



High Tails

By JEANNIE WAGNER

History of Field Trials

ON A GRASSY KNOLL IN THE ROLLING ENGLAND COUNTRYSIDE A GROUP OF DISTINGUISHED GENTLEMEN STAND DISCUSSING THE MERITS OF THEIR FAVORITE HUNTING DOGS. This argument had become a regular debate. Master James brags that his Red & White Setter can out hunt any dog; Squire John claims that his Black & White is the best, while yet another claims there nothing that can compare to his Black & Tan. Various homebred strains of hunting dogs had emerged but there was no way to compare their merits or track the success of their progeny. Dog Shows had been established but that did not test the performance ability of the dog.

Among the men of stature at this time was A.W. Brailsford, who became known as the father of Field Trials. On May 1, 1866, at the Cannock Chase Country Estate in Stafford, England the first official Field Trial was held. Dogs were run in braces of two, by process of elimination until one dog remained. Through the years different methods of determining winners developed. The important thing, for breeders, was that there was finally a way to track bloodlines and validate hunting ability. The public records gave them the ability to trace bloodline and pedigrees as

to field/hunting performance.

The first trial held in America was in Memphis, Tennessee at the Tennessee State Sportsman Association on Oct 8, 1874. A score sheet that graded the various aspects of the dog's performance was used to determine the winners. The first effort to keep authentic registrations of dogs in the US was on March 11, 1876, when the Chicago Field (later know as The America Field) announced open registry for all dogs used in field sports. The first National Bird Dog Championship was held in 1896 and was won by the Setter (English) "Count Gladstone IV". James Monroe

Avent (1860-1936), along with Hobart Ames, was responsible for establishing the National Bird Dog Championship.

Between the years of 1879- 1885 the American Kennel Club gained in popularity. Dr. Rowe donated the records he had kept to the AKC and thus the initial structure of American Kennel Club registrations for sporting dogs was founded, based on the records of the American Field. In 1900 a disparity over recognition of sporting dog interest, caused a split in the sporting dog enthusiasts and the Field Dog Stud book was founded. Sporting dog competitions were developed by both orga-



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nizations and continue today.

Whether you have a pointing dog, flushing spaniel, or a retriever there are numerous events and competitions to showcase your favorite hunting companion. These competitions go hand in hand with hunting over a quality bird dog. Many sportsmen, who participate in field trial competitions, also hunt over their dogs. The competition gives them an opportunity to judge the quality of their dog against others of their breed and identify superior breeding stock, which in turn produces better bird dogs with which to hunt.

Each breeds parent club developed a written standard for their breed. When you look at the written standards of the Sporting Group dogs, you will see that some standards included verbiage that supported the working aspects of the breed, while others did not. Those breeds who embraced the working aspects of their dogs have a high rate of dogs being able to attain Dual Championships. This goes to the Essence of the Breed.

What is the Essence of the Breed? The essence is maintaining breed type-maintaining function, does it conform and does it perform. Breed essence can be judged by looking at the number of dog that are earning Dual Purpose Championship Titles example - Champion / Field Championships, Champion / Master Hunter to the number of dogs registrations for the breed. There is no one single factor that determines it - breed popularity, show ability, inherent field ability and the collective interests of the breed supporters.

The Irish Setter when first introduced in the US was considered a top hunt-

ing dog. Over the years their reputation decreased as more and more breeders were interested in only the conformation show attributes and not their hunting instincts. This eventually led to a split in the breed into field and show types. Another factor that made them fall out of favor with the average hunter is that they are slower to mature, often six months to a year behind some of the other pointing breeds. What makes the Irish Setter special as a hunting dog? It's the fact that once they are trained they never forget, and you don't have to continually go back every year and



retrain them prior to hunting season or performance events.

They are easily adaptable to a foot handler hunter or to a horseback performance event. They understand, on the ground with or without a gun, staying closer to their handler. When handler is up on a horse and they can see from a distance, they easily adjust to ranging wider. As a general rule they prefer an owner/handler that handles kindly but firmly. They usually do not respond well to heavy handed training methods. When used properly they will respond well to electronic collars used in the gun dog breaking process. Some

dogs actually prefer the distance type correction rather than a close up personal correction. Every dog is different.

