



HERITAGE

THE WILDROSEWAY

A CLOSER LOOK AT WHAT DEFINES
THIS SPECIAL KENNEL
THAT STARTED IN THE HEART OF THE SOUTH.

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PPAST THE BLACK iron gate, the driveway extends for miles. Out in the warm southern sun, I spot a man in one of the fields with a fox-red Labrador, fit as a fiddle, off lead on his left heel.

I am greeted at the main shop by Wildrose founder, Mike Stewart; President/Owner of Wildrose Mississippi, Tom Smith; and Pappy—a young black British Labrador who is Stewart’s personal dog.

Stewart, donning a cotton white shirt and a wide-brimmed hat, shakes my hand firmly as I look up at the tall, tan man. His strong, confident handshake confirms that he was a law enforcement officer for 25 years before retiring as Chief of Police for the University of Mississippi.

The Wildrose trading shop is filled with a range of elegant Wildrose-exclusive clothing, embroidered with their signature logo (a Labrador puppy staring playfully back at the viewer with a bumper hanging from its young jaws), and a shelf of books and DVDs. There is also a variety of dog training gear, as well as countless framed photos and articles from top publications like *Forbes* and *The Sporting South*.

A large map, packed with countless pins, is displayed on the wall. “This is a map of where all of our dogs are across the world, and our kennel locations too,” Stewart explains.

Wildrose Labradors are found in all 50 states, every Canadian province, Mexico, and over ten other countries. Their kennel locations are found in Oxford, Mississippi—which is their main location—as well as Texas, North Carolina, and Wisconsin.

All the red pins on the map could convince you it was an empire, but as I talk with Mike and Tom throughout the day, it becomes clear that Wildrose is far more than a kennel or training philosophy.









THE BRITISH INVASION

In Stewart's lifetime, he competed and trained several breeds. From beagles, to pointers, he is a lifetime dog man. But eventually, it was the British Labrador that captivated him and slowly took over his day-to-day—causing him to move away from his goals of sustainable farming and to begin training dogs full-time.

When Stewart acquired Wildrose in 1999, there was little emphasis on duality in retrievers. The Labrador culture was largely focused on hunt tests, field trials, and high-powered waterfowl specialists. Stewart, being a dog man since he was old enough to carry a bucket and lead on his family's farm, wanted to breed a different type of retriever.

He saw the desirable traits that British Labradors carried in their genetics overseas and how that would translate to a wonderful sporting companion here in America. These dogs were natural game finders, calm, quiet, and easily trained without much force or pressure. He felt they would make the perfect sporting companion for most hunter's needs and desires.

These days, a new British Lab breeder seems to pop up overnight. This has only been further inflated from the rise of social media. But Stewart can be credited for popularizing the breed here in the States at a time when Instagram didn't exist. The genetic traits found in these lines of Labradors instantly made them fantastic companions and hunters.

ABOVE:

(Left to Right) President/Owner of Wildrose Mississippi, Tom Smith; and Wildrose founder, Mike Stewart with a string of their British Labradors on the main campus in Oxford, Mississippi.

What separated Wildrose from other kennels, and still does now, is what Stewart also introduced with these dogs. It wasn't just the genetics or the training—it was the brand. He brought the elegance and flare inspired by the British sporting scene. All of these ingredients blended seamlessly together into the Wildrose cocktail, and people couldn't get enough.

But Stewart didn't simply copy and paste this British influence. He made it his own, blending it with uniquely American needs based upon a lifetime of training dogs. His dedication to the breed led him to his most significant accomplishment as a dog trainer and competitor when he led the United States—for the first time in history—to compete in the U.K., winning the P&O Irish Sea International Retriever Competition against several other represented countries.





THE FORMULA

What exactly is “the Wildrose Way?” When reading Stewart’s book, *The Wildrose Way*, it is defined in terms of their unique training method—one focused on bringing out the natural abilities of the dog using a positive, low-force approach inspired by trainers from the United Kingdom.

