

Preparing for the Wildrose British Championship

The 4th Annual Wildrose British Retriever Championship was held at the Wildrose facility on March 13, 2004, fielding 21 gundogs in front of a large, enthusiastic gallery. Visitors from Maine to Alaska were treated to mild Mississippi spring weather and a load of fun watching dogs and handlers work in a variety of realistic hunting situations.

This month we will look at each series and the elements involved for successful completion, then focus on a few training tips to prepare for similar situations on the hunt or to participate in the 2005 Wildrose event.

Our judges this year were Vic Barlow, Cheshire, England, Robert Milner, Memphis, TN, and myself. The chief steward was Tom Hamilton of Saucier, MS. Also, a special guest was on hand to cover the trial, Brian Lynn from espnoutdoors.com. Brian plans to post pictures very soon so visit the ESPN site.

The judges were looking for exceptional hunting dogs. A high value was set for the dogs including being steady, honoring quietly, and being an easy-to-handle gamefinder, one that was just as at home on the water as proficient on land. The quest was to identify and recognize true multi-purpose gamedogs.

Each series will be listed and briefly discussed. A follow-up tip will be offered to assist in preparing your dog for similar circumstances.

Series 1 – Water Test

This test was on a pond with decoys--two dogs in line with a 15-yard water entry. The primary dog was expected to ignore a thrown mark in the water to the left with a gunshot and to complete a blind retrieve that was diagonal across water, up the bank about 20 yards. The total distance of the retrieve was about 80 yards. The honor dog was expected to sit quietly off lead. As the primary dog returns, a diversion is thrown to the right in the water across the line. The honor dog picks the diversion as the primary honors.

Tip: First, prepare dogs to ignore diversions and line past for both blinds and marks. Begin at wide angles and “no” the dog off the diversion. Many of the dogs locked on the diversion and could not be pulled off. Some even “ran in” to retrieve the diversion. Steadiness became an issue.

Secondly, early on train your dog to cross water to the far bank, exit, hunt and re-enter the water. Don’t over build the expectations that all birds will be found on the water.

Finally, some handlers got their dogs across the water to the correct area but could not get their dogs to hunt closely. Some had no hunt command at all. This was evident in many of the other series yet to come. Use tennis balls and small feather-covered bumpers placed in thick cover to teach the dog to hunt closely on command. Remember to use the wind direction to your advantage.

Series Two: Walkup—grass field—single mark

A simple walk up with 6 dogs in line without gunfire was set up. A Dokken deadfowl mallard was thrown about 15 to 20 yards in short grass by forward throwers. Surprisingly, some dogs overran these short marks. Many of the young dogs actually did better than the more experienced.

Tip:

In training as dogs get more experienced they are often run at greater distances. They learn to punch out fast without the use of nose and simply overrun short marks. Re-visit short marking with small bumpers or tennis balls occasionally to keep marking accurate.

Series Three: - Walkup – woodlands

Four dogs were in line with judges and a gunner. The line moved through hardwood woodlands. A forward mark was thrown and shot fired. Each dog received one retrieve about 25 to 30 yards out. Judges scrutinized off lead heel work, steadiness and quietness as well as marking and hunting abilities. This test proved surprisingly challenging for many dogs. Some ran in early and others over ran the mark.

Tip: Train as you will hunt. It was obvious that many dogs had little experience marking and handling in woodlands. Secondly, the gunfire sound rebounded about in the thick woods and seemed to distract the dogs. Also, handling was affected by obstructive line of sight. Simply handlers must train in different environments to have a well-rounded gundog. These woods were exactly the type where you would find snipe, quail and rough grouse.

Series Four – Walkup – heavy grass fields

Four dogs were in line with judges and a gunner. The line walks up an old crop field. The rolling terrain was covered in heavy field grasses waist deep mowed into lanes. As the line moved forward, blinds were placed to the rear on the edge of the lanes at distances of 25 to 30 yards. A shot and mark was forward of the line as it moved. The dog was run across the line for the blind to the rear through thick grass lanes.

