select a puppy based on the puppy's temperament? Most master breeders have learned to evaluate temperaments and activity levels and will offer you *only* a puppy that will match your lifestyle.
14. Are the puppies raised in the house with lots of socialization and acclimation to the sights, sounds and smells they can expect to encounter everyday? And are they kept with their mother and littermates for *at least* 7 weeks? Without this *critical* intervention, puppies can have temperament problems that can be life long.
15. Is the breeder willing to provide you with references of other people who have bought puppies from him or her? If so, call them! Most people are more than willing to brag about their puppy!
16. What written material will the breeder provide you when you purchase a puppy? It should include a

contract that covers both the breeder's guarantees to you and your commitment to keep the puppy safe, vaccinated, in good condition and of course to spay or neuter at the right time. It should also include a copy of the pedigree and all the clearances and photos of the parents. Many breeders also give books, articles or videos explaining dog and puppy care.

17. Lastly, if there are puppies currently available, do they seem healthy? (No discharge from their noses, no loose stools, eyes bright, clean puppies AND environment, activity levels high.) Have they had their first shots and been wormed? Have they been vet checked? Also, how many puppies are available? Most responsible breeders will not tackle more than one litter at a time! Also they will specialize in one or at most two breeds – not "Over 100 breeds available!"

You are now armed with the information needed to make a wise decision about getting a Golden. So where to go next? The GRCA has a phone number to call that will give you contact information for the puppy referral representative or rescue nearest you. The number is: 1-281-861-0820. This information is also on the GRCA web page:

<http://www.grca.org/> If you have already contacted your local club – you are ready to use this brochure to help you make your initial contact with breeders. Remember – **be patient!** Most breeders will have a waiting list for their puppies. It takes time to go through the interview process and wait for the puppy to be born and grow up! Now is not the time to rush. You are adding a new member to your family for the next 10-15 years. Your patience will pay off! If you can't find a breeder in your area, don't be afraid to try neighboring states. Another place to begin your search is at local dog shows. Your local all breed kennel club can help you find shows in your area. The AKC can also help: www.akc.org/

COST: A well bred, pet quality puppy will usually cost between \$650.00 – \$1000.00, depending on the breeding and where you live. Remember a "cheap" puppy is often NO BARGAIN!

Disclaimer: The Author makes no warrantee of puppies sold by GRCA members. Following all the above guidelines does not guarantee that no problems will arise. The author cannot make recommendations about specific breeders.

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