



DOGS

THAT CAN DO IT ALL

*Written by Mike Zlotnicki
Photographed by Melissa McGaw*

Waterfowl, upland birds and tracking game are all in a day's work for the breeds (and people) of the North American Versatile Hunting Dog Association.



Pointing and retrieving upland birds are only part of what is expected of NAVHDA dogs. Water work and tracking are also part of the package, and the dogs are tested against a standard, not each other.



Webster's defines "versatile" as "changing or

fluctuating readily; embracing a variety of subjects, fields, or skills." We see it daily in a variety of things.

Baseball has the "five-tool player," an athlete who can hit for power, hit for average, run fast, throw hard and deftly field. Cutlery has the Swiss Army Knife, a tool that can cut, file, tighten, sharpen, snip or saw. Other knives with multi-tools, like the Leatherman, take the term versatile even a step further. The hunting world has the breeds of the North American Versatile Hunting Dog Association (NAVHDA).

These dogs, mostly of continental European descent, are expected to find and retrieve game on land, find and retrieve game in water, track furred or feathered game on land and be cooperative yet independent while doing so.

My interest in bird dogs started with Jim Kjelgaard's book "Big Red" and the rest of his trilogy in grade school. "Where the Red Fern Grows" (which should be issued to every child at birth) further curried my interest in hunting dogs. While in high school one of my football coaches, Allen Johnson of Sumter, S.C., rescued a lemon-and-white pointer named Molly. I adopted Molly and we terrorized quail whenever we had the chance.

Later, after college and marriage, I bought a German shorthaired pointer from an old high school friend in Oklahoma. Kate was a big bird-finding machine, but had no interest in water work or retrieving and her disposition left a little to be desired, especially with other dogs. When we had to put her down in October of 2011, our family mourned her passing.

And I decided to get serious. While working for a newspaper, I covered a NAVHDA winter test presented by the Carolinas Chapter at Johnson Marsh Shooting Preserve and the performance of those dogs on land and in water was impressive. The thought of one dog doing it all was intriguing. I began researching breeders in earnest, which led me to Friedelsheim German shorthaired



Dr. Jesse Grimes of Garner sends his German shorthaired pointer (Deutsch kurzhaar) Della into a pond for a water retrieve. A Deutsch kurzhaar is a German shorthaired pointer that is registered with the Deutsch Kurzhaar Verband in Germany and is tested to that breed club's standards. Opposite page, Vivian Wiese-Hansen of Raleigh, her German shorthair Tucker, and Scott Caldwell of Lillington discuss upland bird training during a Carolinas Chapter training day.

pointers (GSPs) in Maryland. I'd been visiting the website for a while and the site's photo galleries displayed a nice mix of upland and waterfowl hunts. It was apparent that a lot of thought went into the breeding program to produce versatile dogs. Photos also showed dogs interacting with the breeder's children. As the father of three girls, sound temperament in a dog was paramount, even more than conformation or drive.

When an announcement of a planned breeding was posted I contacted Donnie Ebersole, the owner. Several lengthy emails and phone conversations ensued, and about six months later my wife, Renee, and I drove home with Friedelsheim's Tar Heel Annie. We quickly joined the Carolinas Chapter and learned that training dogs—and training

dog owners—were the primary focuses of the Chapter. We also found out that the membership is as varied as the breeds owned.

The Professor

Jesse Grimes of Garner is one of the founding members of the Carolinas Chapter and has served in just about every position offered by the club. He helped found the chapter after answering an advertisement in a newspaper placed by the late Roy Thillberg of Charlotte, searching for people interested in starting one. That was in 1995, and Grimes, a poultry professor at N.C. State University, has been active ever since.

Growing up in Scotland Neck, Grimes was around bird dogs but hunted rabbits with beagles. He owned a springer spaniel in 1990 while in college and then a Deutsch drahthaar named Sally. Since then, he's owned a smorgasbord of mostly continental breeds—pointers, a French Brittany spaniel, two German wirehairs and a Deutsch kurzhaar.

Grimes personifies the majority of NAVHDA members. "My purpose in joining NAVHDA was to develop my dogs for hunting," he said. "The testing process is a journey for me. It tells me where I am in my training. NAVHDA is also for breeders to evaluate their breeding processes for each breed. The testing started with breeders. Now, it's as much a handlers' club."

The Soldier

Master Sergeant Scott Caldwell grew up with Labrador retrievers and "flushing" Brittany spaniels in upstate New York but is a relative newcomer to NAVHDA. "Back in the 1996–97 time frame I returned from deployment and my family bought me a guided preserve hunt with Tony Wooley at Cow Run Farms in Candor," said Caldwell, who is assigned to Special Operations Command at Fort Bragg. "That was truly the first time I actually hunted over versatile pointing dogs for upland game. I was just amazed. They were German shorthairs. I won't say they were perfectly trained, now that I'm older and have worked around other dogs. But I didn't realize a dog could be trained to that level."