There has been much discussion on allowing reciprocal registrations for dog that are on the FDSB registry. Many comments have been made as to, my dog still has hunting ability, why would we want to include those dogs. We can't find dogs that may have hunting instinct without testing them. Chasing Chippy Birds in the back yard, shows he has an interest, but does not prove he could actually go to the field find and point game birds ;or that he could

physically stand up to rigors of a day of hunting. To identify dogs that could be useful in breeding programs we need to evaluate their inherited ability.

Hunting and pointing instinct is genetic inherited trait, it cannot be taught. Sure you can obedience train the dog to stand a bird but that is not pointing genetics. Field trials are expensive and not for everyone, however anyone can attend a Hunt Test at a reasonable cost and see what

ability their dog may have. Hunt tests are pass or fail. Junior Hunter is a basic instinct test. They are available in many places. Take a trip out and watch, enter your dog and see if he has any basic instincts. He will love it. If we want more Dual type breeding stock, more Dual Champions you have to do more than just make the claim. My challenge is find out if your dog has ability and prove it. Hunt Tests are judged on a standard of performance. They are open to all breed competition, but you are not judged against another breed. Judgment is graded on how well your dog executes the exercises based on a point

value of 1 to 10 with average score of 7 needed to receive a passing score.

Field trials are also judged on a performance standard that applies to all pointing breed. To earn championship title you have to earn points, just as you do in conformation, by defeating the other dogs entered in the stake. Stakes can be closed to a single breed; however they are not dumbed down, a dog still must perform to the set standard of performance. In my 50 yrs. of experience, I have seen in the past, some breeds that only ran closed stakes at their trials. Some of those breeds had dogs awarded points and titles with mediocre ability and sloppy performances. When they started coming over to all breed competition and/or started opening stakes at their trials, the quality of dogs competing and their performances improved.

All performance events rally, obedience, agility etc have standards of performance that all dogs have to adhere to. None are ever geared just to one specific breed. Jump Heights of course are adjusted for dog heights, but everyone competes on the same course against the same standard. Hunt Tests are just the same. Pass or fail on a set standard of performance.

Field trials have a standard of performance; however the judge's preference in style also comes into play. Same as it does in the Conformation Ring where it is the judges interpretation of the breed standard and his or hers prefer-

ence. It always saddens me when someone receives a negative comment from another exhibitor or even a judge, telling them that their dog can't compete if he doesn't have a 12 O'clock tail. That is just not true, many dogs have achieved Field Championships with a level tail. That is a particular judge's style opinion not a requirement. Tail does need to be

Fall Hunt
Author Jeannie Wagner
Nostrils quiver with scent
Stealthily stalking
Point
Rustling grass
Frighten flight
Bang
Feathers fall
Fetch
Good Dog

level, not hanging down below level. No matter how intense the point may be the dog will be faulted. A flagging tail will also be a major fault as it often indicates the dog is soft or not intense on point.

Events are slowly dying. We need new people to get involved. Breeders need options open to them. We have so few clubs left holding Field Trials and

Hunt Tests that we can no longer rotate the National Walking Events. Instead of pointing fingers and infighting we should be working together to preserve our breed and our sports. Not only Field events but Shows are also suffering. Members are getting older and retiring with no new people to take their place. We need support for our upcoming National Walking Events. Come out and join us, you will see young dogs puppies/derbies, Gun Dogs and Champions competing in the various field trial events. You will also see Hunt Tests- Juniors, Seniors, and Masters working towards their titles. The field community is welcoming and helpful to newbies.

April 5-6-7, 2024, will be the ISCA National Walking Events in Illinois. The events include closed Irish Setter Only Hunt Test, Walking Field Trial with Closed Irish Setter Only Amateur Gun Dog, Amateur Walking Puppy, and Amateur Walking Derby. With these events we also hold an Irish Setter National Walking Gun Dog Championship. We have centralized the events as many exhibitors ask and also due to the fact that we have lost a number of clubs eligible to host the event when we were rotating. We need support to keep it going. It is a program that was developed to help get new people started.

Hope to see you there.

Happy Hunting, Jeannie Wagner ❁



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