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What Exactly Is a Golden Retriever?

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What exactly is a Golden Retriever?

It's a medium-size sporting dog, weighing between 55 and 75 pounds, although either sex may be slightly smaller or larger than the standard. A Golden's coat is thick and wavy but never curly, of medium length, and is solid colored in any shade of gold. A typical Golden is a happy character who dotes on his family and likes other dogs.

What are Golden Retrievers used for?

Sportsmen originally bred Golden Retrievers to retrieve waterfowl and upland game birds. The hunter shot the bird, and then it was the dog's job to bring the bird to the hunter's hand, retrieving it from water, dense underbrush or wherever the bird happened to land. Good retrievers picked each bird up gently and brought it back intact. The dogs hunted under trainers and professional handlers, and many are still used for those purposes.

Today's Golden is more often kept as a pet and family companion. He's strong and powerful, has a moderately high energy level and can play, work or swim for many hours in almost any weather. Goldens are highly trainable and active in canine sports, and they excel in obedience trials; agility and fly ball contests; Frisbee competitions; and more recently, in synchronized freestyle dancing exhibitions. They are superb companions for hikers, bikers, and backpackers.

Considering the Golden's heritage, it's little wonder that trained Goldens often compete in tracking and scenting contests and are valuable as drug, contraband, and munitions sniffers. The practical scenting skills needed following disasters and avalanches are within the realm of possibility for the sensitive nose of the Golden.

Goldens are superior guide dogs for the blind, and many are used as therapy dogs who bring their cheerful wagging tails and earnest expressions to long-term care facilities and hospital patients. Goldens often are trained as assistance dogs for the handicapped, and are large enough to fetch and carry sizable objects to wheelchair-bound owners. Specially trained Goldens nudge their hearing-impaired owners when the doorbell, telephone or alarm bell rings.

Just how versatile is a Golden?

Versatility is the Golden's strongest suit. Part of this flexibility is associated with his even temperament, and more is due to his penchant to please his human companions. His cleverness and intelligence serve him well in every pursuit. His trainability and willingness to bond with families rather than specific individuals are also part of the Golden's versatility.

What's a dual-purpose dog?

It's one who has two separate but nearly equal purposes for its existence. For example, a Golden might be proficient in tracking trials and also be a gundog or retriever trial competitor, or a combination obedience dog and gundog or show dog. Golden retrievers have so many diverse uses that nearly every one is at least a dual-purpose dog.

Where do retrievers come from?

During the 1920s Golden retrievers came to the United States from Great Britain. Retrievers of every description have come from all over Europe and parts of Asia. Probably they were developed from companion dogs who showed a propensity for chasing wounded birds, catching them and bringing them to their handlers. Spaniels, waterfowl retrievers and upland game bird dogs all have individual physical characteristics and histories.

Why, when and where did Golden Retrievers originate?

There's a great but probably fictitious story about the Golden's origin that's worth repeating. According to an ancient report that's still accepted by some authorities (and discounted by most), the Golden Retriever originated in 1860 when Sir Dudley Majoribanks of Brighton, England, purchased eight performing dogs from an Eastern European circus troupe. Those dogs were called Russian Trackers and were accomplished trick dogs.

According to that report, these Russian Trackers were used chiefly as guard dogs to protect the great flocks of sheep in Russia's Caucasus Mountains. The strongest and usually the biggest dogs were chosen to combat the flocks' predators. These dogs often measured 30 inches at the shoulder and weighed more than 100 pounds, and those with the heaviest and thickest coats were most valuable because of the cold Russian

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weather. Those dogs, so the story goes, were the ancestors of the first Golden Retrievers.

