

# Field and Feather

## The Retrieving Game

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### In their own words: Part II

This article is the second in a series where I have asked three people to share their stories. For this column, I talked with Susan Kluesner from Lakeville, Minnesota. Susan has Golden Retrievers.

**MK:** How long have you had Goldens?

**SK:** I bought my first Golden Retriever, Kelly, in 1983.

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

**SK:** I did what many first-time dog owners do, I enrolled in a basic obedience class to gain more control over a rather large and overly friendly dog. So, my start in AKC performance events started with obedience. Starting out with obedience training was a wise decision and has continued to serve me well for many years and with four Golden Retrievers.

With Kelly (Can OTCH Kelly of Queen Island UDT WCX) I also explored tracking and field training for the first time. It seems hard to believe now, with hunt tests being my primary interest, that with Kelly's early field training I asked my husband to handle her because I didn't want to touch the birds! I guess I have come a long way, especially considering the fact that I am now training and running a Golden Retriever in master level hunt tests and recently ran my first field trial.

I have since trained three more Golden Retrievers in the field. My second dog was a sweet little girl by the name of Spinner (Can OTCH U-CDX Wynwood Dream Spinner UDT JH WC) who I lost to cancer three years ago. Currently, I have two Goldens in field training.

**MK:** Do you remember your first licensed field event? What went wrong and what went right?

**SK:** AKC hunt tests had just started when Kelly was young. In fact, the only junior AKC hunt test we ever ran Kelly in was the first one held in Minnesota. It did not go well for us. Kelly went charging out for the first bird—a pheasant—and proceeded to roll and roll and roll on it and never did bring it back. Oops. Apparently we should have introduced Kelly to pheasants before the test, instead of only pigeons, and perhaps a lesson in force-fetching would have been a good idea too.

However, my husband and I continued working with Kelly through a local individual who offered a field training class. After two, eight-week field training classes we ran Kelly in a WC and WCX test (Working Certificate and Working Certificate Excellent—retriever tests sponsored by the Golden Retriever breed clubs. The Labrador Retriever breed clubs also have this program) where she aced both of them. Guess that is the moment I became hooked on field events.

**MK:** How did you find out about the Hunt Tests ?

**SK:** I first learned about field events through my local Golden Retriever club. Initially, just the WC/WCX program. So that was my first goal to get a WC on Kelly. But the WC turned into a WCX and along the way the AKC started up the hunt test program. So, in short I learned about these programs by being a member of the national and local Golden Retriever club.

**MK:** What is the one tip you would give a “newbie” to the sport?

**SK:** The road from running Kelly in a WC to upper field stakes has been a long one because I’ve always trained my own dogs. I have never sent any of my dogs out with a pro for training. I have learned by reading, watching and simple trial and error. However, a key tool was joining two local all-breed retriever clubs. These clubs provided me with access to training grounds and connected me with other people to train with. It is absolutely essential to have a good training group to succeed in the field games.

My one tip to newbies? You must take on the responsibility of learning this sport yourself. No one class or mentor—if you are fortunate enough to have a mentor—is going to train your dog. So, read everything you can on dog training, join a retriever club and work at their events. Ask lots of questions. Offer to throw birds for other training groups in turn for help with your dog. Finally, recognize from the start, being “good” at field training and running dogs in competition will take a lot of time because there is so much to learn.

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

**SK:** Currently, I have two Golden Retrievers in field training. There is Chaser (WR Wynwood High Speed Chase UD SH NA NAJ WCX) who I am now running in master—he has two legs on this title. I also have a young dog by the name of Ticket (Raggedy Run Just the Ticket JH WC) who recently received a derby JAM at an informal field trial (club trial or “picnic” trial).

It is the challenge of this sport that keeps me coming back year after year. There is so much to this sport one never runs out of new things to learn. And when the day comes that your first dog, the one you trained, successfully completes his first major blind or derby, you’ll be hooked too.

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Susan and her dogs have learned the same hard lessons that I did—and many others did. Introducing your dogs to different types of birds BEFORE your first test is a must. And force-fetching usually becomes necessary at some point too...it’s just a matter of time.

As BJ and I headed off to our first junior test, BJ had never refused a retrieve. However, the second duck I sent her to retrieve was a live flier that was only wounded. She flew out to the duck, had her mouth open and was getting ready to scoop it up when the duck reared up and started quacking furiously! BJ didn’t quite know what to do, so she just started scouting the area in larger and larger circles, looking for a duck that didn’t talk back.

When we got home, I asked someone to explain and demonstrate the force-fetch to me and BJ learned to carry live ducks as well as dead ones. If you recall, BJ is the same dog who in a later hunt test tracked a crippled duck all over a pond and most of the surrounding countryside to finish her Junior Hunter title.

Notice that we all use words like “hooked” and “addicted”? Well, it is that much of a challenge and that much fun. When I first started in this game, it was my husband who didn’t want to touch the birds—he had to have gloves on before he would throw for me. Now we barely give it a thought. Like I said in my column titled “You know you are hooked...”:

You know you are hooked on the retriever game when...you take a lunch break during training or a hunt test and forget to wash your hands!

If you aren't to that stage yet, that's okay. Those of us in the field game welcome you and know that eventually you will be "hooked" too.

Next month: In Their Own Words: Part III, an interview with Paulette Swartzendruber about her Flatcoated Retrievers.

Happy training!

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Susan Kluesner with her young dog, Raggedy Run Just the Ticket JH WC