

## Reflections on Field Trials at Seventy

By Tom Word

I come to pointing-dog field trials from a different perspective—different in that I have seldom been a competitor or owner or breeder of a competing dog. I learned what a bird dog could—and could not—do walking behind them with a shotgun in the vanished era of plentiful wild birds—quail and grouse—in my native Virginia. For the first thirty adult years of my life, field trials were a sideline—I went to them in Virginia or North Carolina on weekends, fall and spring (outside hunting season) mostly as a spectator. I followed the game in the *American Field*.

About twenty years ago when wild birds were fast dwindling, my interest in trials grew. I had the good fortune to meet Ted Baker who invited me to report the Florida Open All-Age Championship because of a write-up I did of a Scotland grouse hunt where we met (my one and only such hunt, as the guest of a grateful client). That launched my career as a field-trial reporter, a second calling that has given me enormous pleasure and opportunity to experience nature, animals and people from a perspective uniquely suited to a storyteller, the role I love best. The stories may be fiction or nonfiction; the field-trial game provides bountiful material.

Why so? Field trials are, after all, just a diversion, a pastime. Yes, a diversion they are, but they are based on things at the heart of human and animal nature, the primordial need to hunt, teamed with a dog and a horse, to hunt for quarry that flushes and flies and thrills.

This tied to the competition makes field trials unique for a storyteller. The dogs and the men and women who breed, train, handle, and scout them, the horses, the

owners, the lands, and the game birds all combine in a dramatic panorama that for me provided great pleasure and storytelling opportunity.

From that first assignment reporting the Florida, I went on to report the Invitational, the Continental (Derby and All-Age), the Amateur Free-For-All, the Open Free-For-All and National Derby, the Oklahoma All-Age, the National Amateur Pheasant, the Southeastern Open All-Age, the Lee County, the Kentucky Open All-Age, the North Dakota Open All-Age Classic, The Montgomery, the Alabama Shooting Dog Championship, and other trials, most several times. I recite this to tell you what a privilege it was for me to ride these places and see these dramas, with a duty to watch it all. That is the gift of reporting, the duty (and therefore the opportunity) of watching it all.

Reporting teaches you, sometimes slowly, sometimes abruptly. You learn first the lies, first among them: “Come report our trial. We will have two good safe horses for you.” You learn the 10% Rule: Only 10% of performances you see are anything close to worthy. You learn professional dog folk have a tough row to hoe, and to admire them for their persistence in the face of long odds.

You learn to love the great dogs, to marvel at their talent, at how they can thrill you. You learn to see what a talented, hardworking dog person can do with a talented dog. You learn what hard work and devotion—call that obsession— can achieve with a talented dog.

For the most part, you see how judges strive to reward the best dog on its day, regardless of its handler or owner. You see a little that doesn't meet that ideal, but not much.

What has been a disappointment? Only one thing. The *American Field's* banning of Miller's White Powder and Miller's Date Line from the gene pool of pointers. This has left in my heart a great sadness. And I have never owned a Miller dog. Two blameless dogs, the best sires of their decade, were banned from the gene pool for the benefit of their principal competition. But that competition has yet to produce a single winner of any endurance all-age stake.