Tip: Again, begin able to turn the retriever away from the forward diversion to line on an unseen to the rear of the line was imperative. Here are some basic elements necessary for success:

1. Steady/honor in the walkup line, off lead
2. ability to line across in front of other dogs (distractions)
3. ignore diversions
4. hold a line to a blind in heavy cover, often out of sight of the handler
5. stop and hunt cover carefully on command

Jess, later declared the winner, made the most difficult retrieve of this series and it was an eye wipe, that is, the retrieve was completed after another dog's attempt. The distance was the longest preformed-- over a rise in the field and through two lanes of tall grass which limited visibility before hunting heavy cover. Well done, Bill Billups!

Don't forget to take advantage of wind direction. This factor was commonly overlooked which limited success. Use the scent cone.

Series Five – long blind across a creek into heavy cover

The judges' first selection of dogs which would be retained was made prior to Series Five. A blind was placed in very heavy cover across a creek. Handlers were located about 80 yards away up a hill lined with lots of tempting cover (suction). A bumper was launched to the left of the line about halfway down the hill as a tight diversion. Judges asked for the unseen bird. A forward judge was pre-placed in the creek area for close observation. Only 3 dogs could complete this retrieve.

Problems:

1. pulling to the diversion
2. pulling into the cover on the line out
3. failing to drive across the creek into the dense cover

Tip: Practice lining your dog on marks and blinds across and through natural barriers such as hedgerows, fences, ditches and heavy brush. Also, develop a hunt command that is effective at distances. One of the dogs that did get into the area struggled to locate the bumper showing little hunting cover ability without assistance from the handler which was impossible due to the cover. Again, tennis balls are great! Be able to stop your dog at any distance and give a verbal or whistle hunt cue that will direct your dog to hunt closely even out of sight of the handler.

Series Six – sport clay walkup

All dogs remaining after Series Four were called back as we had five places to select. This series involved two shooters with 6 rounds each, dogs at heel, walking down a field. Three clay launchers threw targets across the field from both sides. After the shots were fired and guns reloaded, shooters walked on. Again 3 clays were launched followed by a launched bumper into woods forward. The primary dog was first asked to pick a blind across the field to the rear in a wooded fence line. Upon return, the dog picked a mark. The primary dog was switched to the honor dog and the next shooter was called in. Four different criteria were scored in this series:

1. steady/honor/heel work as the primary dog
2. picking the blind (lining, handling, hunting)
3. the mark
4. steady/honor/heel work as the honor dog

Tip: Sport clays are excellent for testing steadiness at heel on a walk up. If the dog does run in, there is no reward (the retrieve). Use the clays as a distraction (shots and falling debris). Then run blinds away from the fall area. This is a good drill if your dog is hard to pull off a mark to line for a secondary mark or blind. If they pull to the fall area, no reward.

At this point, the judges determined the winner, but were undecided on 2nd and 3rd places. The final run-off retrieve to determine 2nd and 3rd places was up a sloped field through

cover through heavy woods. The blind was hidden in the back edge of the woods. To be successful, once again the dog had to drive deep through the woods holding a line to pick the blind. A gunshot and thrown bumper did mark the location of the blind by sound only. Each dog used the sound to determine the approximate fall area quite well and this is a skill to train for. Rusty made the retrieve without a handle and secured second place. Slick, last year's winner, picked it as well with only one cast—a very difficult retrieve handled well by both dogs.

The Awards:

First Place – Bill Billups and Jess, Meridian, Mississippi

Second Place – Andre Fendalson and Rusty, Zachary, Louisiana

Third Place – Bruce Cook and Slick, Livingston, Alabama

Fourth Place – Tim Soucy and Zena, Madison, Maine

Gun's Award – John Warren and Luke, Memphis, Tennessee

Congratulations to all award winners and a well done to all participants.

Plans are already being made for the 5th Championship for the spring of 2005. Many enthusiastic participants are already expressing an interest in returning. I hope this quick review of the 2004 event will assist those interested in preparing for next year's event. The '05 course will differ but the skills we seek to recognize remain: steadiness, control in the field, and gamefinding ability.

Thanks to all for attending and for all your kind comments. See you next year!