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FOUR DOLLARS



Dogs on Trial • National Sporting Library • David's First Deer

DOGS on Trial

story by Clarke C. Jones
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Leave it to a southerner to help create one of the oldest dog trials in the United States. W.W. (Uncle Billy) Titus of West Point, Mississippi, along with Edward Dexter, who owned what would become the famous Charlottesville Field Trial Kennels, promoted and lobbied for a national championship that would recognize the best bird dog in the country. In 1896, the first National Championship—a field trial for pointers and setters—was won by a setter, Count Gladstone IV. That championship has run almost without exception since and is considered at least among bird dog owners as, “the most prestigious event of its kind, the field trial equivalent of the Kentucky Derby.”

Despite the decline in quail and waterfowl hunting, dog trials still exist and have even expanded into non-hunting events. According to Todd Kellam with the U. S. Kennel Club, there are two reasons dog events are important: “First, and foremost, it gives people something to get out and do with their dog. It is fun for the owners and great for the dogs. Secondly, I think that by offering dog events, better dogs get bred from generation to generation. Many dog events are competitive and dogs earn championship titles based on head-to-head competition. Yet others [events] are not competitive in that they have performance standards that dogs need to meet in order to earn championships. In both cases, dogs that earn titles, degrees, and championships are the best of the best. These events give us



Jeff Winall (on horse) helped judge this bird dog trial. Setter Chipokes Joe is shown here with his owner, Waverly Coleman. Below, members of the Tidewater Retriever Club prepare a Lab for an upcoming trial.

a measuring stick as to how well our dogs perform in their individual areas of expertise.”

BIRD DOG TRIALS

It is believed that the first bird dog trials held in the United States were to initiate in some formal way what would be considered the best bird dog in the country by having bird dogs follow a course over a prescribed number of acres and see which one found the most birds, to put it simply. A dog’s “style” and “drive” were also considered. The Llewellyn setter was the more popular breed, or maybe it was the more popular breed to those who organized the first trials, so setters won those events. It wasn’t until a decade or so later that pointers began to dominate trials. Pointers proved to be

faster and harder-going dogs, and once they started winning bird dog trials, it was rare to see a setter win over a pointer in the National Championship when they competed together.

There are numerous bird dog registrants that sanction dog trials. Perhaps the best known are the American Kennel Club (AKC), founded in 1884, which registers approximately 20,000 purebred dogs annually, and the United Kennel Club (UKC), established in 1898. The American Field Stud Book registers pointers and setters. That book actually predates the American Kennel Club and provided the AKC a great deal of information which assisted in the club’s formation. The AKC used to register only purebred dogs and allow only purebred dogs in its trials.

However, according to Todd

Lundgren with the AKC, in April 2010 it opened its companion trials, which consist of rally trials, obedience trials, and agility trials, to mixed breed dogs. The UKC registers purebred but also has what is known as a limited privilege program—where dogs other than purebred can compete. Each of these organizations has their own rules and regulations as to how a bird dog trial is scored. Specific breed clubs also have their own field trials, where only that breed of dog may enter.

Bird dog trials showcase what a particular group of hunters or owners look for in a bird dog. Some want to see a dog staunch and steady while on point and test the dog’s ability to honor another dog already on point.

Below, this English setter is steady on point during a bird dog trial.





Agility trials test a dog's ability to clear obstacles correctly and without fault; in this case, a hoop.

been breeding, training, or trialing retrievers since the middle 1980s. "We have run in AKC field trials, NAHRA hunt tests, UKC hunt tests, and AKC hunt tests," said Ron. "We like the hunt test atmosphere in that it is geared toward hunters, and the non-competitive nature of the test makes a lot of friends because everyone wants each other to succeed. Field trials are much more technical and require a lot of training time. Field trial dogs are great dogs and it just boils down to what appeals to you."



Members of the Deep Run Hunt Club exercise their hounds during the off-season.