Within a year, Caldwell had purchased a shorthair named Ruger that would break ice

to retrieve mallards in the morning and then work guided upland hunts the rest of the day. Eventually his work with Ruger would lead to training puppies and then to breeding short-hairs. Two years ago Caldwell purchased an 80-acre spread outside of Lillington that serves as the chapter's training grounds, where monthly informal training days are held. A large pond allows for water work and fields are used for upland and tracking work. A lot of training, especially while the dogs are young, is in simple obedience, lacking in many gun dogs. For some members this is their first versatile dog and questions abound.

"The gamekeepers in Europe wanted a true versatile dog that could do blood trailing and upland as well as water," he said. They bred and tested their dogs according to specific guidelines in Europe and the European testing is very strict. With that as a base, I think that NAVHDA has brought that strict testing to

our society. If you look at our average weekend hunter, I'd say about 85 percent don't have the time or money to have a Lab to retrieve ducks, an English pointer to hunt birds and a beagle to hunt rabbits or other small game. For a guy like me, NAVHDA offers how to train a dog."

Caldwell said that as a breeder and trainer, people would often purchase a puppy and say, "now what?" Caldwell would say "bring it back to me" or recommend a trainer. The Carolinas Chapter offers a third option.

The Dietitian

Not all chapter members are hunters. Vivian Wiese-Hansen, who works for the N.C. Dept of Health and Human Services as a nutrition program consultant, is a native of Quebec, Canada. She grew up with a father who favored Brittanys in the field. A cousin gave her Gina, a 7-year-old shorthair, in 2007. When Gina passed away she told herself "I will have another shorthair." And into her life came Tucker, a ball of energy from field trial stock in Washington. "Strong drive, longer

"Quite a bit of it is basic obedience, but you also have to understand and be able to read your dog so you'll know how to correct your dog..."



range and smart as a whip," she says of Tucker. "Very headstrong and covers a lot of ground."

There was a fairly steep learning curve for Wiese-Hansen as an owner, but lots of walks and runs and training helped.

"I've had a lot of fun and I wouldn't have traded these past two years for anything," she said, citing the chapter and Tucker for the experience. "I've had so much fun learning about my dog, what his potential is and helping him learn what to do, teaching him. But it's also a learning process for me because I didn't know anything about training a hunting dog. Quite a bit of it is basic obedience, but you also have to understand and be able to read your dog so you'll know how to correct your dog and know what is going to work. Having a dog and NAVDHA go hand-in-hand."

Wiese-Hansen said that a welcome offshoot of the monthly training days is how the chapter became a support group, which spawned a sense of belonging and friendship. The social aspect is appealing; folks of all types brought together through their dogs.

When Tucker was 10 weeks old, Wiese-Hansen met with Caldwell and formed a partnership with him; Caldwell teaching Wiese-Hansen while Wiese-Hansen was training Tucker. Caldwell would later handle Tucker



Above: Kevin Perez of Raleigh gets a kiss from his Weimaraner after hydrating the dog during the upland portion of its Utility test. **Right,** the author steadies his puppy Annie on point during a monthly NAVHDA training day.



to a NAVHDA Natural Ability Prize I. Wiese-Hansen now has enough experience to partner with other Chapter members for weekend training sessions as she readies Tucker for his Utility Test in December.

Getting There

Our Annie proved to be a precocious pup, full of drive and intelligence. You get what you pay for in breeding. Some of the training, like the upland work, was quite familiar, but some, like tracking, was not. I asked Grimes (one of the chapter's founders) about it and he suggested dragging a hot dog on a string to get her started. In only two hot dogs she was tracking nose on the ground. The little hints and tips from chapter members can make the training side so much easier. As she progressed I was sure the Natural Ability test was in the bag and I expected a Prize I. I mean, a dog only has to swim, hunt and point, and track, right? Even at a young 7 months I thought she'd

breeze through it. But as I learned, there are training days and there are testing days.

Our test morning opened with Annie lacerating her gum and scraping her chest on a metal pole when I took her out to exercise. She should have been on a leash. Rookie mistake. There were 10 puppies in her Natural Ability group, and we were No. 10 in the order. We started with upland work and she seemed to sense it was "go time," shaking off her soreness and carving up the bird field with nice quartering while garnering solid points. Some of the continental breeds are more methodical in the field than pointers or setters, but Annie is not a plodder. A small gallery followed us along with three judges. She aced the upland test. Next was swimming and she hesitated at first to go in after the rubber bumper. I glanced back at the gallery and my wife had her hands covering her face. That's never good. Annie eventually swam to the judges' satisfaction and also "passed" her coat and teeth exam. We broke for lunch and I had a chance to talk to one of the senior judges, Mark Whalen of Poolesville, Md.

