

TO TRIAL, OR NOT TO TRIAL - THAT IS THE QUESTION

By : Tim Powell

Beginning this spring for the first time in this country our Epagneul Bretons will have the opportunity to compete in European style UKC sanctioned field trials. The question in many owners and breeder's minds is, do I really want to trial, and is this trial format the arena in which to compete with our Breton gun dogs.

The newly adopted UKC field trial rules begin by saying, "The goal of gun dog field trials in the United States of America is the improvement of the pointing breeds by the recognition of the best representatives of the breeds". This is a lofty goal to which we all aspire. The question is simply: Does THIS field trial format reliably reward the best Breton gun dogs that will potentially improve our breeding programs? My answer to that is a resounding YES! While acknowledging that there is no perfect field trial format, the UKC standards, which are heavily formatted after the F.C.I. (French Trial Rules), adopt many of the best aspects of existing field trials, and exclude those that do not reward the traits that we look for in our Bretons. Examples of this would be:

1. **ACCURATE HUNTING SITUATION-** The goal of these competitions is to reward the best hunting dog. Accordingly, the entire heat is run in a hunting situation with game present, with the associated problems for the dog (i.e. utilizing the wind, hunting at a range suitable to the cover, hunting to objectives, etc.).
2. **GROUNDNS –** The trial is to be run on a continuous course, where, if possible, each dog/brace is assigned a separate area to hunt. The surface area must be large enough so that the dogs will not cover it more than twice any day during the trial. This is similar to the big horseback trials but adjusted to a walking/hunting format.
3. **WILD BIRDS MAY BE UTILIZED-** Trials utilizing liberated birds do serve to evaluate a dog's nose and hunting ability; however, it is important to note that to be designated Champion of the Field "CHF" a dog must demonstrate the bird sense to handle wild birds and to have at least one first place in a trial conducted on wild birds.
4. **JUDGING STANDARDS –** While it is necessary for a dog to have at least one point on birds to gain a placement, the quantity of birds found is not the sole criteria judges will reward, but rather, the over-all quality of performance considering desire, nose, style, handling, and training.

The question will invariably arise as to why the dogs must be steady to wing and shot, as this is not typically the way we, as American hunters, tend to hunt our dogs. First, it should be pointed out that the novice stake requires only that the dog be steady to wing. It has been my experience in thirty plus years of hunting with pointing dogs that a dog that will stop to flush, and stay steady to wing is a great asset, and greatly appreciated by hunters. Taking it to a higher level, the dogs that we would elevate to field champion status should demonstrate the ability and aptitude to receive the intensive training required for steadiness to wing and shot. Lastly, we must consider the fact that this is the standard that the French have used all these years to reward and perpetuate the traits that we love in our Bretons. Ideally, field trial winners in this country should be fully prepared to successfully compete in France.

To trial, or not to trial-your decision. Personally I have found over the years that field trialing my dogs outside of the hunting season keeps me and the dogs in shape, provides much camaraderie and training opportunities, can be just plain fun, and every once in a GREAT , GREAT while, a TRUE champion does emerge. Do you know any prospects ?

AUTHORS' NOTE : This article was originally published in Issue 19 (Spring 2004) in the FBGDA Magazine. On Aprui 23 , 2006 Vernon de L' Escarbot completed the first CHF – Champion of the Field with his win at Choteau , Montana on wild birds. Congratulations to Mark Dinsmore , and " Vern " – Our first true Field Champion.