COONHOUND TRIALS

The United Kennel Club's coonhound program licenses as many as 4,500 coonhound night hunts annually. You would think with that many people and hounds running around in the woods at night, someone would likely notice. Again, Todd Kellam pointed out, "The general public has no idea how popular the sport of competition coonhunting is in comparison to other hunting dog trials. Collectively, among all the registries that offer hunting dog events, coonhound events would add up to more than all the others combined."

The object of this type of trial, like that of all dog trials, is to test the per-

formance of a dog's ability to do what it was bred to do. In this case it is to track and tree a raccoon. Ashby Nuckols, an active member of the Louisa Coonhunters Association, explained it this way: "Each hound has its own individual cry and the owner of each hound knows his hound's particular bark. When a coon is tracked and a hound begins to 'sound,' the owner lets a judge know that is his hound. The hound that trees the coon first is awarded points." Rarely, if ever, is the coon



Retriever trials can involve a hunt test or a field trial. Right, setters wait their turn to trial.

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caught. As Ashby noted, "The object of these trials is to tree the coon. We do *not* want the coon harmed." West Virginian Tim Shanley, who participates in hunts in Virginia, added, "Coon hunts are *no kill* hunts. No gun is allowed on the premises. We do not want to see a raccoon injured or killed. The more raccoons there are, the better it helps our sport. These coon trials are all about making a dog a champion, not about harming the animal."

Dr. Tom Carroll, a deer hunter and veterinarian noted, "Deer leave a very strong scent, so even a hound that is just adequate can usually follow a deer, but a coonhound has to have a very good sense of smell if it is going to be competitive. Most peo-

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ple I know who own a coonhound take very, very good care of it."

Annually, the coonhound season culminates in a final trial, and there is a triple crown of competitions. "It generates quite a bit of money to the town that hosts it, as attendance for the weekend may draw up to 40,000 people," said Nuckols.

AGILITY TRIALS

A number of dog trials don't involve wild game, and agility trials are one of the more popular venues. As Laura Streng of the Central Virginia Agility Club described, "Just about every weekend you can find an agility trial within 100 to 150 miles from a major city." At these trials you can see all breeds, shapes, and sizes of dogs that run through an obstacle course. A dog and its owner enter a ring set up with obstacles such as ramps, tunnels, hurdles, hoops, and weaves. At a designated signal, the owner starts the dog through these obstacles that the dog must clear correctly and without a fault. Any faults are noted by the judge in the ring. In the "excellent" class, your dog qualifies by not committing an error. The time it takes your dog to go through the course also matters to some degree, but the object is to qualify by passing

through each obstacle without a fault. It is a fast-paced challenge for both the owner and the dog. A qualification in a trial equals a "leg" and three legs equal a title.

There are different classes of difficulty for dogs of different heights. Although border collies, shelties, and Australian shepherds are some of the more popular breeds that run in these trials, you will see every breed and size of dog compete. In AKC-sanctioned trials, the ultimate goal is to receive the title of master agility champion. These are great, fun activities in which any family member and any dog can participate!

BEAGLE TRIALS

According to O. C. Greenwood Jr. of the Old Dominion Beagle Club, "You have brace trials, pack trials, hare trials (which are run in the northern U.S.), and gun dog trials. Greenwood has been trialing beagles since the late 1960s and probably typifies most whose dogs chase wild game. "This is a *no kill* sport and we do everything possible to provide cover, food, and protection for the rabbits the beagles scent. We feed the rabbits 12 months out of the year.

Greenwood runs in brace trials as



In some trials, a dog must not only point but retrieve shot game as well. In other such trials, the handler must walk and handle his dog. In still others, the dog owners and the gallery are all on horseback. Depending upon the type of trial, a dog may run a course in 10 to 25 minutes; in others, where endurance is a key element of a dog's standard, a dog may run up to 3 hours!

