

Field and Feather
The Retrieving Game

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The first title is the sweetest.

I started in the Hunt Tests seven years ago with my chocolate Labrador, BJ. Thankfully, she has a forgiving soul, so we learned together and she forgave my mistakes.

When we started running Junior tests, we had all kinds of adventures. The most nerve-wracking and rewarding was on the day that she would finish her title.

We were at the Madison Retriever Club (Wisconsin) in June. There were two groups (sometimes called flights) of Junior dogs. One group started with the land marks, the other started with the water marks. Then the groups would switch to complete their tests. BJ's group had the land marks first. It was a warm day, but early enough in the morning that there was still some dew on the grass. The grass and cover were deep; the land was slightly rolling and was rimmed with trees. I was nervous, but BJ was excited and ready to retrieve for me.

Our turn came. The flier was shot; BJ went out and returned in short order with the bird. A second land mark was thrown and BJ quickly returned with that bird as well. While we waited for the rest of the dogs in our group to complete the land marks, we had some lunch and waited in the shade. We were able to watch some of the water marks for the other group. The test looked fairly straightforward although some of the dogs had obviously never seen a boat before. The dogs and handlers were asked to climb into a flat-bottomed boat, which was sitting on land. The boat was about 20 feet from the shore of the lake. The lake had lots of cattails and marsh grass and on this particular part of the lake the marsh grass made a finger-like protrusion into the water from the left shore. This created a channel of water between the shore and the finger of marsh grass. The gunner station was on the left shore, throwing the live flier to the right so it would land on the finger of marsh grass.

Our turn came. BJ hopped into the boat with me and sat on the bottom of the boat to my left as I sat on the bench. The flier went up, was shot and landed. The judge called "dog" and I sent BJ for the bird. BJ hopped out of the boat and took a wonderful line to the downed duck. She swam the channel and climbed out on the marshy surface of the finger. She ran to where the duck had dropped and stopped in her tracks. She started looking around and sniffing. Then she pounced to her left, we saw a flutter of wings and the duck was gone. BJ was looking puzzled and started looking around again. It was then that I realized

what was happening--the duck was only wounded and it was DIVING on her! She kept losing it under the surface of the marsh grass.

The duck dove and seemed to disappear. Confused, BJ slid back into the water and started swimming back to me. I called to her, "BJ, fetch it up!" and she immediately turned in the water, heading back to the finger of marsh grass. The chase began. BJ started tracking the duck, the duck diving, resurfacing a few feet away, and diving again. The chase went from the finger of marsh grass to the left shore--the duck was heading for the timber!

I was standing at the line, heart in my throat, knees wobbly. I could hear the judges behind me: "We have to give her a high score on marking because she went directly to the fall. And we have to mark her high on trainability because she went back out when the handler told her to--and we have to mark her high on perseverance because she is tracking the duck."

Now I couldn't even see BJ. Occasionally, I could catch a glimpse of the tip of her tail through the cover or the underbrush. Sometimes you could see the cattails or the grass waving as BJ pushed her way through. Now what? BJ kept tracking, the duck kept running, the judges kept judging. The gallery was hushed. How long could this go on? Would the judges tell me to call her in? What next?

All of a sudden, one of the judges yelled, "She's got it! She's got it!" Here came BJ, down the left shore, past the gunner station, duck swinging from her mouth. The gallery burst into applause. I took a deep, much needed breath. BJ was trotting along, not in any great hurry, making her way back to me. BJ brought me that duck, clutched firmly around its neck. BJ heeled, presented me with the troublesome duck and wagged her tail. I handed the duck to the nearest judge and shakily put BJ's slip lead back around her neck. Both judges smiled and said, "Nice job!"

As I ran up the hill back toward my husband and the gallery, I heard a series of comments:

"Great job!" "My dog wouldn't do that!" "I hope my dog's flier is DEAD!"

For the rest of the afternoon, strangers kept coming up to congratulate me on my dog's perseverance and a job well done. All I could do was grin and hug BJ. When the test was over and ribbons were being presented, I almost couldn't utter the word "Title" to let everyone know that this was the final of four qualifying scores for our JH.

At age 11, BJ now spends most of her time keeping the couch company and teaching the younger dogs how to respect their elders. BJ was not the fastest dog in the field and she never went beyond a CD and Junior Hunter. Her ribbons are looking a bit faded and are surrounded by brighter ribbons of

"greater" accomplishments by my other dogs. And when I look at what my younger dogs are doing in Senior Hunter and Master Hunter, the Junior Hunter requirements don't seem like much. But when I remember what determination she had to get me that duck *because I wanted it*, I have to say that was one of the sweetest victories of all. After all, the purpose of a "meat dog" is to bring the game home for dinner. BJ made sure that wounded duck did not get away. And she made her human companion very happy. Enjoy the couch, BJ!