"We want to see a dog do well; we want dogs to pass," he said between spoonfuls of chili. "But, we don't give out a NAVHDA prize like a Christmas present. A dog has to earn it.



A Utility [prize] dog should be able to waterfowl hunt in the morning, upland hunt in the afternoon and track a wounded deer the next morning.”

He went on to explain some of the Utility tests like the Duck Search, in which a dog is expected to independently swim and search up to 400 yards away for a duck that can't be seen and can get no help from the handler after being sent. In NAVHDA, silence is golden. “We want the dogs to use this,” Whalen said, tapping his nose.

After lunch was the pheasant track, when a pheasant is released to run away and the dog is brought to the release site to track. Annie had tracked hot dogs, dead ducks and live pheasants and I had a fair amount of confidence in her. But this was test day, and sure enough, she lost the track after 30 yards or so and when re-sent, couldn't get any further. At the end of her time I leashed her and we made our way back to Caldwell, where the handlers and guests gathered a little nervously to await the public announcement of prizes. As fate would have it, Annie had perfect scores until the pheasant track where she lost enough points to knock her back to a Prize II (although her 108 points out of a 112 would normally be a Prize I). Good enough for me at 7 months and hobbled some with minor injuries. Now we're looking toward Utility.

I didn't get a “bird dog” because I'm fooling myself about great upland hunting in North Carolina. But I love pointing breeds in general and shorthairs in particular. With grouse in the mountains, woodcock and snipe in the Piedmont, some quail Down East and the dove fields and duck swamps, one can parse together seven months of wing shooting in this state with a versatile dog. As much as I loved my two dogs before Annie, I didn't do them any favors on the training side. They were more like “sporks” than Swiss Army Knives. I want a canine Victorinox. A do-it-all dog. And with the help of the Carolinas Chapter of the North American Versatile Hunting Dog Association, good genes and some determination, we'll get there. ♦

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NAVHDA TESTS

In 1969, NAVHDA established a system of comprehensive tests that truly measure all aspects of work for the versatile hunting dog breeds. The trialing systems in use in North America before this time were established for specialists. The NAVHDA system provides for testing at various stages of maturity. Performance records are kept and made available through our Test Information Service since they provide invaluable information for both breeder and buyer alike.

NAVHDA chapters sponsor four kinds of tests:

The Natural Ability Test which is designed to evaluate the inherent natural abilities of young dogs and gain insight into their possible usefulness as versatile gun dogs. It rates seven important inherited abilities: nose, search, tracking, pointing, water, desire and cooperation.

The Utility Preparatory Test measures the dogs' development midway through their training toward the Utility Test.

The Utility Test evaluates trained dogs in water and field, before and after the shot, as finished versatile hunting companions as well as many other specific tasks.

The Invitational Test is the highest level of testing. Only dogs who have achieved a Prize I in Utility are eligible. This limits the entry to exceptional animals who have demonstrated a high level of training and tests their skills in the advanced work.

To be truly meaningful, tests for versatile hunting dogs must meet certain criteria. They must be conducted in an environment which reflects actual hunting conditions and situations. They must test the important qualities of a good versatile dog.

Judges must be knowledgeable, consistent and objective. All testing and evaluation is to be within the context of judging dogs as useful, productive hunting companions. NAVHDA tests have been designed with these requirements in mind. In addition, record keeping provides an accurate, complete performance evaluation on each dog tested. The results of these tests for specific breeds are available through the Test Information Service.

In order to eliminate direct competition between dogs, entrants in a NAVHDA test are judged one at a time, by three judges, with their performance scored against a standard. The only exception to this is the Invitational Test, in which dogs are braced (paired) in the field so each dog can demonstrate his willingness to back (honor another's point) and work effectively with another dog. Prizes are awarded on the basis of numerical scores achieved in the test. Each dog that meets or exceeds minimum standards in all areas of work is placed in one of three categories: Prize I, II or III. Prize I being the highest classification. If all dogs entered in a NAVHDA test perform well, all can receive a prize.

Source: navhda.org



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BREEDS OF THE CAROLINAS CHAPTER

Since 1969 more than 40,000 dogs have been tested in NAVHDA hunt tests. The German shorthaired pointer has accounted for 39.6 percent of dogs tested, followed by the German wirehaired pointer at 18.9 percent. The wirehaired pointing griffon is third at 9.9 percent. The rest of the top 10 are pudelpointer (6.2), small Munsterlander (4.3), Brittany spaniel (4), spinone (3.6), Vizsla (3.1) Weimaraner (2.9) and large Munsterlander (2.7).

