

May Newsletter
Wildrose Kennel
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Training for the Wildrose British Championship 2002 Part II

In our second and final summary of the criteria for the second annual Wildrose British Retriever Championship held March 23, 2002, at Wildrose, we will examine the 5 upland game tests.

A point to keep in mind. Dogs were judged on the ability to find game efficiently not on precision lining and handling skills. This is the main difference between British and American Trials and Tests. We recognized dogs with gamefinding abilities and those that demonstrated calmness and remained under control with a predisposition to work with their handler as a team.

Series I The Water Test (Please see Part I for details.)
All dogs were advanced to the second series.

Series II - The Give Me

This was a simple, straightforward walk up, upland game test to allow participants a chance to acclimate themselves to expectations for the remaining four series. Dogs and handlers were in line with two guns (shooting hunters) on the outside positions of the line. There was a right and left judge in the line between the handlers. Bird throwers are in front of the line as the handlers progress in unison across the grass fields. This is the primary configuration for all four remaining tests. The line moves forward on command with dogs at heel, leads off. A simple mark was thrown about 40 yards across the line for each dog. No dog was eliminated in this practice run series. You can see pictures of similar lines on my website, www.uklabs.com. This exercise is great training fun with your weekend training groups. It develops steadiness and honor in dogs and hones obedience skills.

Series III Grass Fields and Plowed Lanes

This series involved the same configuration as Series II but encompassed a more challenging environment. The test was conducted on a large, long field bordered by woodlands. The waist-high, thick grass was in 60-foot rows broken by 30-foot plowed lanes. Each dog was asked to make two single retrieves across the line of

guns, dogs, and handlers to the opposite side of the field. Bumper throwers could not be seen but Dokken birds were thrown high and identified by gunfire from the line. Quite often handlers could not actually see the dog, once sent, except in plowed lanes making handling most challenging, yet realistic.

Breaking from thick grass lanes into plowed lanes facing another thick grass lane presented problems for some dogs. Their dive out for the mark often broke down when the terrain abruptly changed. Some retrieves required the dog to line from grasses, to plowed ground, back to grass lanes then drive across another plowed lane into woodland borders. Here are skills to definitely include in your transitional training plans if you ever intend to put your retriever onto upland game. Creeping, poor heeling and unsteadiness were closely scrutinized.

Off Game: In some series flushed wild game occurred as dogs went out or were hunting the fall area for a mark. Quail and rabbit flushes were confronted which added a bit of sport. If the dog switched from their quest for the mark or blind, points were deducted. Two noteworthy incidents occurred:

- A. In Series III Andre Fendalson's Golden, Rusty, flushed a quail just as Andre sent him out on a long mark. Rusty stayed true to course.
- B. Later in Series IV, Spencer Ragland's black British Lab, Bradley, was searching a bit of cover out some 60 yards on a blind when a rabbit jumped and gave flight right under his nose. No problem and extra points were awarded. The suggestion here is obvious; train for diversion.

Series IV

Not all entries were called. This test was across another strip-disked field, this time across the lanes. The field was bordered by woods on the left and a creek on the right. A mark was thrown left of the line into cover. To the right, 60 yards down a sloped field into a bottom was a briar-covered ditch with banks 5 to 6 feet deep. A blind was placed at different locations for each dog. The mark was first thrown with a shot. A few seconds later, a shot to the right of the line was fired. The primary dog was asked to pick the blind. Upon completion, another dog was sent for the original mark. Each dog remaining was given an opportunity for both.

Conditioning dogs for such a situation begins by using memories preceded by a mark. I expose young dogs to lots of memories which are directed away from short marks. Continuously practice sending dogs away from seen marks for unseen memory bumpers. Marks are picked up last.

Be sure to condition dogs to drive across obstacles, such as ditches at angles. The deep creek diverted dogs. Some birds were placed in the ditch, others on banks or across the ditch. Involve ditches in training and expose dogs to finding birds in a variety of locations, even in the briar thickets.

It was evident that dogs needed more work at hunting tight at the point of loss. The blinds were area blinds. The handler only knew the general area of the loss. The dog's ability to locate the game, once in the area, was important. The handlers had to get the dog into the area and let the dog hunt. The dog's scent ability (nose), willingness to hunt cover, holding tight to an area and practical hunting experience produced results. Work on getting your retriever to hold tight on an area of cover and get their nose down and in gear. Tossing tennis balls in thick covered areas works wonders.

This series left only 6 dogs to advance. Surprisingly though, one was a 13-month old, British dog named Lige who made short work of this trial to this point, even at his young age.

Series V

This drive was in heavy woodlands so thick that the handler could not see the dog beyond 30 yards. Dogs that could mark well by listening and those with good noses prevailed. Practical hunting experiences proved beneficial as well. Dogs performed doubles in this environment.

Training for such conditions should include keeping the dog attentive, focused, and quiet while walking on the drive. The dog's attention must be ahead. Train dogs to mark with their ears as well as their eyes at an early age. Use large bumpers thrown to fall through branches and brush in woodlands. Practice doubles and memories in thick woodlands during transitional work. Again, good nose work

is a must and dogs that had been trained to line in thick cover involving obstacles prevailed. We were looking for gamefinders, not precision handlers.

Session VI

The trial switched its structure from a walk up to a driven. A driven is where the birds would come toward the guns and dogs as they were driven from woodlands or high ground. This is an extreme test of steadiness.

Dogs were lined very closely together, off lead, with about 20 yards of plowed lane before them. Shots rang out, birds, balls and bumpers began falling in all directions. Steadiness was tested to the max. Any whining, creeping, or movement resulted in elimination. Andre, Rusty's owner, wrote later, "This was without a doubt the most serious breaking test I had ever seen." Once the shooting ceased, birds were collected and the dogs were asked to pick a blind 100 yards at a 90-degree angle to the action. The terrain was a sloped hill covered with grass which broke into a plowed lane. Some dogs found it difficult not to pull to the grass cover or woodlands as they were accustomed to finding birds in these areas.

This time the birds were actually in the wide open. Lining, in this particular test, became important combined with handling and response to the whistle. Handling the dogs out of woods proved challenging for some. The birds were in the wide open yet dogs kept being pulled back into the cover.

Training for such retrieves involves developing reasonable lining skills, practiced whistle and hand signal commands and running blinds in a variety of conditions which may attract or pull the dogs off course. Extremely long lining ability is not necessary for the successful gundog but dogs should have the ability to run enthusiastically in an indicated direction for reasonable distances, then take proper casts directly to the area of the fall.

Plans for next year's trial in March are already underway and I promise an even more challenging course for our participants. Plan to attend the event or run in the trial to earn your dog the recognition as the finest gentleman's gundog in America.