However, most current authorities say that sometime before 1865, the (now extinct) Tweed Water Spaniel was used as foundation stock for the Golden Retriever. This spaniel was crossed with Irish Setters and other hunting dogs, small Newfoundland dogs and probably Bloodhounds to produce today's Golden Retriever. All this cross-breeding was done in an effort to produce a superior gundog with just the right combination of characteristics: trainability, toughness, courage, good swimmer, protective coat, ability to find downed birds in thick cover, gentleness and willingness to relate to people and take direction. Today's Golden Retriever is big and tough enough to satisfy outdoors people and gentle and trainable enough for families with children.

Why does my Golden love to swim?

You tend to like what you do best. So do dogs. Most dogs are proficient swimmers, and for many years Golden Retrievers have been selectively bred for swimming ability and a great love of water. That means you will have a hard time keeping your Golden out of any nearby lake, pond, stream or swimming pool.

Leg strength, body musculature, coordination and balance are among the qualities that make the Golden a superb swimmer. Other retriever qualities, such as good scenting ability, soft mouth (holding a bird in his mouth without crushing it), obedience, temperament and coat quality, accompany his swimming ability.

How big do Goldens get?

Males stand 23 to 24 inches at the withers (the tallest point of the shoulder), and females are a couple of inches shorter. In other words, a male Golden's shoulder is knee-high to a six-foot man. When he's standing with all four feet on the floor, his muzzle can usually reach a steak lying on the kitchen table. Coffee table treats disappear quickly when a Golden strolls across the room. An adult Golden standing on his hind legs is as tall as a petite adult human, and a rambunctious Golden can easily knock over a child or an older person. Some Goldens grow taller and some shorter and,

like humans, some lean toward heavyweights and others are slim. Balance and muscularity are more important than size in this sporting dog.

What does physical balance mean?

An adult male Golden should appear powerful. He should be slightly longer than he is tall, measured from the foremost point of his chest to the rear of his buttocks. A Golden should be strong, full-bodied, standing on sturdy legs, with a muscular chest and rump. His head should be broad and somewhat massive, and his neck should be muscular. His physique should appear smooth and balanced, never clumsy-looking. His movement should be easy and graceful, and his legs should be well muscled as befits an athletic dog who can earn his biscuits by swimming with a duck or goose in his mouth.

A female Golden's features are balanced as well, with considerable strength and coordination, but her muscle mass should be more refined and her weight a few pounds less than the male's. When you look at a Golden, you should be able to discern the difference between male and female at a glance, even though they're performing the same work.

How active are Golden retrievers?

Golden retrievers are not super-energy individuals, like small terriers, but a healthy Golden will need plenty of vigorous exercise each and every day. A Golden pup will be moderately active, but usually your puppy is as active as you *allow* him to be. A pup's activity may feed off his family's activity, and if he's playing with energetic children, he'll be a living dynamo until he exhausts himself or is confined. A typical young adult is a reasonably active individual as well, and can keep up with almost any human activity.

A healthy adult Golden of any age who's living with a family that has several children probably won't need any more regular vigorous exercise than he gets playing with the kids—if the children play with him just about every day. A Golden one to four years old should be exercised vigorously at least once a day for at least half an hour, and also should go on at least two leisurely walks every day. A Golden five and older will need at least three walks every day, plus a half hour of vigorous exercise a few times a week.

When your Golden is asleep, he's busily planning his next game in his dreams. If you're looking for a sedate lapdog, a very low-energy pet, the Golden isn't the dog for you. But you can redirect his constant frolicking.

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Teach him new activities. He'll enjoy it just as much as pointless playing, and you'll both get a feeling of accomplishment.

Why is a Golden puppy so active?

Because he's a happy camper! A Golden puppy's merry attitude is contagious, and his playfulness and curiosity are timeless. A healthy Golden's desire to frolic is quieted only by old age. The innate desire to play begins as soon as a puppy is coordinated enough to tackle a sibling, and it never disappears. The Golden has a happy switch. He can act serious and reserved one minute and be roughhousing the next. He'll curl up beside a sleeping child and be quiet and content there until the child begins to stir, then will spring to life, ready for any adventure. A big, active puppy can get rough, though, so very young children should not be left alone with a Golden pup.

