

Finding the Perfect Family Pet – Buyer Beware

By Jeff Wilson, President, NORCAL Golden Retriever Rescue

Your spouse and children want to get a family pet. Golden retrievers are so friendly, and so good with young children, so you decide to buy one. Searching on the internet, you come across a number of sites that are selling golden retriever puppies. They look so cute on the Internet, these puppies for sale. Soft and cuddly, and playful, just waiting for a good home like yours.

Some sites offer a puppy for \$1,500, while others are only charging \$500, \$600, or \$700. You're a discriminating shopper, and the \$600 puppy is just as cute as the \$1,500 puppy. You contact the person selling the dog and arrange to have your new family member shipped to you. What the prospective owners don't realize or consider is the thousands of dollars in medical care often required with a poorly bred dog.

Although you didn't realize it at the time, chances are, if you buy a puppy from an unknown breeder on the Internet, a backyard breeder, or a pet store, you probably bought a puppy from a puppy mill. Today, many puppy mills also are selling directly to consumers, via the Internet and in newspaper classified ads.

Rescue Groups are often the recipients of these dogs. At NORCAL Golden Retriever Rescue, we see puppies with no hips that require a \$10,000 surgical operation. Cataracts, hip and elbow dysplasia, and high cancer rates are common. Most disturbing is the rise of aggressive behavior towards humans that contradict one of the Golden Retriever's most admired traits.

There are an estimated 4,000 to 5,000 puppy mills in the United States, many located in the Midwest and on the East Coast. Many of these mills sell their dogs to pet stores or "middlemen" breeders around the country, who in turn sell these puppies to unsuspecting people.

In the Bay Area, we know of "brokers," operating in Contra Costa and Marin counties, who import Golden's at a young age from breeders in Oregon. Several of these have multiple public court judgments against them. They show pictures of dogs they falsely claim to be the puppy's parents, have fraudulent or no pedigree, and no proper documentation of veterinarian hip and eye clearances normally provided to reputable breeders for breeding stock.

Unfortunately, there is no regulation or law governing this activity, and some of these individuals have made puppy breeding their main source of livelihood. In contrast, the hobbyist breeder is trying to build the quality characteristics of the breed and is not making a living at it. State governments are finally stepping in with important initiatives. The governor of Pennsylvania is attempting to control large problems in the state's

Pennsylvania Dutch community. California's proposed AB 1634 is another attempt to regulate and control this activity to protect consumers.

Further complicating matters, a proper American Kennel Club (AKC) certification is no guarantee that the breeder is reputable, as the AKC does little to police the process. Furthermore, there are fraudulent certifications available on the internet that are similar in spelling to AKC. One service, called the "ACA" or American Canine Association, will allow you to print out a certificate after you submit a \$12 fee.

Approximately 500,000 dogs are bred per year in puppy mills. Only about half of these dogs make it to pet stores and backyard breeders. Many of the other puppies suffer from the effects often found at the mills and die from hypothermia, starvation, or in transport. These dogs live in overcrowded conditions, receive nonexistent veterinary care, and poor quality food or very little food. Puppy mill dogs used to parent the puppies are kept in cages all day and when their productivity as parents drops, they are typically killed or sold to other breeders. They never have a chance to be someone's pet or chase a ball in a park.

So what steps should you take to find a good family pet? First, consider a dog from a local animal shelter or breed-specific rescue organizations, such as NORCAL Golden Retriever Rescue. Shelters have hundreds of dogs ready for adoption. You should expect to wait with many breed-specific rescue groups, as they often have a waiting list and will check out a prospective home diligently before placing a dog in a new forever home.

If you really must have a puppy, be sure you understand the time and commitment required to exercise, groom, and train a puppy to be a good canine citizen. Next, seek out reputable breeders at dog shows and breed-specific club Web sites. For example, a list of reputable Golden Retriever breeders in Northern California can be found at the NORCAL Golden Breed Club's Web site at www.norcalgrc.org. The Humane Society of the United States also has information on its Web site for people interested in a puppy, http://www.hsus.org/pets/pet_adoption_information/puppy_buyers_guide.html.

Reputable breeders don't advertise much. They maintain a waiting list of prospective owners and are very selective in picking new owners and homes for their puppies. Therefore, expect to wait and pay more but realize this will greatly decrease your chances of incurring thousands of dollars in medical bills later on. Most importantly, avoid buying a dog on the Internet, in pet stores, and from newspaper ads.

Jeff Wilson is president of NORCAL Golden Retriever Rescue (NGRR). For more information, visit NGRR on the Web at <http://www.golden-rescue.org/>.