



# On Condition of Anonymity

A candid conversation about Tollers

**THE NOVA SCOTIA** duck tolling retriever, or “toller” for short, has always been an intriguing breed to me. To be honest, I’ve never actually seen one in the flesh, but it’s hard not to be drawn to this breed on the basis of pictures. Perhaps like many others, I’ve often imagined this breed as having the spirit of a Lab in a fluffier, smaller, bouncier package. After all, the word “retriever” is in the name. So recently I decided to call an experienced toller breeder to discuss this fascinating breed.

My intention was to write another in my series on Retriever People. But the breeder opened up with some very candid talk about the breed, and told me I could only publish the testimony on condition of anonymity.

It’s a shame that people have to worry about reprisal and hate mail when simply sharing an honest opinion about dogs, but I understand. I’ve been flamed more than once for writing what I felt were fair and well-informed opinions in this magazine over the years. And a breeder has more to lose than I do.

At first I didn’t like the idea and figured I’d need to come up with another concept for this column. But out of respect, I decided to hear the person out. Over the next hour, I decided the breeder’s input was valuable enough to *GUN DOG* readers that it should in fact be printed.

Granted, what follows is only one person’s opinion, and my source even suggested that I poll others. But this is not meant to be a comprehensive breed feature. This is a column, and columns are by nature opinion pieces.

To protect the anonymity of my source, I can’t tell you much about this person’s history with the breed, personal background or location. All I’ll tell you is this person has many years of hunting, field event and gun dog training experience with multiple breeds, and I feel this person has a good sense of the tastes and values of the vast majority of *GUN DOG* readers.

For convenience this person will need a pseudonym, so for fun let’s use the name “Maxine.”

**CM:** How do you think the toller compares to other retrieving breeds?

**MAXINE:** Well, first, let me say I love my tollers, and I think they have their niche. I’ve put a lot of time and energy into my dogs, and I’ve had tollers for many years. I think there are some people who will absolutely love them, and for whom this breed is a great fit.

Having said that, I think many people will be sorely disappointed if they buy a toller expecting the dog to be a Lab in a fluffy body, or a smaller version of a field-bred golden. Certainly there are exceptional individual tollers out there. I’ve seen the rare toller pass an AKC Master Hunter test, for example. But as a breed, they generally will not attain the same level of field excellence as the other retrieving breeds.

**CM:** Why is that?

**MAXINE:** Other retrieving breeds have a long history of being held to lofty standards in field testing programs. For examples, Lab devotees expect long-

© MARK ATWATER



RETRIEVE



distance marks and multiple blind retrieves as a basic price of admission into the gene pool. But most toller breeders are not avid hunters, at least not in the same way that many readers of *GUN DOG* are.

Show competition has been much more formative of the breed than field testing. Certainly, the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever Club USA does hold field tests, for which a toller can earn a field title. But those tests do not have anywhere near the level of difficulty you see in other retriever hunt tests.

**CM:** Talk about those toller field tests. How are they different from other retriever hunt tests?

**MAXINE:** They're different in lots of ways, but mainly the retrieves would not be nearly as long, or the set-ups as complicated as you'd see in an AKC or NAHRA retriever hunt test. Again, I reiterate that tollers do exist who pass the more demanding tests. But they are the exception, not the rule.

© MARK ATWATER

A Trusted Name in Pet Nutrition.



Since 1950  
**VICTOR**<sup>®</sup>  
Super Premium Pet Food

[www.victorpetfood.com](http://www.victorpetfood.com)



"The Official Dog Food of"  
**DUCK COMMANDER**





**CM:** In what other ways would you caution the over-zealous and naïve potential buyer of a toller?

**MAXINE:** For starters, prepare yourself for the possibility of being rejected in your quest to buy one. You will likely undergo intense scrutiny from toller breeders. Expect to complete a questionnaire of anywhere from three to eight pages in length. And if you answer any questions in a way that the breeder deems unsatisfactory, they might refuse to sell you a pup.

For example, I know of people who have been turned down because they answered "No" to the question, "Do you have a fenced yard?" That may not seem like an applicable question to someone who lives in an urban apartment or townhome, or on a rural acreage. It's an inherently suburban question. Nevertheless, something like that could be the deal-breaker.

If you do pass the test, prepare to spend \$2,000 to \$3,000 or more for a puppy. Finally, expect to be required to

travel, perhaps a great distance, to pick up your dog in person. Currently, there are not more than two dozen breeders in the United States, and many of these specialize in show dogs.

There are perhaps another 30 or 40 families who raise a litter once in a great while. So availability is quite limited, and the pool of possibilities to get a pup from hunting lines is very small compared to most other breeds.

**CM:** OK, you've talked me out of it. But you did say this breed has a niche. For whom do you think a toller is a good fit?

**MAXINE:** A toller is a good family pet for the occasional hunter who does not demand a high level of performance in the field. If you hunt a few times a year on a shooting preserve or opening weekend on the family farm, for example, then a toller could suffice for you in the field if given proper training. And the dog would also be an adorable member of your household.

But if you're a hardcore hunter, I think you really should think twice before getting a toller. They just don't have the drive that more traditional hunting breeds have. I feel that my tollers are well above average for the breed in the hunting department. Yet even mine, in my opinion, are nowhere near the hunters that a decent Lab or field-bred springer would be.

If you do talk to a breeder about tollers, make sure they're raising hunting tollers, and not just show dogs.

**CM:** OK, so maybe most tollers can't play a Lab's game. But they're so darned cute. Do you think the raw material is there, waiting to be tapped by proper training?

**MAXINE:** With some tollers, yes. But again I think those dogs are exceptions. Moreover, some breeders/families may refuse to sell you a toller if that's what they think you're going to do with it. They simply may feel you don't fit the profile for the breed. \*

His commitment  
is our inspiration.



**Man's Best Kennel®**

**5 Star Crash Test Rated**

**GunnerKennels.com**

The G1™ carries a lifetime warranty. Tested to withstand 4,000 lb. of force, a 12 gauge shotgun at 7 steps, and a 200-foot cliff drop. See the videos at [gunnerkennels.com](http://gunnerkennels.com).