



Photos by Molly Schlachter

## ASK THE PRO

### managing dog behavior for competition

By Paul Sletten

ONE OF THE MOST COMMON PROBLEMS we all deal with is managing our dog's balance of behavior between training and competing. Countless issues seem to arise at competitions when we have no way to correct our dog's behavior. Poor manners and uncooperative behavior can grow worse and worse if left unchecked.

I'd like to make some general comments about this issue and some suggestions to address the problem.

No matter how we try, we cannot fully duplicate the sights, sounds, smells, and change of routine that our dog's immediately recognize when at a competition. This can greatly stimulate our dogs to a level that is never seen in training. I believe this is the root of most of the problems that seem to crop up. I always hear people make the comment, "He knows he doesn't have the collar on!" What that tells me is the dog does perfect work in training and if you showed up to a competition with a collar on, they would perform beautifully! We know that is probably not the case. However, regardless of the reason, we have to manage their behaviors and hopefully shape their habits to achieve a desirable outcome.

Many issues that arise while competing are simply the effect of being in an uncontrolled environment too many times before good habits are formed in training; such as a

derby dog cheating the water when they do not fully understand de-cheating drills in training. If your dog does not yet have the desirable habits in training, the dog most likely will not have them while competing.

Another issue arises when your dog does not have the desirable habits formed in training, and they seem to slip away while competing. If left unchecked, these poor behaviors can quickly become a real problem, perhaps for the lifetime of the dog. It is our job to recognize this when it happens and deal with it. If our derby dog is beginning to cheat the water while competing, perhaps we should pick them up during the act. The best medicine may be to not let them complete the behavior, but work on the behavior in training and take a weekend or two (or more if necessary) off from competition.

Often times issues will arise with an older dog after a seemingly cooperative start to their career. These issues can be even more difficult to fix, as these dogs may have run dozens of weekend trials or tests and fully understand when they are in training and when they are not.

So now that we understand the problem, what do we do to fix or at least manage it? Given the fact that dogs will, sooner or later, understand when they're away from training, we have to bridge the gap between the two.

It is my belief that as long as the dog is willing to make the mistake in training, we can deal with the problem.

For example, a common problem may be having a dog that is well behaved in training and creeps at the line while competing. If a dog is willing to creep a little in training, I can deal with modification of the behavior.

The trouble arises when the dog creeps at the competition, but sits steady as a rock in training. Often they get worse and worse at competition and better behaved in training. They know the difference, and we throw our hands in the air and say, "Fido never creeps in training!" Well if we're going to make it better, Fido has to creep in training! Perhaps we can find a happy medium. Let's first try to make him 50% better at the trial, and not 100%. Let's not make him pay the ultimate price with harsh corrections every time he twitches in training. Let's perhaps let him get happy feet a bit, walk away from the line and giving him just enough correction to pay attention if he doesn't heel with you. Heel Fido 180 degrees and do a blind before the marks. Perhaps correct him for not sitting in the holding blind well. Make him sit halfway to the line while you continue walking.

The point I'm emphasizing is that we are correcting the dog on other issues that may relate to the problem, but the dog doesn't perceive it as such. We can raise the dog's level of awareness, which will make him creep less, and he didn't even get corrected for it! It is possible for us to 'tighten up' the dog's behavior, and have him willing to respond and creep less without correcting him for creeping! Now we have a dog with a free mind, who is willing to make the mistake in training and we can work on it. He's not just making the mistake on the weekend.

Let's examine the water cheating issue. Managing a dog's willingness to do a swim can usually be known before we get to the trial/test. I see many people who will deliver a harsh correction for a water cheat a day or two before competition and feel like they

"got him good." I argue that you should feel better about your dog's behavior if the dog is willing to make the right decision in training without a correction. Now we have good habits being formed. Look for the dog to do the right thing, simplifying if necessary, and for the dog to feel good about it! Let's do some cheaty singles and look for success and not look to correct harshly on the last bird of a quad. When the dog is responding correctly on singles, do doubles, etc. Continually showing the dog the proper way and having the dog feel good about doing it will pay far more dividends than them doing out of fear of correction. Fear of correction will quickly melt away on the weekend.

Then begins the cycle:

- *Fear of correction during the week.*
- *Proper behavior during the week.*
- *Weekend arrives, fear of correction vanishes.*
- *Poor behavior repeated.*

Hopefully this will give you some food for thought on your training program. Evaluate your dog's strengths and weaknesses. Make a game plan, perhaps some time off from competing if necessary. Plan the corrections you may be looking for, and avoid the "normal ones." Shoot for success during the week. Best of luck! ■

## Pine Edge Retrievers

### Paul Sletten

Paul was born and raised in Wisconsin and currently resides in Montello, WI, while wintering in North Mississippi. Paul started professionally as an assistant for Andy Attar in 1996 and went on to start Pine Edge Retrievers in 2006. "I am lucky to have a wonderful wife, Sarah, supportive parents and a great friend/assistant, Jess Bentley."