

Outdoor Canada  
Homage – Hunting Mutts  
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Sporting mags commonly feature pointing and flushing dogs with uppity names and pedigrees that read like royalty. The message, which sadly many hunters buy into, is that only purebred dogs are both worthy and capable of hunting game birds.

The reality, though, is that many of the best bird dogs are of the Heinz 57 variety, mutts that would never qualify for field trials because they aren't papered blue bloods. Their natural hunting ability is underscored with one major characteristic: strong hunting hearts. I've been blessed with two such dogs in the last three decades.

The first was a golden retriever-Keeshond cross, a male born on a Saskatchewan farm. Keesh had long black fur and a tail that curled around in classic Keeshond form. While hunting with friends with labs and Brittany spaniels, Keesh stood out like a clown at a funeral. But if there was a bird to be flushed or retrieved in the thickest of cover, or ice to be broken, Keesh was relentless.

Our present dog, Belle, is a black lab-golden retriever cross. On her first pheasant hunt at 13 months old, a group of us were taking a break, while four veteran purebred pointers and flushers lounged all around. Belle, however, kept sniffing around a clump of cattails just feet away. Suddenly, a big rooster launched like a cackling missile. At my shot, five dogs went for it. Belle emerged with the bird, her tail wagging happily with four purebreds in hot pursuit.

Belle turned 14 last October 1<sup>st</sup>. The vet proclaimed a heart condition would take her before then. The day before her birthday, she water-retrieved a limit of ducks, and fetched many more before the season ended.

That, my friends, is heart. And heart, not pedigree, is the defining quality of a good hunting dog.