

NUCS: A New Game in Town



Working as a team, Marlene Sipes directs one of her Labs to another part of the field.

Dwight Dyke

by Clarke C. Jones

Luke and I are sitting obediently behind one of those large, round hay bales as the bird boy puts out three pheasants. I am not allowed to see where the birds are being placed in this 10-acre field, but I'm hoping Luke will take a peek and give me a heads up. Unfortunately (for me), a couple of cute little female Nova Scotia duck tolling retrievers saunter by and he is thoroughly distracted. The scorekeeper motions us forward, hands me six 12-gauge shells, and asks, "Are you ready?" I glance at Luke—who is always ready—and then nod in the affirmative.

Luke is at heel when we arrive at the gatepost, which is our starting point. I com-

mand him to "Hunt 'em up!" and the scorekeeper starts his stopwatch. Luke takes off like a shot. My job is to keep up with him as he sniffs the air and ground to track down the first of the three pheasants hiding somewhere in the grasses.

Hunting with your dog is fun but hunting with a group of about 100 people watching you is a little uncomfortable. Luke could care less. He is in his element and doing what he loves to do. I am not worried about how he will perform in this new type of field trial (at least, new to me), but I do know that if I shoot at a pheasant and don't kill it cleanly, it may sail for quite a distance. Luke, accustomed to my spotty shooting, is used to chasing pheasants a couple of hundred yards and then tracking them down to retrieve to me. In fact, he can get darn smug about it when he brings

them back and often rolls his eyes as if to say, "Boy—what would you do without me!"

Chasing and retrieving a pheasant into the next county might be impressive on a hunt, but there is a stopwatch clicking off time and a bird that a dog has to find. If we take too long, we lose. Suddenly, Luke is getting birdy! My hands are getting sweaty. His tail is rotating faster than a swizzle stick at a bar on Saturday night. He punches his way through the tall grass. I rush in, trying to stay close. Luke dives into a thick bunch of cover and up roars a cock pheasant, cackling his displeasure. I bring the gun up and fire.

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Dogs participating in one form of competition or another most assuredly began before the inception of the National Field Trial



Scorekeeper Bill Crowley prepares to add points for the shot by Richard Sipes and retrieve by his Lab, Uno.

Association Championships in 1896, by those who loved bird hunting dogs and felt it necessary to try to formalize a way to measure a national champion bird dog. Setting a national standard for excellence would, it was thought, improve the breeding of bird dogs. And while it may have proven to some which was the best pointer or setter for a particular year, it was open only to pointers and setters and to those few gentlemen who had the means to either train bird dogs or hire someone who could. Field trials for retrievers came along much later—in 1936—per the American Kennel Club. According to the American Kennel Club's website, the first National Amateur Championship Stake for retrievers was held in 1957.

As in many sports, the growth of a competition fuels the intensity of winning and the

value of possessing a champion canine increases. More effort is required to meet the growing competition, and that usually requires more resources of both time and money. It became increasingly difficult for a non-professional to compete in retriever field trials, and the tests for a retriever to become the National Field Trial Champion seemed less and less like normal hunting situations. Retriever owners seeking to test their dogs in ways they felt were more realistic hunting situations started new clubs and organizations such as NAHRA, which held its first trial just outside of Richmond nearly 30 years ago. Out of these organizations, tests for retrievers developed into hunt tests because they simulate what a dog may be required to do in an actual hunting situation. In a similar way, bird dog owners have formed various tests for



Ladies like Donna Cartner from Statesville, NC, with English setter Jody participate frequently in NUCS trials.



A scorekeeper records the shot by Marlene Sipes along with her dog's retrieve.

their dogs, which attempt to measure both the pointing and flushing breeds' excellence in the field.

Hunt tests and field trials are a means to keep your hunting dog sharp and ready for the next season, after the current hunting season closes. In areas of the country where both habitat and quail are still available, that may hold true. However, the combination of limited wild quail, somewhat difficult access to waterfowl, and the continual decline of the birds' natural habitats means hunting dogs may be doing more trialing and less hunting all year 'round. Running your dog in hunt tests or field trials is certainly a worthwhile and healthy activity, but it is the dog's skill and intelligence that is measured. The disadvantage is that human participation can be relegated to more of a trainer/handler position and less of a

bonded hunting partner with one's dog. As a result, other forms of hunt tests or field trials have evolved, which attempt to re-establish the human and dog hunting partnership that began cons ago, developing into trials for non-hunting dogs as well.

In the late 1970s an organization called the National Shoot to Retrieve Association was formed to allow pointer and setter owners to compete against each other in a simulated hunting situation, where a dog and his owner/handler would hunt placed birds in a prescribed area. The hunter/dog teams that are the most productive within a set time frame win the competition. These events have become more and more popular over the years and the competitions are set up all across the United States, culminating in a national championship.

