



Breeders' Briefcase

by Cindy Long

Chair of the Breeders' Education Committee

I felt it appropriate to go back in time, and thanks to Anne Taguchi, came across this article written by Tom Wilson of Smokey City fame to the then-editor of the Weimaraner Magazine. This letter could be considered even more relevant today than it was when it was written back in 1977, thirty six years ago! Hopefully reading it will encourage breeders to sit back, realize our breed is still relatively young, that our dogs are/can be major contenders in both venues, and that we just need to work harder and focus on the betterment of our breed. Achieving a Dual Champion in any breed should remain a prestigious and elusive accomplishment. Even more importantly before casting stones, breeders should know through experience what it takes to win with a top show dog and win with a top field trial dog. How can you create the best of both if you don't know equally as much about the other?

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From the April 1977 Weimaraner Magazine (scanned copy here: <http://www.huntingweimalliance.com/docs/April1977TomWilson.pdf>)

Letters to the Editor

Dear Paul (Lester),

I was glad to see that your comments have sparked some response from the membership, which I'm sure as you know, is very difficult to do. Unfortunately, some of what is

being offered as comment in many cases is made without a thorough understanding of the "other side." I wonder how many breeders of Show beauties that claim to have good hunting dogs have ever bothered to spend a day at a major Field Trial of some of the more respected Bird Dog Breeds and ridden behind their top competitors with an open mind and an objective attitude, to try and see the difference between us and them? The reverse is also an interesting question. How many breeders of good bird dogs have not just shown some dog to prove they are finishable but actually stayed all day and watched those top winning Sporting Group Dogs of the other breeds and tried to evaluate what certain qualities set them far apart from the average show dog competitor?

During 18 years of being involved with this great, but baffling breed, I have managed to integrate the ranks of both sides. I would like to offer a few observations.

Far too much emphasis is placed on proper conformation being the prime pre-requisite for a competitive bird dog. Above all things, it takes a "very Elusive Quality" which is referred to by knowledgeable Field People as desire, spark, fire, etc. I prefer a term described to me by a very old setter pro who showed me how to train my first Weimaraner. In his words, 'If he ain't got "heart," he can't do nothin'.'

The most perfect conformation dog with all the proper proportions and balance could, but won't run a lick without heart. Likewise, we have had some top competitors in our breed, who by conformation standards, are theoretically unable to get around a thirty minute course without breaking down, but have played a large part in gaining whatever respect has been earned by this breed among other bird dog people. Whether these handful of dogs were actually freaks of our breed will probably remain purely speculation due to several factors:

1. The Weimaraner's strange ability to refuse to pass on traits with any great amount of consistency.
2. The reluctance of most breeders to recognize this infrequent quality for what it is or to breed to those dogs extensively (making some sacrifices in some cases) to give them a chance to reproduce that quality, if only by sheer law of averages.

In defense of the statements made often by field people and criticized even more by show folks, that, "I don't care what he looks like, as long as he can run," I really believe that any one of those field trialers would actually prefer to own a really top field trial dog with excellent conformation if he just had that elusive quality "heart" but so few do, even among field bred dogs. On the other hand, many top show breeders would be horrified at some field trialer actually approached them to breed their hard running small, long bodied or cow hocked bitch to "Mr. Beautiful." In many cases they would be refused that privilege because the sacrifice is too great.

I am not criticizing either of these opinions, merely recognizing them,

because I have been in both positions and have made similar decisions based on the reluctance to make that sacrifice one way or the other. I also realize that this is the problem that makes the "ultimate goal" – the top dual dog – a very difficult achievement for most of us even though we may profess otherwise in discussions with our peers.

I also do not believe we must accept this mediocrity as a trait of our breed or claim they are to perform any differently than any other bird dog breed. I think we are just a lot further behind in our development and to rationalize by saying we are different is merely a "cop out" to excuse us from tightening the long hard battle to achieve that perfection we all know we desire.

Just to clear up one point, I would like to be sure everyone understands what the difference is. I'm sure we all know of a Shorthair or Brittany that won't hunt at all. We have also seen the ones that operate at such ridiculous range that they have to be considered out of control much of the time. What we are talking about is neither of these extremes. Those wild running renegades that so many seem to think we are trying to match certainly spark a lot of conversation around trials, rarely do they win. The quality we are searching to develop in the one that makes the dog do what he does with every ounce of enthusiasm he has. He doesn't have to be out of sight all the time to impress the judge. What he must do is run the required range for that stake (Puppy, Derby, Gun Dog, All Age, etc) and do it with all his might instead of half-heartedly. It's the difference in making that 75 yard cast to the treeline and then hunting it out. Instead of watering the trees after he's there. It's making

a long hard cast without the aid of horse tracks to follow, and then going on from there instead of coming straight back 65 yards like he just ran out of rubber band. It's using the cover that others ignore. It's making a choice to go into the cover when there is a chance between a path or cut strip, and some likely bird cover. When we have that quality in our "average" Weimaraner, then we will have reached equality with the other breeds.

The show people have their problems also. If you take a reasonably sound dog, adequately handled, to enough shows you can finish him or her, but everyone dreams of not just a Champion, but a dog that wins big specialities and groups or even the Super Bowl (Best in Show). Of the incredible number of dogs shown, every year, the percentage that ever achieve these top awards is very low. It is always the same few dogs no matter what breed you talk about. Sure there are cases where the right judge or the right handler or both make a difference, but I'm not talking about that now, but more of the average again. Talk to 50 knowledgeable show people of other breeds and you'll find that most of them don't consider our breed much of a threat for Group competition although I gladly admit that in the last 3 or 4 years this picture is changing considerably.

But back to the point of this whole thing. A dog can only be so sound and at a certain point they all become equal. In fact, if you really go over some of the top winning sporting dogs (any breed) you are going to find that they are not perfect and by putting your hands on them you'll find that the answer is not just in soundness. The only thing they all seem to have

in common is evident. You can all it flair, style, enthusiasm, spirit or whatever. It's the one quality there, in consistent top winners regardless of who's showing it or who is judging it. It's even evident in young dogs making them stand out in those big classes of 25 or 30 class dogs.

Isn't it strange that whatever seems to be lacking in the average field trial dog and the average show dog is an invisible thing that has far more to do with attitude than anything else? Wouldn't it be ironic and even a little humorous if we discover someday (Heaven forbid) that this quality is actually related somehow and both field and show breeders have been searching for the same thing all along.

I submit that it is at least worth considering. As the old song says, "You gotta have heart, miles and miles of heart."

Sincerely yours,
Tom Wilson
Kilshawn Kennels