

American Field<http://americanfield.villagesoup.com/p/1572117>***Highest Standards Essential for Breed Improvement*****Performance in Open Championships**

By John S. Gates | Sep 13, 2016

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John S. Gates

Georgia correspondent Steve Standley recently wrote to the editorial office: "Enjoyed the John Rex Gates article that you reprinted (issue of August 27). I just bumped into another possible one, 'Performance in Open Championships' by John S. Gates. It was published in the April 13, 1968 issue. It is excellent." John Gates's 1968 article follows.

First of all, let me assure the reader that I must feel deeply about a matter to attempt to put my thoughts into words. Conversation comes easy, but when one tries to put into writing his ideas — well, that's something else again. I make no pretense of being a writer, but do feel that there is

something I might contribute toward a clear-cut definition of what should be looked for in open field trial championship performance.

What prompted me to take pen in hand at this time is no decision by any judge or set of judges in any field trial; it is because there have been articles and considerable talk about handling technique, about showing dogs to judges, about what judges should be looking for . . . and it is my sole purpose to emphasize that dog and handler are a team and that the ideal field trial performance is an exhibition that brings out brilliantly all the superior qualities of the brainy, bold, tireless bird dog.

My credentials are not writing skill, but the fact that I have handled more dogs to more championships than any other professional in the records of field trials. This is not said boastfully, but to lend credibility to the fact that I might know a little something about championship performance. You hear so much about the credibility gap in national administration affairs, that it seemed worthwhile to mention my background and experience in making bold to write about what standards are essential in open field trial championship performance if it is our hope to continue the improvement of the dog breeds.

I hold no brief for a handler who rides wildly and constantly over a course. Nor do I want to see glorified a dog to which handling response is foreign to his nature. But there has been such a trend to shooting dog in the last decade that there is the worry that the great principles on which field trials were built may be lost if all of us do not think soundly on the purposes of field trials.

I remember reading the late Dr. William A. Bruette's article on "The Real Purpose of Field Trials," and it made such an impression on me that I have referred to it frequently.

Basically, the real purpose of bird dog trials is improvement of the pointing breeds, the elevation of bird dog performance in the hunting field. There are other objectives also, but some of the latter will cause novices, particularly those with only shooting dog experience, to be confused by particular standards applied to exhibitions in field trial competitions. Too many bird shooters do not seem to have the right conception of the purpose of field trials.

To revert to Dr. Bruette, he stressed that field trials were not instituted for the purpose of bringing to the front a dog or a class of dogs eminently suited to the wants of the average gunner whose primary object in using a dog afield is to fill the game bag, regardless of the manner in which the dog performs, but rather for the purpose of bringing to the notice of the public a class of performers best suited to perpetuate the most desirable qualities possessed by the high-class field trial dog.

These dogs are at all times the most desirable to shoot over, for the reason that their individuality is such that it cannot be dominated by the handler's use of "foot-rule" methods whereby a dog of subservient temperament is forced to range so many yards to the front or to the right or left without consulting his own inclination or judgment. In some cases, a high-class field trial performer may run "too big," so great is his ambition to find birds, and while it is by no means the wish to encourage the development of too-wide running, nevertheless it is certain that more harm will attend breeding for sires of soft, deferential dispositions than will come from the use of those whose independence is so great that it is with some difficulty they are persuaded to work to the gun in a manner satisfactory to the average sportsman. The best field trial dogs, given the proper preparation and type of work, are actually the best shooting dogs.

But you can't pick the really brilliant individuals on the basis of shooting dog performance.

Those who have had the greatest success with breeding say that strong individuality and the possession of prepotent bloodlines are the basic requirements in a successful sire, and it is known that the really brilliant field trial champions have been instrumental in perpetuating and improving the qualities most desired in the high-class field dogs. Breeders look for sires who have tremendous nervous energy and virility, independence of spirit and endless determination to hunt for and find birds.

The high-class field trial performer, in order to show his natural qualities to the best advantage, is developed and intensified to the highest degree, which is different than making an ordinary shooting dog subservient to the gun.

Handlers who have had the most success in developing field trial champions, virtually allow these dogs to train themselves, applying only such restrictions as are necessary in steadying of a dog on point and back, but allow the dog almost absolute freedom in other respects so that he is not hampered in the development of his natural qualities (which are all that can be perpetuated).

By the use of proper methods in training, any dog which possesses mentality of a high order (which is one of the prime requisites of the ideal field trial performer) can be developed or subjugated in a manner which will make him eminently suited for a gentleman's shooting dog. But in order to develop a dog's natural qualities to the utmost, so that they may be exhibited in trials and thus afford the breeder opportunities to make intelligent selections of the highest class individuals, a special course of training is instituted which, while it accomplishes its purpose in admirable fashion, does not render the dog fit for use in general shooting until he has undergone further training.

Major circuit field trials are not intended to be trials for shooting dogs nor for the wild running dog, heedless of handling, which displays little brains. Placing either harms the interests of bird dogs.

Let us mold our major championships so that only the most fit and finest compete. These are not for shooting dogs, but if too much stress is put on mere pointing of game, you find this type entered. It makes the starting fields too large, causes the trials to take too long for completion, literally starves a handler because of the amount of time that must be consumed and the number of dogs that must be carried.

