

Field and Feather

The Retrieving Game

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In their own words: Part I

I have been sharing my field experiences with you for two years now. Rather than me “preaching” all the time, I thought it would be fun to have some other field enthusiasts share their stories.

This article is the first in a series where I have asked three people to share their stories. The first person is Thomas McClanahan of Sacramento, California. Tom has Chesapeake Bay Retrievers.

MK: How long have you had Chessies?

TM: I got my first Chessie in 1992, although I have had dogs nearly all my life. Getting a Chessie was inspired by a former co-worker who had two. I thought they were a most remarkable breed. So when my wife and I decided that the dog that we had needed a companion we got a Chessie pup (Star).

Prior to 1992 we were probably the typical suburban American pet owner. When we wanted a pet, we would open the newspaper and find something that sounded interesting. That changed in 1992 when we picked up our Chessie pup. Even though they could probably be called “back yard breeders,” they handed us a packet that contained the pup’s pedigree.

Anyway, after picking up the pup (Star) we decided that we needed to go to the pet store and get some puppy necessities and toys. At the store we ran across a book on the Chesapeake and noticed that several of the names mentioned in the book looked familiar. So we also bought the book. After reading the book and comparing some of the names in it to those on Star’s pedigree, we started wondering just what we had bought. So we asked around as to how to inquire into the Chesapeake breed and the recommendation we got was to go to a dog show. Further checking revealed that the next dog show was in Reno at the “convention center.” So that weekend we headed to Reno and went to the Reno Convention Center but did not find any dog show. Turns out that the dog shows in Reno are at the livestock convention center. That is how little we knew about the sport!

We got to the Livestock Convention Center over an hour late, way after the Chessies had shown, but still went for a look around. We did find a Chessie entered in obedience and talked to them a little and watched them perform. They tell us that the rest of the Chessie folk had headed north of town to Jim Shine’s place for an ACC working dog stake. So after a little thought we headed out there. When we got there we found a bunch of people and dogs out in a field shooting guns and dogs running around picking up birds and having what looked like a great time.

After explaining who we were, we were accepted with open arms and were mesmerized by the work of the advanced dogs. We asked around about the pedigree of our pup and got assurances that she was of quality stock. We also got several local references and found several people who offered to help us get started. Little did we know that day where it would lead us. But boy has it been fun getting here.

MK: When did you start participating in performance events, and which events?

TM: The first event that we entered was novice obedience. As we had always taken our pups to obedience classes, we did the same with Star. We entered her in the local neighborhood puppy training class. She seemed to be a natural picking up on heeling, sits and downs with very little trouble. The instructor was impressed and suggested that we consider entering an obedience trial. So we did and Star sailed through getting her CD before her first birthday.

MK: How did you find out about the Hunt Tests and how did you go about learning more and starting to train your dog? (did you join a club, find a mentor, etc.)

TM: Hunt Tests were an offshoot of the American Chesapeake Club (ACC) working dog stakes. We had joined the ACC so went to their training days and picnic matches [picnic matches are informal field events set up according to AKC regulations. They are similar to a practice match in obedience]. From our first introduction to the breed, it just seemed that the breed always did field. So I picked up a couple of books and started training. Realizing that I didn't know the first thing about it, I asked around and was referred to Jim Shine who trained a bunch of Chessies [for field work]. Jim took Star for a couple months of initial training and tutored us on the mechanics of field work.

MK: Can you remember your first Licensed test? How did it go?

TM: Our first test was the ACC test in July at Argyle Park. While we picked up a couple birds, we did not get an orange ribbon. But it sure was a hoot!

MK: Do you remember what went wrong and what went right? Was it what you expected?

TM: Our first test was hosted by the ACC (local region) and was held the second weekend in July 1993 at a place called Argyl Park. It was huge with over a hundred junior dogs entered. And it was hot, dry and dusty. Anyway, the bird being used on land for juniors was a Chuckar. We had never seen a Chuckar as it is not that common in California (Note: A Chucker is a small partridge)—they are more prevalent in Nevada. But I was assured that a good force-fetched dog would pick up anything. So as I waited my turn I watched as several dogs ran out to this bird and then kind-of shrugged to say that it wasn't what they were supposed to get and then start going into big hunts trying to find a duck, pheasant or pigeon that is more common in training and tests.

So with nerves tingling, it is finally our turn to run. We get to the line and I try to remember all the advice I had gleaned: point the dog to the gunners, have her sit and gently hold her collar, signal the judges and then wait for them to say our number, make sure the leash is out of sight, etc. So we finally get to the line and she sits there while I get everything under control. I signal that we are ready, the judges signal the gunners and the bird is in the air. Shots rang out and the bird falls. Our number is called and Star is locked on to where the bird fell. The judges call our number, I release her and she races to the bird. Alas, it is a cripple and is running. She chases it all over the field until it finally crawls into a hole. Star works and finally extricates the bird from the hole and brings it back. A nice hand delivery. I get her under control and we wait for the second bird. This bird being a tossed dead bird is nowhere as exciting as the first. So after she is released, Star heads back to where she got the first bird hoping for something else to chase. Alas no ribbon, but still a lot of congrats from the gallery for her determination in chasing down the cripple and digging it out of the hole.

This pointed out a lot of things about hunt tests and dog training in general. While hunt tests are to measure skill and training, there is still a lot of luck involved. Dogs will do well if they are trained to the concept under normal circumstances, but a great deal of proofing needs to be done for those out of the ordinary circumstances (in this case the distraction of a very lively crippled bird). Always try to expect the unexpected or dogs will be dogs. They are not robots. And at the most inopportune time they will demonstrate this.

MK: What is the one tip you would give a "newbie" to the sport?

TM: Find a good mentor/trainer, and do not rush your dog.

MK: Where are your dogs now in their accomplishments and what's next?

TM: Star is now retired. She is one of the first four Chessies to have earned her CH, UD and SH title combination. She has had three litters and her kids are now carrying on. Cruiser is a UD, MH with three UDX legs and Flash is a CH, CDX, MH and has gone to the Master national twice. And I have become a hunt test judge.

Well, Tom's story mirror's mine in several ways. Our first Labrador was a purchase out of the newspaper—we were also lucky that she was healthy, sound and had some good genes behind her. I also started in obedience, earning CDs on several dogs before we discovered field work.

Tom also learned--like I did--that most dogs need to be introduced to all types of birds BEFORE the test day and that you need to give your dog as many different experiences in training as you can. These are issues I have covered in previous columns.

Watching retrievers work in the field is truly thrilling. To see their instincts and their intelligence at work is more than thrilling—it's addictive!

Next month: In Their Own Words: Part II, an interview with Susan Kluesner about her Golden Retrievers.

Happy Training!

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Photo: Tom's dogs from left to right:

CH TuleMist First Light, CDX, MH • TuleMist Cruisin' Thru Life, UD, MH • CH Acampo Grizzly's Star, UD, SH