

Field and Feather

The Retrieving Game

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A success story—accomplished field dog becomes accomplished obedience dog

Ann Begun, a reader of *Front and Finish* and someone who has been involved with dogs for a long time, offered to share her story about her accomplished field dog who has become an excellent obedience dog.

I asked Ann to explain some of the challenges of taking a field-trained dog and turning her into an obedience dog, because the games are VERY different. Here's what Ann has to say.

What's different between field and obedience training? To begin with, in the field when I say "heel" I don't really expect my dog to do anything more than sort-of stay by my side. With Bailey it's more "sort-of" than anything else. An eager beaver, she frequently leaps ahead and then bounces back to my side. The concept of "attention heeling" in the field simply isn't possible or desirable. You *want* your dog focused out where the birds are going to be coming from, particularly on a walk-up. If your dog is staring at your face he'll miss seeing the birds.

The level of precision is also vastly different in the two events. Consider the goal of having a Utility dog go precisely straight on the go-out portion of directed jumping. A difference of 6 inches means you've lost 1/2 point. A difference of 4 feet (think "corner sit") means a substantial deduction of 3-5 points. On a blind retrieve in the field, you worry about your line to the blind being in a corridor. When you send your dog, if he's off-center by a foot or two from what you want that's good enough. At the end of the blind, if he's 10-15 feet off to one side, you're happy.

But there's a reverse side of things too. If a dog stops short on a go-out, but is 10 feet beyond the jumps, you won't flunk. In the field, if your dog is short on the blind he'll fail. The other big transitions for Bailey and me were the concepts of straight fronts and finishes. Field dogs don't do fronts...we want them to do automatic finishes (come directly to heel) so they are lined up for the next bird.

One of the advantages of having a field bred Lab is the extreme work ethic bred into these dogs along with high level of desire to retrieve. These are two qualities that lend themselves well to a competition obedience dog. Bailey **lives** to work, and is never happier than when she has a job to do. And her retrieving desire works well as a motivational reward during training.

Now here is Ann's story about her field dog turned obedience dog.

This is the story of Koo Koo Achoo UDX MH NA NAJ ("Bailey"), a yellow Labrador who began life as a field trial/hunt test dog and morphed into a competition obedience dog. "I want one of Susie's puppies. Are there any females still available?" I heard the words, but it took a few moments to realize they'd come from my lips. Astonishing! My friend Larry, breeder of the litter, told me there was an available female. I looked at the 3-week old puppies and almost immediately regretted the words, but couldn't make myself say I didn't really mean them. I didn't need a dog...I already had a 7-year old Lab female (Dinah Mite VIII UD MH) and a 19-month old Lab male (KimsheW's Magic Rock MH).

Over the next four weeks I kept meaning to tell Larry I'd changed my mind, but I never did. When I went to pick out my puppy, Larry told me which of the three females he thought would be best for me. Usually I listen to him, but on that day I didn't. After observing the puppies for almost three hours I selected the one whom, when placed on the tailgate of my truck next to my big male—who woofed loudly at each—wagged her tail happily and confidently.

And that's how Bailey came to live with us. Her early puppy hood adventures included "The Demolition Of The Lemon Tree" (Bailey running from one end of the backyard to the other, grabbing a branch of the miniature tree with each pass and stripping fruit and leaves from it) and "The Great Couch Leap" (my calling Bailey from across the room to go outside and, instead of running around the couch, leaping onto it and flying off the back). Bailey ran in her first field trial at 15 months and ended her Derby career with 5 points. At 17 months of age she got her first MH leg, finishing up her title at 25 months. At two years of age she attained Qualified All-Age status by getting a 2nd place in the third Qualifying stake she ran. By then, Bailey had also finished her CDX. It was a relief to

finish it, and finish it in four attempts, as it took her many tries to earn her CD. That long “field trial Lab” nose had gotten her into a lot of trouble before the “four feet between dogs” in groups rule came into effect. A friendly dog, Bailey would reach toward neighboring dogs for a sniff or two, enough to NQ us in several trials.

We went to the Master National that year, where Bailey was the youngest dog to qualify. It was exciting and nerve-wracking, as there was a breaking bird (a close pheasant flyer almost immediately behind the dog in the final series of the event) that tempted her sorely. The next couple of years were spent getting ready to run Amateur stakes and qualifying for two more Master Nationals. By then Bailey was three, and I realized she should have had her UD long ago.

We started training (I’m an old-fashioned, “train for one level at a time” obedience trainer) and, after time out for a litter of puppies, she finished her UD in five attempts. Concentrating on field once again, Bailey ran her first Amateur stake that fall. As usual, she had beautiful marks, but difficulties with the blind. We had some serious work to do. The winter was spent increasing distances to 800-1000 yards, so our comfort level was raised. We also tackled shorter blinds of significantly more complexity. As spring arrived I realized that in order to be competitive in field trials at this level I’d have to send Bailey to a pro trainer. Although I’d done this previously with other dogs, I just couldn’t do it with her. So I retired her from the field and began working on her UDX.

The excitement of a High Combined on Bailey’s first attempt for a UDX leg was soon replaced by the slow progress of getting the additional nine double qualifying scores. By then, the *Front & Finish* “First & Foremost” rankings came out. Bailey had an honorable mention for the five times in the ring getting her UD the previous year. What could we do, I wondered, if we competed a **lot**? So we spent the remainder of the year doing just that and finished 2001 as the #3 ranked Lab. Along the way Bailey’s scores began to improve a little bit, enough so we started getting placements every so often.

Watching the really competitive regulars was an educational experience. These dogs were awesome! We had the privilege of watching Terry Southard and Pepper UD, Ann Brown and OTCH Holly, Judie Howard and OTCH Digger, Dee Dee Anderson and OTCH Kit and Dimity Mueller and OTCH Trouble. And then I began to wonder “why not us?” After talking to lots of folks whose dogs I admired, inquiring about whom they trained with, I approached Dee Dee Anderson about taking us on. I feel very fortunate that she said yes.

Dee Dee’s familiarity with retriever field events was a plus...she understood what Bailey’s earlier training had been like, her capabilities and training weaknesses. Her incredible patience and ability to always come up with yet another approach to a troublesome problem has enabled Bailey and me to make huge changes. Realistically, the lack of early competitive obedience basics will limit our progress at some point. But we’ve not yet reached that point and Bailey continues to improve. It’s been a fun journey and a rewarding one. Along the way Bailey has gotten six High Combineds (we stopped showing in Open this past summer), all her necessary wins and 63 OTCH points to date. Over the spring and summer we did some agility training and Bailey finished her NA and NAJ. To the best of my knowledge (and research), she’s the only Lab to have field trial Derby points, Qualified All-Age status, have an MH, a UDX and agility titles. This tracking season we hope to add a TD and finish her VCD1. We owe thanks to lots of folks: her breeder, Larry Linthicum and all the years of field assistance he’s given me; Dee Dee Anderson for her willingness to “rehab” us and to the wonderful folks we see so many weekends a year at the trials who are always encouraging us.

And, most of all, thanks to Bailey—her willingness and excitement to do whatever crazy thing I ask her to make her a truly special dog.

Thanks to Ann for sharing her great story! Maybe I should have Bailey talk to my Scarlett about how much fun obedience can be—that CD just about killed Scarlett with boredom! Maybe if they used ducks instead of gloves or articles...

Happy training!

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Editor’s note: Bailey is now an OTCH in addition to all of her other accomplishments!