RETRIEVER TRIALS

The UKC and AKC are sanctioning registries that run retriever trials or tests. There is also an organization called NAHRA (for, North American Hunting Retriever Association), that holds trials. Retriever field trials and retriever hunt tests may look similar,

but they are different. A retriever field trial is often thought of as a competition between dogs, and hunt tests are where a retriever runs against a written standard. In a hunt test, dogs that meet the standard are awarded ribbons and points toward a title. In a field trial, dogs are awarded a placement such as first, second, or third and are awarded ribbons and points according to *how* they place. In a hunt test consisting of 40 retrievers, 30 may qualify because they met the written standard. In a field trial, however, perhaps only 3 dogs out of the 40 performed well enough to place, and the rest of the entries may leave with no ribbons and no points.

Ron and Marge Samuels of Amber Run Kennels in Amelia have

opposed to pack trials. Here, two beagles are brought out on their leashes and the spectator gallery walks nearby, hoping to flush a rabbit. When a rabbit is flushed someone yells “TALLEY HO!” and the two beagles in the brace that are competing against each other are brought to where the rabbit was flushed, and released. Beagles in this type of trial are not gauged on speed; in fact, these beagles more or less walk when following the rabbit’s scent.

“The beagles are judged on how accurately they follow the scent,” Greenwood pointed out.

Beagle trialers in Virginia will travel from New York to Georgia to participate in these weekend events. The dogs compete in different classes and are segregated by height.

Beagle trials, like most dog trials, are a family sport. “My wife has her own beagles and has won at more than one trial. We have met some of the nicest people at these trials and some have remained close personal friends for many years,” Greenwood stated.

HERDING TRIALS

Herding trials test a dog’s ability to take commands and interact, not only with its trainer, but also with other live animals. As opposed to retrieving game to a handler, it must move livestock through a pre-designed course. A good herding dog seems to be able to “read” the actions of the cattle, ducks, or sheep that it must herd.

In these trials, you have a handler who gives signals as to what he or she wants the dog to do and you have herd animals that may have some idea of what *they* want to do. The dog and handler work together to apply the right amount of guidance to move animals through a course. If the handler gives too many commands, points are taken away. If any of the livestock misses a gate, points are deducted. There are also different degrees of difficulty in a herding trial. The ultimate goal at a trial is to qualify by meeting a prescribed standard. Dogs that win enough qualification “legs” eventually win titles.



Above, a beagle is hot on the scent of a flushed rabbit. Here, an excited fox hound stands at the ready.



A blue heeler (top) and Australian shepherd perform in agility trials, while a border collie herds below.

Wink Mason, of Goldvein, has been training dogs for herding trials for over 25 years. “Years ago I saw border collies in a herding trial and I was fascinated by the dog. I got one and started trialing and now teach people how to be herding trialers.”

OBEDIENCE TRIALS

Perhaps the simplest and best way to learn about trialing is to enter your dog in obedience training. Whether you want to trial or not, obedience training is the best investment you can make. It creates a lasting bond between the two of you and, more importantly, obedience training lays the foundation for future training. It has the added benefit of perhaps saving your dog’s life.

In obedience competition, there are three levels: novice, open, and utility. A qualifying score means the dog has passed all the required exercises according to UKC or AKC obedience regulations. Competitions offer a wonderful opportunity to not only spend time with your dog, but also to meet people who may share your interests.

Admittedly, dog trials are not widely publicized, and it requires some investigation to learn when and where they take place. Perhaps the best way to find out about dog trials in your area is to visit the websites of the UKC, the AKC, and American Field. If you find someone who does run a dog in a particular trial, more than likely they would be happy for you to come and watch if you have a sincere interest in doing so. Watching a trial is a good way to become more familiar with different dog breeds. Plus, you can see first-hand how much fun entering can be! Dog trials are free outdoor events that offer your family the opportunity to participate in something other than the latest video game. □

Clarke C. Jones is a freelance writer who spends his spare time with his black lab, Luke, hunting up good stories. You can visit his website at www.clarkecjones.com.

RESOURCE:
Skehan, Everett. *Fields of Glory, Volume 1, 1874-1930*; documents the early history of bird dog trials.