Are Goldens good watchdogs?

If you want a guard dog or protection dog, look in another direction, because the Golden isn't the dog for you. A Golden has a big voice and may announce a stranger at the door or gate, but when it's a neighbor or friend calling, she'll greet them affectionately. Guarding property is foreign to a Golden's character. However, a watchdog's job really is just to warn her family of an approaching stranger, and this can be learned by a trainable Golden.

Do Goldens shed a lot?

Without regular, frequent combing and brushing, a Golden is a hair merchant. His hair isn't short and stiff like a Dalmatian's or a Pug's (that kind of hair sticks on everything), but it collects in nooks and corners of the house in little golden dust bunnies. This breed probably isn't for you if the first question you ask is "Do they shed?"

What does a Golden need from me?

A Golden Retriever is a friendly, people-oriented, loving and lovable dog who bonds tightly with his owner or handler. He'll trust you if you are

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consistent and patient with him, and will be a trustworthy companion if you give him the training he deserves.

Your Golden Retriever is a pack-oriented animal, like his wolf ancestors. When he comes to stay at your house, he has traded his canine pack for a human pack, and he wants to be included in practically all of his family's functions—even if it means just watching. A Golden wants to share and be included, and will eventually exhibit behavior problems, and even health problems, if he's penned or tied up or otherwise regularly excluded from family activities. Some Goldens are quite happy just going for an afternoon ride in the country once a week, going on a picnic or driving to a lake or park. If you spend two hours a day with your Golden in between such functions, he'll be ecstatic.

He's a living paradox. He'll sit for hours for petting and grooming, but *you* must manage his coat or he'll shed copious quantities of hair every day. His favorite pastimes include fetching, playing ball, chasing and romping with children, and he is rarely discontented except when *you* ignore him. He will often find a toy and bring it to a family member, sit with it in his mouth, waiting patiently, begging to play, but *you* must direct his activities.

He's not picky about what he eats, but you can't keep a Golden happy with food unless it's followed by a long walk, a swim in the lake, a game of Frisbee, or some quiet petting time shared with a member of his family. He wants a yard, but the yard furnishes only the opportunity to play. Play must involve you and other family members. A Golden needs his humans to toss a ball for him; a hide and seek game requires human participation.

Goldens demand training. Since they have active minds, they'll become bored and think of mischief. They need challenges and to be taught a new concept nearly every day. It needn't be a complex problem-solving venture, and might be a simple child's game of hide the toy under a rug.

Although a Golden isn't terribly conceited, to look his best he'll need regular grooming all his life. You should brush his coat twice a week, and each session should last about 20 to 30 minutes, or until his coat is straight, untangled and shiny.

Grooming is an activity that Goldens anticipate with enthusiasm, once they learn its advantages. They're no different from other dogs who enjoy the personal handling and touching that accompanies regular brushing and combing. Few doggy chores require as much conversation as grooming, because Goldens like to be talked to and they like the one-on-one dialogue that accompanies grooming.

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Why are Goldens so people-oriented?

Prehistoric dogs hunted in clans or packs, usually made up of relatives. Dogs have been selectively bred from those who considered themselves part of *human* society, and the Golden has risen to the upper crust of dogs who are extremely people-oriented. He assumes his role in a human pack and lives contentedly there. One breed rescue organization referred to Goldens as “Velcro dogs” because they do best when they’re close to their owners.

Do Goldens think and reason like we do?

That depends on how *we* think. Dogs have varying abilities to store experience, think, reason and solve problems. Goldens have sharpened those abilities over many years of selective breeding. An 1895 training book written by Mr. B. Waters noted that most dog owners of his day believed dogs’ actions were only related to instinct. Waters flatly stated that premise is woefully *wrong*. A dog’s actions are related to his *knowledge*, which depends on heredity, training and experience.

