

FIELD AND FEATHER
The Retriever Game

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This column will be a series of articles dedicated to explaining the AKC Retriever Hunt Test program from the perspective of a participant.

Hope Springs Eternal

Every January, we see it. Despite the cold, the snow, the wind chill, they still come to the first club trial of the season on the fourth Sunday in January.

The Mid-Iowa Retriever Club has club trials (or informal trials) the fourth Sunday of the month, January through April. Informal trials are club events staged with poppers, dead birds and club members judging, throwing, etc. It is the re-entry into the spring and summer ritual--the re-entry into the dog events for the year.

And here is where you see that "hope springs eternal." Despite the miserable weather, the snow and ice, and so many layers of clothes that we can hardly move, we still come. We come to visit with people we haven't seen since the end of the previous season. We come to get our dogs a bit of excitement in the middle of winter. We come to rekindle the fire and the excitement we have competing with our dogs.

We come to see who has new puppies in tow. You can't see an eight-week old pup at a retriever event without someone saying "Here comes the test dog!" It is an old joke, but still we laugh and smile. And everyone has to pick up and hold the new pups.

We use this time to socialize young dogs to the chaos of field events--lots of things to see and smell, lots of willing hands for petting or for tossing a pigeon for a young dog. It's hard to tell who has more gleam in the eye--the curious, precocious pups or their proud owners.

We come to remind our dogs that they have to stay steady, in case this habit has slipped during hunting season. We come to see where we left off and what work we have yet to do. We come to talk about our plans with fellow club members--who is working toward what titles, who will be breeding what dogs or getting spring puppies.

We talk in a strange code, familiar only to other dog people--pedigrees rattle off our tongues and our fellow enthusiasts nod knowingly.

We come because a portion of our lives--with some of us a LARGE portion of our lives--revolves around our dogs and we can't wait for the warm weather and the trial/test season to start! We come to spend time with others who understand this passion when sometimes our spouses or kids don't.

We come to shake off the cobwebs in our minds cluttered with work and family and other obligations.

When we aren't crouched in the in the field, sitting on a bucket of frozen ducks gunning for an event or at the line with our teeth chattering, we sit in our trucks that have fogged windows and smell of sweet, warm dog. Or we stand in small groups in the club house, warming ourselves around the wood burning stove, swapping stories. We will bitch about the cold and the miserable conditions. But we will do it again--in four weeks at the next club trial! And we will dream of spring and water work and the start of the "real" season.

A couple of columns ago, I talked about how you can use the winter to play games with your retriever, like hunting up bumpers hidden in the snow. I talked about how one of my dogs loves to carry hats, gloves or socks and how I never have to bend over to pick anything up. Well, I discovered the true depth of her retrieving desire and desire to please me a few weeks ago!

We saw an opossum in the yard, wandering around after a deep snow, looking for food. It disappeared into the snow-laden bushes around the house. Since we were heading out to do some training, I let BJ out and jokingly told her "Find it! Hunt it up!" and I headed for the truck. Before I knew it, my husband had a very strange look on his face and he was urging me to turn around. There was BJ, calmly trotting across the yard to me, with a possum in her mouth! One of my other dogs was trying to get her to relinquish her price, but nothing doing. Meredith said hunt it up, so she was delivering it to me.

The possum was unhurt, playing "possum" quite convincingly. If you have never had the opportunity to see a possum in this ultimate self-preservation mode, the mouth hangs open, drool strings dangle from the lips, the eyes are glazed, the tongue sticks out. BJ came to me, went to the heel position, sat and presented me with this "wonderful" prize. I thanked her, took the possum by the tail and removed it from her mouth. Then I tossed it over the fence into the pasture where it landed in the deep snow and kept its "dead" game going for quite a while before it popped up and ambled into the timber.

Just a subtle reminder that BJ takes her job very seriously...even at 11 years old!

I also mentioned that my winter project was getting a CD on my Master Hunter, Scarlett. I figured the big challenge would be getting her to sit in front of me on the recall instead of finishing like we do in the field. Well, that hasn't been the half of it! She is totally BORED with obedience work. No bribe or motivation--short of me having a duck in my mouth--will get her to even pretend she likes it. We attended classes preparing for competition. She dragged her feet, lagged, day-dreamed. Between classes, we worked every night and weekend in the yard, down the drive. She seemed to be doing okay, but the next class would show again how disinterested she was in the whole process.

We managed to pass both Novice B events we were entered in, but it wasn't pretty! Suffice it to say that she wasn't in the top four. I always start what I finish, so we will finish her CD in March and then she will be back to the field work that she lives and breathes for. Mental note: next puppy be sure to do CD title BEFORE upper levels of hunt test work! It's true what they say: Once they have seen Paris, you can't keep them down on the farm!

Happy Training!

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