1. German Shorthaired Pointer

The origin of the German shorthaired pointer is not clear, but the source of the breed seems to have been the German bird dog, related to the old Spanish pointer, and various crossings with local German scent hounds and track and trail dogs. When the Germans introduced the English pointers to lend elegance to the German shorthaired pointer prototype, the result was a utility dog that combined sporting virtue with clean lines, good looks and sound temperament. (American Kennel Club) Males, measured at the withers, 23 to 25 inches and 55 to 70 pounds. Females 21 to 23 inches. Weight 45 to 60 pounds. (German Shorthaired Pointer Club of America)

2. German Wirehaired Pointer

Most of the early wirehaired pointers represented a combination of griffon, stichelhaar (both mixtures of pointer, foxhound, pudelpointer, and Polish water dog), Pudelpointer (a cross of poodle and pointer) and German shorthair. The Germans continued to breed the distinctive traits of pointer, foxhound, and poodle until they had created what is today the German wirehair, a constitutionally tough, courageous breed which points and retrieves equally well on land and in water. (AKC) Males from 24 to 26 inches, and 55 to 70 pounds. Females smaller, but not less than 22 inches, and 45 to 60 pounds. (United Kennel Club)

3. Wirehaired Pointing Griffon

Griffon-like dogs have existed throughout history, but exact origins are uncertain. The modern history of the breed, however, has been well documented. Dutchman Eduard Korthals was an avid hunter and desired a dog that could hunt over a variety of terrain, so he developed a breeding program to create a versatile new sporting breed. In less than two decades, Korthals had fixed the new breed he called the wirehaired pointing griffon, wrote the standard and formed a griffon club. The "griff" is easy to train and devoted to family and has a friendly temperament. (AKC) Height range for males is 21½ to 23½ inches. Height range for females is 19½ to 21½ inches. (UKC)



4. Weimaraner

Originally known as the Weimar pointer (derived from the court that sponsored the breed), the Weimaraner is a product of selective German breeding and comes from the same general stock as other German hunting breeds. It is believed to be a descendant of the bloodhound and was originally used to hunt wolves, deer and bear. Over the years because of the rarity of bigger game in his surroundings, the Weimaraner adapted to become a bird dog and personal hunting companion. (AKC) Males, 25 to 27 inches; females, 23 to 25 inches. (Weimaraner Club of North America)

5. Spinone Italiano

The spinone Italiano, or Italian pointer, is Italy's all-purpose hunting dog. The dog is a pointer of the old school, that is, a rather slow-footed dog similar to those used before the era of wing shooting. It is estimated to be a cross of coarse-haired Italian setters, bred with those left by Greek traders and others from the Adriatic coast, in addition to crosses with the white mastiff and perhaps French griffons. An excellent retriever by nature and an experienced hunter on any terrain, the spinone is robust, sociable and docile. spinones range in size from 22 to 27 inches tall at the shoulder. (AKC)



6. Bracco Italiano

The bracco Italiano is one of only two native Italian gundog breeds, the other being the Spinone, and they both belong to the Hunt, Point and Retrieve Group of dogs. The bracco is a classic and ancient breed, with paintings and writings about it dating back to the fourth and fifth centuries B.C., and is considered an antecedent of many of today's modern sporting dogs, more specifically European pointing breeds. The bracco Italiano originated in Italy and is believed in most circles to be a cross between either a segugio Italiano (a coursing hound), or sighthounds brought to Italy by Phoenician traders from Egypt, and the Asiatic mastiff or Molossus. The bracco ranges in height from 21.5 to 26.5 inches and weighs from 55 to 88 pounds. (Bracco Club of America)

7. Pudelpointer

The first cross of the pudel and an English pointer to establish the new breed took place in Germany in 1881. The sire was "Tell," an English pointer belonging to Kaiser Frederick III, the dam was a German hunting pudel bitch "Molly," owned by Hegewald, a famous Teutonic author on the subject of hunting dogs.

The idea behind this breeding was to combine the outstanding natural working abilities of the two great specialists in one dog: The intelligence, water love, retrieving instinct, easy trainability and willingness to please, wrapped into the protective coat of the Pudel with the unending desire to hunt, birdiness, pointing instinct, field nose and endurance of the English pointer.

Since the pudel proved to be the stronger breed in passing its genes, many more pointers were introduced into the breeding program to arrive at the breed, as it is known today. During the first 30 years, only 11 pudels were used against well over 80 pointers. From then on, only occasional re-introductions of pointers were undertaken, especially after the two World Wars severely depleted the breeding stock. (Pudelpointer Club of North America) Pudelpointers are usually 22 to 25 inches in height; females are usually 50 to 60 pounds, males 60 to 70.