Dogs have fantastic memories, and they use that to great advantage in learning. Dogs watch their mothers and copy her actions. Thus, if a Golden’s mom is a gentle, loving, well-socialized and peaceful pooch, he will have that pattern to follow.

Reasoning and planning result from inherent intelligence, learned cleverness and past successes. When a Golden hunting dog discovers that *wounded* quarry dive and swim away quickly, he’ll retrieve them first, before picking up those that fall to the lake like a stone and are obviously dead. Reasoning also is exemplified by a Golden’s rushing to pull a floundering infant from a lake. A Golden guide dog will refuse to take his blind handler onto a trail that leads under overhanging tree branches, even though the dog’s height is well below the danger. Those situations can’t be taught, and are the result of reasoning and planning.

Why are Goldens so popular?

Goldens are people pleasers. They are number two on the American Kennel Club’s breed list because smart people want smart dogs. Popularity depends upon personality, size and maintenance requirements, and the slow-maturing Golden Retriever is a smart dog with an easygoing personality. He’s typically intelligent, athletic, clever, self-confident and trainable.

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There is a perception that Goldens don't shed much, but in fact, they shed as much as any dog and require their share of maintenance. Good nutrition and regular grooming will help minimize shedding.

There is also a perception that the Golden Retriever is the end-all, perfect companion who doesn't require anything except food, water, and housing. Wrong, wrong, wrong! It's natural for you to think of the obvious attributes a Golden Retriever offers, but at the same time, you must consider his less desirable imperfections.

The Golden Retriever breed has many genetic problems (see Chapter 4), so buying one requires very thoughtful screening. A Golden is quite intelligent, but many people consider him slower than some dogs of other breeds. Usually he's extremely trainable, but he still requires patience and consistency, exactly like any other dog.

Sometimes Goldens' popularity clouds the mind of a shopper. Maybe several of your friends have smart, lovable, beautiful and wonderfully trained Goldens, but a neighborhood trend is a lousy reason to acquire a living being. If you find that status is your true motive, buy a classic Mercedes or a yacht instead of a loving Golden Retriever.

Why are some owners dissatisfied with their Goldens?

They refuse to accept a Golden for who she is. They think they're getting a perfect, trained, non-shedding, super dog—which the Golden is not! Often, dissatisfied owners want nothing in their life that's as unpredictable and time-consuming as a companion pet, no matter how loving she is.

What is the Golden's share of the United States dog population?

Exact numbers are impossible to calculate, but according to American Animal Hospital Association surveys, there are about 52.9 million dogs in the United States. These dogs live in about 31 million households, so each dog-owning household averages about 1.69 dogs. Those surveys report that approximately half the U.S. dog population is purebred.

The American Kennel Club (AKC) recognizes 150 different pure breeds, although worldwide about 400 breeds are recognized. The Golden Retriever ranks number two in numbers of AKC registrations (after the

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Labrador Retriever), with 63,497 Goldens registered in 2001, out of a total of 1,081,335 AKC-registered dogs. This means that about 6 percent of *all* registered dogs in the United States are Goldens.

Annual Golden registrations are down from 1997, when the number reached over 70,000. Many Golden fanciers believe this decrease is healthy, because even after a breed loses some of its popularity, conscientious breeders continue to select the best dogs for the gene pool. Therefore, the decrease might mean that fewer but better breeders are producing fewer but better Golden Retriever puppies.

How long do Goldens live?

Never long enough to suit their owners. Barring accidental injuries and serious illnesses, a typical Golden will live 10 to 13 years. His life span depends upon genetics, nutrition, exercise and preventive health care.

If you choose your puppy carefully, feed him appropriately, and take good care of his health, he should live at least a dozen years and maybe longer. As a puppy grows, his needs change and you must adjust his diet and exercise accordingly. As he continues to age, his requirements change dramatically. You must adjust a senior Golden's care to accommodate his physical changes, and failure to do so may cause your pet's life to end prematurely. Mistakes made during puppyhood may return to haunt you and your Golden in later years and shorten your pet's life.