We want a dog that will run, but a dog that will use his country and cut it up to his birdy objectives, a dog that may reach out boldly on a searching cast, but one that will come around. There will be times when a handler has to ride, not to curb the going inclinations of the dog or herd him around, but to know which direction the dog's hunting may head so that in case he does find birds, he can be found more readily.

There will be times, also, when a judge has to ride up to watch a dog's pattern or to be able to witness a dog's manner of going to game. Different situations call for different techniques; you cannot generalize. The handler's role is to enable his dog to display his natural qualities to fullest advantage and there has never been a successful trainer of a topflight performer who did not at some time during a field trial performance feel nervous — you always do. It intensifies your desire to be as helpful as possible to the dog.

Let me say again, it is a handler's job to know his dog, his predispositions, his capabilities . . . and the expert's training methods are designed to show a dog's qualities to best advantage. The fact that a hard driving dog has a consuming desire to find game is best portrayed by allowing the exercise of the dog's independence, and the experienced handler rides alertly where conditions require it.

The class performer's initiative, his ambitious range, his spirited search and courage in completing casts of thrilling proportions cannot fail to set one's pulse to pounding. It builds tension when you are witnessing such a grand opera performance, as Dr. T. Benton King was accustomed to describing it. When a reporter says the galleryites were riding "high in the saddle" it describes the reaction to a spectacular effort, or to use a favorite word of reporters, a scintillating race. The adrenalin begins to flow faster and reflexes are quickened also. If a bird dog fan isn't moved by such an exhibition, he has no real appreciation of class.

When a dog reaches out into birdy country, a handler likes to know the dog's direction. In the 1968 Free-for-All, a finalist was lost and found on point more than an hour later in the same neighborhood where he was headed when last seen. Think how a handler feels when his dog on point and is not found in time? If the terrain is rolling or hilly, alert forward riding is an intelligent part of proper handling procedure. It is not something to be indulged in constantly — none of us condone that — but where it may enhance the excellence of a dog's pattern, who can be critical of it? Like Jim Avent used to say, the time to turn a dog is when he nears the end of his cast to a birdy objective, and if the handler is under a hill at such time, precious minutes can be lost. All of this is not contrary to Clyde Morton's recommendations; it is said merely to describe approved technique that Clyde himself used with such great success.

There have been many great sportsmen in field trials who have been outstanding judges and their contributions have been of greatest importance in setting performance standards. They never over-emphasized the mere pointing of game. They were quick to reward the bold, brilliant dogs for meritorious bird work. It would serve no useful purpose to include names, but the sport owes a debt of gratitude to these for the enhancement of bird dog excellence.

It might be well for me to list the qualities looked for in the high-class field trial dog. All of the natural qualifications, to be sure, such as speed, range, intelligence and stamina. A dog must have the instinct to hunt and the desire to find birds. A good nose is of great importance, able to detect the faintest scent and to locate game quickly and accurately. Pointing is instinctive, and character, intensity, style and loftiness on point are essential, as well as staunchness. A champion is expected to have bird sense, wisdom which enables him to select likely objectives and to pattern the course intelligently for greatest effectiveness. His pace and his range should be adaptable — in a sense adjusted to the terrain and type of cover, but always on the ambitious side reflecting the capacities of the performer, ever conscious of his handler but not dependent on him to take the dog places to hunt.

A dog should have a strong constitution, and imperturbability also, an ability to orient himself quickly, any amount of stamina and highest courage in facing all sorts of cover or conditions.

Carl McKinney, longtime retainer on the Ames Plantation who worked for years with James M. Avent, used to say the most important quality of a field trial dog was that he had to be nervy. Carl meant by that ambition, nervous energy, courage — in a word, gameness, for that's what keeps a dog working and trying and doing, still reaching out when another is looking to be picked up.

The class bird dog in open championship competition should show great speed and cover a large amount of country . . . and when he does this the handler can't be dilatory or sluggish in his actions.

What some refer to as mental telepathy also enters the picture, for there is no doubting the records — handlers with the greatest intelligence, alertness and general know-how have developed the most champions.

No one would say that Clyde Morton was a handler to sit calmly on his horse — he got nervous like the rest of us — but his energies were always directed toward assisting his dog and toward showing the dog's superior qualifications. He never rode out merely for the sake of riding fast; it was always to accomplish something, and in this sense that is what a handler is supposed to do.

When a dog is staying in front in flashy form, the handler has merely to keep him in sight and may ride comfortably with the judges and field trial party, but when the ambitious performer reaches over yonder hill and sights a likely objective far beyond, and possesses the initiative, independence and courage to go to it, it is the duty of the handler to keep contact with his dog, a dog which if he does not find game will come around, but if he does point, the handler wants to have some idea of where to look.

Ed Farrior, Dewey English and others did not hesitate to ride and handle aggressively when circumstances dictated such.

Some of our greatest sires, both pointers and setters, would never have been heard of if a wise handler had not noted the brilliant class of the dog, and applied training methods and handling technique so that the natural qualifications of the individual were brought to the attention of breeders.

It is of the utmost significance that in our open field trial championship stakes judges apply the highest standards to performance, not just a dog with nice speed, range and style that handles easily, but the brilliant individual, exuding class, showing the intensified qualities of the prepotent sire. For unless such dogs are developed by handlers and shown by them, and selected by wise, experienced judges, breed improvement will grind to a halt because of commonplace "ideal shooting dogs."

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