Two events, the National Upland Classic Series (NUCS) and the National Bird Dog Circuit—open to both pointing dogs and flushing dogs, have emerged as the latest hunting trials where you and your dog can participate as a team. There are individual fields or trial areas set up of anywhere from 7 to 12 acres. Flushing dogs work in one field and pointing dogs work in a different field. In each field has been placed three pheasants or other game birds. The hunter is given six shells. When the hunter and his dog enter the field, they are followed by a scorekeeper who starts a stopwatch. The hunter/dog team has a specified time limit in the field. The hunter who shoots the birds and then has his or her dog retrieve the birds in the shortest amount of time, with the least amount of shots fired, wins the trial. There is no judging of performance of

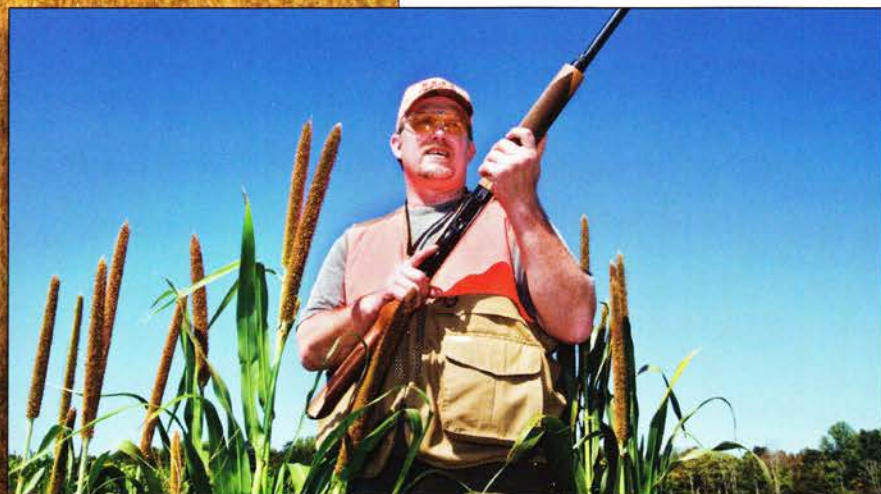
the Open Class is for dogs over 3 years. There is also a doubles teams category, where father/son, husband/wife, or you and a friend who may not have a dog but loves to hunt can participate.

Richard and Marlene Sipes recently hosted the NUCS and Circuit events at Liberty Corners Farm in Esmont. Dog owners lacking a place to hunt their dogs are drawn to these events, and because these trials are open to any hunting breed, you will see a larger variety of hunting dogs than at other trials. Ed Callendar, from Woodbridge, brought his two good-looking Nova Scotia duck tolling retrievers (first noticed by Luke) to participate in their first trial, and Jason Pittman from

girlfriends are coming to the tournaments to participate or watch—the ladies are enjoying the camaraderie and support enthusiastically the women competing in the sport.”

Both the National Upland Classic and the National Bird Dog Circuit offer a fun, relatively inexpensive way to hunt with your dog. For the bird hunter, these trials offer a brief tune-up for their hunting companion. For those who have always wanted to give bird hunting a try or just see what their hunting dog might do if given the chance to hunt real game, it offers that opportunity.

Bob Jones from Goochland County has owned bird dogs since 1962 and entered the trial at Liberty Corners for the first time with



Contestants travel from all over to participate as does Gary Shellman from Maryland, shown here.

Dwight Dyke



Scorekeeper Steve Haynes registers Irving Morel and his German shorthaired pointer, Luney, and Wes Stigall with English pointer Molly.

hunter and dog; only a score and timekeeper who counts the number of shots and number of retrieves.

While there are a few differences between these two trials in scoring methods and the class you and your dog may participate in, the emphasis is to hunt and shoot with your dog—and to have fun doing it. They are designed to simulate hunting conditions and have been formatted to encourage a greater number of participants. For instance, in a NUCS, if you have never participated before you can be placed in the Novice Class. This gives every new participant a chance at winning. But once your dog has placed 1st, 2nd, or 3rd in the Novice Class event, you should move up to the Amateur or Open Class, depending upon the age of your dog. The Amateur Class is for dogs less than 3 years old and

Radiant entered his one-year-old standard poodle, Walker.

“We had a blast and will definitely be participating in future events,” declared Jason. “I think we did okay for our first competition. Walker found and flushed his first bird in five minutes, and I knocked the rooster down with one shot!”

Marlene Sipes is also an active participant in these trials and has traveled around the country with her husband competing with their Labrador retrievers. “I went to a few tournaments with Richard last spring. I quickly realized how much fun it is to watch the dogs work the field. The tournament hunting is exciting and a great fit for me. Now my husband and I are working and traveling together with the dogs,” said Marlene.

As she pointed out, “More wives and

his seven-year-old English setter, Jasper. “I think this is a nice event,” Bob remarked. “It gives me a chance to walk around. If you are 82 years old, just getting out is a great thing—and to do it with your dog is even better.”

As Bob pointed out, the race is not always won by the swift. If you view your prize as just spending one more day, no matter how brief, in the field with your dog—you win! 🐾

Clarke C. Jones spends his spare time with his black Labrador retriever, Luke, hunting up good stories. You can visit Clarke and Luke on their website at www.clarkecjones.com.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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