How does human age compare with dog age?

The oldest dog in the world was an Australian Cattle Dog who lived 29 years and five months (don't expect your Golden to approach that record!). Large dogs have a shorter life expectancy than small ones.

The first year of a midsize dog's life is approximately equivalent to 21 human years, and each subsequent year of a dog's life is roughly equivalent to four human years. By this calculation, a six-year-old dog compares to a 41-year-old human, and a 10-year-old dog compares to a 57-year-old human. Since the Golden is a fairly big dog and has a correspondingly shorter life expectancy than smaller dogs, he may even be a bit older at age 10. Let's just say that a 12-year-old Golden Retriever is well into his Social Security years.

How long do Goldens stay puppies?

Some breeders and owners say Goldens never grow up. It's true that they mature more slowly than many other breeds, and this slow maturation rate is more prevalent in males than females. Usually puppy silliness begins to slowly diminish from about three to six months until about two years old in females. An individual male may retain his puppy attitude longer, until well after physical maturity.

A Golden should never be considered a ready-made companion, and he will require significant training before all his kinks are worked out and replaced with the habits that typify his breed. Your Golden pup wants to be a good companion, but until you teach him otherwise, he doesn't know that he should chew or take into his mouth only *his toys*, and not your hands and everything else he encounters. Likewise, you must teach him not to jump up on his playmates. He doesn't mean to tear your hose or muddy your slacks, but you must teach him that these activities aren't acceptable.

According to one Golden rescue organization, one of the main reasons for giving up a Golden is that a family with young children doesn't always have time to devote to obedience training. When that happens, by the time the Golden is full grown, he's nothing more than an oversized knucklehead. Buyers almost always underestimate the amount of personal time a Golden requires. When a family with small children applies to this group for a Golden, the request is often discouraged because children lose interest quickly. If you're thinking of a Golden for your kids, DON'T! He always will be *your* companion and *your* responsibility.

Why is there so much difference between a Golden show dog and a Golden pet?

You can enter any AKC-registered Golden Retriever in AKC-sanctioned events. In that way, there is actually no difference between a Golden show dog and a Golden pet. However, from the very finest litters of Goldens raised by expert breeders, only a precious few will win ribbons and titles in shows. Those are the cream of the crop, the very best Goldens. They score high in show competition because they conform closely to the breed standard, which describes a perfect Golden Retriever.

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Is a Golden's coat color an indication of his quality as a show dog?

No. The coat of a show dog is part of the physical appearance that makes him a show dog, but it's not the only part. Show judges frown upon white or extremely pale colors, and many top dogs are darker shades of gold. But the show dog's general musculature, leg strength, head and neck size and shape, joint angulation, stride, carriage and character all contribute to his winning ways.

Is there a difference between hunting Golden Retrievers and pet Golden Retrievers?

All Golden Retrievers have many ancestors who were hunting dogs. These dogs weren't much different from the pet dogs of today, except that their masters lived at a time and in a place where pheasants or ducks abounded. Those Golden Retrievers truly paid for their keep by putting birds in the hunter's bag, thereby putting meat on the table and money in the bank.

Today, field Golden Retrievers are selected based on their physical ability to do the hard work of retrieving shot birds, their trainability, and their heart and desire. A field Golden is likely to be a more active dog who requires a higher level of physical and mental stimulation.

What are the top 10 reasons people want a Golden Retriever for a pet?

1. They are outdoor people who want to share their activities with an easygoing, affectionate pet.
2. They want a happy and responsive dog who looks for fun instead of dog fights.
3. They want a loving pet who loves petting and cuddling.
4. They want an obedient dog who will obey house rules about children, elders and dogs.
5. They want an intelligent dog who understands and enjoys games of all kinds.

