



On The Hunt

Historical records indicate that field trials, highly competitive events at which hunting dogs compete against one another, began in 1876 in Britain but didn't hit American soil until 1884 near Memphis, Tenn. In Alabama, bird dog field trials became prevalent in the 1900s when dogs and horses were transported to trial sites by train since there were no \$40,000 trucks and fancy horse trailers back then.

Big Business

Union Springs, Ala., where a life-size statue of an English Pointer adorns the town square, is known as the "Bird Dog Field Trial Capital of the World." Bullock County, home to thousands of acres of prime game country, bird dogs, and the men and women who participate in the sport of field trialing, hosts the annual National Amateur Free-for-All each February.

Sanctioned in 1951, the National Amateur Free-for-All was held on Sedgefields Plantation, then a 14,000-acre hunting preserve owned in the late 1920s by appliance magnate L.B. Maytag, who was passionate about quail hunting. In 1931, Maytag made the land available for the championship each year. Thankfully, other owners since then have made the ground available for the championship. Hundreds of people and their steeds still gather each year to ride and watch lanky, long-legged bird dogs compete for prizes and to just have fun and fellowship. One of several area field trials – some professional – held in Bullock County, the Free-for-All draws people from all over the country and abroad whose visit helps boost the local economy in the Black Belt county.

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Originally, only pointers and setters (or "bird dogs") competed in field trials. Today, additional breeds of dogs like spaniels and retrievers are entered in many different types of trials nationwide. The main agenda of bird dog (all pointing breeds) field trials is to test the display of a bird dog's talent to point out where quail are hiding in the fields.

The "gallery" of riders, judges and officials and dog handlers, all on horseback, follow the dogs over the hills and through

the woods. The spectacular sight of a dog coming to a standstill, perfectly frozen in stance and not moving a muscle, with tail straight and rigid pointing out a covey of quail, perhaps huddled in a corn field or patch of dense brush, thrills the onlookers. The gallery follows to where the judges will confirm the dog's point, grading it on speed and agility, stance, posture, handling and the ability to seek out the birds through scent but not flush them up. Much like a beauty pageant, dogs showing class and manners vie for the championship. Winners are often rewarded with prizes, trophies, and the crown of being the trial's best.

Longtime field trialer Dr. Glen "Doc" Sanders of Fitzpatrick, Ala., said he remembers the early days when he and his father met the train in Bullock County to fetch their horses. "Back in those days it was amazing we even got to the fields," said Sanders. "But once we did, we rode until sundown and had a grand time." Sanders, who is in his 70s, still competes with his bird dogs and enjoys the fellowship of the trials, watching the dogs run and riding in the galleries.

Field trialing is a sport and favorite pastime of Sanders' good friends Rick and Sam Stallings, owners of Quicksilver Kennels. The kennels were named for Ricks' mother, Mary Nell Stallings' Quicksilver Pink lipstick. Rick's father and field trial legend, the late Mr. J. F. "Tobe" Stallings, shared his love for bird dogs with his oldest son Rick who carries on Mr. Tobe's field trialing legacy. The Stallings' bird dogs have been winning championships for many years. It takes hard work, lots of time and a considerable amount of money.

Sanders, the Stallings, and many others are looking forward to having a new location for field trials in the future. The

Alabama Forever Wild Program and the ADCNR's State Lands Division have completed the acquisition of the historic State Cattle Ranch in Hale County, consisting of 3,988 acres. "We are restoring the grassland prairie habitat on this land which will likely see a significant amount of recreational use in the form of field trials, birding trails, horseback riding trails, recreational fishing, and public hunting," said State Lands Division Assistant Director Greg Lein. "All of these activities will be of benefit to the local communities and their respective economies." Look for an article on the State Cattle Ranch facility in an upcoming issue.

Quail Habitat

Managing land for quail is beginning to see resurgence. Ensuring plenty of open fields and fallow land, weedy-brushy fence-rows, brush and natural plants that quail coveys thrive in is an essential part of field trialing. But, since the quail population in Alabama has declined, most field trial hosts must purchase pen-raised quail to release on their property in order to have a successful field trial.

The United States Department of Agriculture announced in 2004 that the Northern Bobwhite Quail Habitat Initiative would be within the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP). The initiative is designed to provide financial resources to landowners with active cropland who want more quail back on the farm. Visit outdooralabama.com for more information on this initiative or to download and read "Ecology and Management of the Bobwhite Quail in Alabama," a publication for landowners and land managers published by ADCNR. 