“It is about having a dog that can hunt ducks in the morning, quail in the afternoon, and then lay by the big screen watching football in the evening. We are focused on breeding and training the ‘Gentleman’s Gun Dog’—the ultimate sporting companion,” Stewart explained.

The Wildrose philosophy toward training is based upon:

- Positive Training Methods
- Pack Behavior
- Consistency
- Train the Trainer
- Personalized Training Programs

The end result is a dog that is a take-anywhere hunting companion. It should be adaptable to any kind of hunting blind, travel, terrain, and every kind of vehicle and animal it may be exposed to in the field or on the ranch.

LEFT:

Wildrose brings out the natural abilities of puppies utilizing a positive, low-force approach.



Wildrose’s training facility is specifically designed to expose puppies and dogs in training to anything they may encounter both at home and while hunting. Puppies are socialized to a variety of common household objects, platforms, and sounds—things like skateboards, place boards, and more. When the puppies finally go home to their new owners, they have had a ton of positive socialization.

Wildrose is looking for specific attributes from their dogs. These goals are bred for genetically and developed through training. They include:

- Companionship
- Steadiness
- Delivery
- Control
- Game-Finding

At their kennels, it is hard to find something that they did not think of when it comes to training exposure. For adult dogs, there are a variety of cover crop fields, woods, complex duck blind platforms, technical ponds, and just about everything in between. Does the dog need to learn to ride in ATVs? They have them. Around horses? They can do that. Loading in and out of the boat? Check. Their training is always evolving for any kind of situation their dogs may encounter.

One interesting aspect of their training is their use of a large flight pen. I watched as one of their trainers, Bryan Pala, heeled a young female yellow Lab on a lead as pigeons erupted around them. Then off lead. After heeling, she was asked to sit while Bryan walked around, causing the birds to fly towards her while she sat calmly. He then tossed a bumper for her towards the pigeons. Without skipping a beat, she took a line towards the bumper, ignoring the frenzied birds, and brought it right back to him. Calm, steady, and always in control. That is what Wildrose calls their signature “Gentleman’s Gun Dog.”



A FAMILY AFFAIR

As I toured the property and spoke with the people behind it—including full-time trainers, a medical team, and a staff of puppy caretakers—I saw first-hand what makes “the Wildrose Way” different from other kennels and training methods.

One unique factor about Wildrose is the emphasis they put on the trainer and on the people themselves. As mentioned before, they put an emphasis on “training the trainer.” They do this by working closely with their puppy owners, and others, in workshops and demonstrations put on across the country.

But their community’s reach does not stop there. They hold events throughout the year for owners and friends, including tower shoots and fun UK-inspired field trials.

The thread connecting this expansive Wildrose community is the dogs. When someone goes to pick up a puppy at Wildrose, they aren’t simply treated as a client. They are given thorough instruction on the relationship, communication, and training of their new Labrador puppy.

Tom Smith, the present owner of Wildrose HQ in Oxford, was once just one of these many puppy buyers. After training his first dog in 1998 through a more ‘American field trial’ style approach, Smith visited Wildrose and immediately gravitated

to their training approach and sporting lifestyle. He brought home Wildrose Dixie shortly after.

Smith spent as much time as he could shadowing Stewart and trainer Ben Summerall. He’d take breaks away from his industrial construction company to attend every course, class, and event Wildrose had to offer. Before one event Smith asked Stewart, “Am I taking the class?” Stewart replied, “You already understand all of this...you’re working.”

As I toured the property with Smith in a side by side, he spoke of Stewart and their partnership that started all those years ago: “Mike was the best man at my wedding. It is far more than a business deal for us. He’s been one of my best friends for fifteen years now.”

Smith and his family live on one end of the property and Stewart and his wife have a home on the other. Their relationship is a wonderful example of just how dogs connect us all, and how Wildrose embraces this in every aspect of their brand. From their signature products, to their unique training approach, to their elegant European style, all the way to their kennel of British Labs—the “Wildrose Way,” is all of these things and so much more. 