6. They want a trustworthy and trusting pet who thrives on human interaction.
7. They want a clever dog who demonstrates problem-solving skills.
8. They want a dog who will join children's and adults' activities with playful exuberance.
9. They want a funny dog, one with a sense of humor who acts silly and clowns around.
10. They want a trainable dog who can be taught tricks and games.

What are the top 10 reasons people give up their Golden Retriever after they've acquired one?

1. "He's too demanding. We didn't know that a Golden required so much of our time. (No, we didn't discuss this matter with the dog's breeder.)"
2. "We wanted a smaller dog, but he was such a cute little puppy in the pet shop window. (No, we didn't ask how big he would be.)"
3. "We thought he would be just fine tied in the backyard. We bought him a doghouse, and he has food and water available, but he just sits and whines. When we turn him loose for a few minutes, he jumps on everyone and is totally out of control."
4. "We can't keep him home. He climbs over the fence every day just as soon as we're gone. When we come home at night there he is, playing with the neighbor kids."
5. "He barks continuously and our neighbors called the nuisance control officers. He didn't bark when he was a puppy and living in the house with us, but since we've confined him to his run we can't control his barking."
6. "He jumped up on the baby, knocked her over and scratched her face. We can't risk any more of that. (No, we didn't teach him not to jump up on children because we thought that would come naturally as he grew up. No, my husband really doesn't have time to train him.)"

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7. “We can’t afford him. He eats tons and veterinary bills are nearly bankrupting us. We didn’t know that Goldens had so many hereditary problems to cope with.”
8. “We moved to a small apartment with no yard. We can’t play with him all the time. We’ve considered walking him frequently, but that takes all of our free time.”
9. “He sheds too much, especially on the furniture. The carpet is matted with hair and we can’t vacuum the rugs because his hair clogs up the sweeper. We tried grooming him, but that’s a never-ending task!”
10. “I’m too busy to train him. When I start, he acts thickheaded and just wants to lick my hand. I’ve lost my patience and he just sits there looking wistfully at me.”

What kinds of people will best be able to develop a Golden into a good pet?

Active people who like to spend a lot of time doing things out of doors. Smart, patient people with a well-developed sense of humor who are devoted to their companion. Those who appreciate an intelligent, trainable dog and will spend the necessary money to acquire a fine, healthy representative of the Golden Retriever breed. They will take the time to train her appropriately, care for her properly, both mentally and physically, and mold her personality into that of a desirable pet. They will offer the dog love and attention, and will acquire the knowledge and take the time to ensure that their Golden receives suitable nurturing, training, grooming and discipline. They’ll appreciate their companion’s admirable qualities and will treat her with respect, even when correcting a problem.

What kinds of people will probably have difficulty managing a Golden Retriever as a pet?

Couch potato people who don't enjoy physical activity. Impatient and uninformed people who seek shortcuts to everything. Fussy folks who have little time for their pets. People who want ready-made solutions to all problems and can't or won't take time to work on solutions. Demanding people who expect their dog to obey every command immediately, if not sooner. People who don't understand a Golden's sensitivity, intelligence and abilities. It's disheartening to learn that nearly 20 percent of all dog owners are dissatisfied with their pets and consider them more trouble than they're worth.

Each Golden is a thinking, reasoning individual. They have similar temperaments and share some physical characteristics, but each has her own special character. A Golden isn't a pre-programmed robot who has been assigned the chore of pleasing your every whim. Therefore, each Golden must be managed as a distinctive personality in a special, unique way. This takes time, patience and lots of love and caring.

Why shouldn't I want a Golden?

A Golden Retriever is a time sponge who will soak up all the hours you can give. He's a smart, happy companion, but not a worry-free creature who's perfect in every way. He's a loving canine pet who will return every speck of affection you give, but to do so, he'll need training and extensive socialization. He sheds, too, so he'll need lots of grooming to minimize the amount of hair he deposits on rugs and furniture.