

Field and Feather

The Retrieving Game

A Title at Both Ends

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At the suggestion of a reader, I interviewed two owners of Conformation Champion, Master Hunters to see where they started out and how they “crossed over” into the different areas. Last column, I talked with Jeanna Brushwood who owns Am/Can CH Clarion's Bad As I Wanna Be, MH, WC, CGC, known as Hooper.

This column, I interviewed Nancy Brandow, breeder of CH Plantier's Ruthless Ruthie, CD, MH (Ruthie was the first chocolate and the first female Labrador to earn CH/MH) and owner of CH Ruthless Blazing Brentley, CDX, MH (Brentley was the second chocolate to be a CH/MH). Here is what we talked about.

MK: What did you start with first ---obedience, conformation or field?

NB: I started our first yellow Lab with formal obedience classes, however Carl worked with him using the gun dog methods outlined by Richard Wolters. Carl's primary interest was in having a good bird dog and I was looking for a well-behaved dog in the home.

MK: When did you get interested in the hunt tests?

NB: My first real desire to test my Labrador in a hunting situation came when I planned to go to the Canadian National Specialty in 1986 and there was a Working Certificate event hosted by the National Breed Club. “Sable” was a natural retriever and required only some basic holding lessons. Once through the Canadian Working Certificate, I became very interested in the AKC hunt test program. A special thank-you to Dottie McDonald-David for encouraging me in that quest.

MK: Can you remember your first junior test and how foreign and up to chance it seemed?

NB: My first AKC junior hunt test was in Simsbury, Connecticut, some six-plus hours from my home in Bradford, Maine. The theory was that if I had to drive all that distance to watch a test, then I might as well enter and possibly pass it. As I indicated earlier, my Sable was a natural hunter and proved to be an excellent marking dog as well. Having replaced my husband's first yellow Lab as his current bird dog, she really knew what the game was all about. Our weakness was on the hand delivery, so the “scoop and grab” method was used to gain our first orange rosette at our first test. The judges were wonderful and suggested I work with a professional trainer on the force hold/fetch--thus began my longstanding relationship with Mark and Dave Mosher at the well respected Sugarfoot Kennels in Burnham, Maine.

MK: How has the process changed for you and your current Labs?

NB: I'm still not beyond running a dog before it's ready. It gives me a chance to test the dog and myself to see where we need work. I do begin the force hold/fetch early and like to have that along with some marking experience out of the way before serious hunt tests begin.

That's an excellent reason to encourage more working certificate events and sanctioned hunt tests (author's note: a sanctioned test is approved by AKC and run according to AKC rules and regulations, but ribbons awarded do not count toward a title). It gives the handler and dog an opportunity to get out in a test-like situation before attempting a licensed event.

MK: Have you seen a different side to your dogs in the field?

NB: Clearly the young dog is less controlled and his attention becomes focused on the world around him--which is all motion and excitement. With the more experienced Lab, I often feel they now have developed much higher expectations of me...many times I believe I let them down. Fortunately, they continue to love me no matter what my performance is in training or in a test situation.

(Author's note: I have seen that look of disappointment from my dogs both at the line and when we are hunting! It's like they are saying, "Hey, I did my part--what's YOUR excuse?")

MK: When you are working with a new pup, when do you introduce field elements?

NB: I encourage the basic retrieving instincts as soon as I see them demonstrating it in the whelping box. We provide interesting and soft things to retrieve and carry around. Typically they have some form of feathers by five or six weeks. Gun shots are just so common around our kennel that the introduction there is as soon as their little ears are open for noise. What I find interesting is not when I've introduced the pups to birds, but when "mom" does it for me. I'm sure many breeders have had the same experience...mom grabs a training bird out of the bucket when you're not looking and you find it in the whelping box.

MK: Do your dogs participate in multiple activities--field and show for example--at the same time, or do you complete one aspect before working on the next?

NB: Whether it is wise or not, my dogs participate in all of my areas of interest concurrently...field, show, obedience and therapy dog work. I believe to have a successful competitor, the dog needs experience and needs to develop a comfort level in all arenas at a young age. I don't participate in an event always hoping for a winning ribbon. I'm often participating for the pure fun of working with my dog and to develop the confidence and experience to make that dog a successful competitor in the future. It's tough to take a dog that's being worked hard in field or upper level obedience and is not necessarily in show weight--i.e. coat and weight--and expect to go Winners or Best of Breed. I also won't run a dog in utility or master in show weight. I'd like to say it doesn't matter, but when I feel the dog is ready to be shown and is in good condition for the breed ring, it is typically too heavy to take the jumping or multiple marks the advance testing level requires. They are athletes and conditioning is critical. That doesn't mean that you won't see me in the utility ring and then in the breed ring with the same dog, only that I know from experience I will not be as competitive with a dog in the breed ring that is in good obedience weight and field condition. It has become two different worlds and makes the challenge of moving between them all that more fun and rewarding when it can be done successfully.

MK: It is disappointing that the breed standard for Labradors states, "Labrador Retrievers shall be shown in working condition well-muscled and without excess fat" but the Labradors

being shown and placed in the breed ring are not in working condition. I also know that the Labrador breed isn't the only breed seeing this kind of schism between the different venues.

Thanks to Nancy Brandow and Jeanna Brushwood for sharing their experiences with us. Having dogs "titled at both ends" is a lot of hard work and a neat accomplishment that should inspire the rest of us to keep playing in the different venues.

Now I want to hear from other readers who are crossing over into field from obedience. If your dog has a JH, SH or MH or you are working toward a field title—drop me a note about your experiences in the field with your obedience dog and I will try to feature a reader and his or her dog in each new column. Let me hear from you!

Happy Training!

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