

The Hunting Dog Promise and the Madness of Cynthia

By Michael McCracken



Cynthia's special bond with her dogs were a bit of a distraction as Bruce worked them in the field. She was banned to the "penalty box" atop the motorhome.

Don't say things. What you are stands over you the while, and thunders so that I cannot hear what you say to the contrary.

—Ralph Waldo Emerson

April, the PROMISE. My wife Cynthia and I met Bruce and Jennifer Shaffer of Almost Heaven German Shorthaired Pointers at a dog show. They were new to the conformation show ring, and some friends brought them over to see our show dogs. Bruce mentioned that the dogs appeared to have bird potential. He volunteered to work with them, saying they should have no trouble finishing their Junior Hunter titles. We were show people — you know, coats, ties, skirts, shoes to run in, makeup, bait in the pockets. This would be a new experience.

On May 31, our four dogs were introduced to birds — Ch. Bleugras Treffen v MiCyn, Ch. SleepyCrk NikidaBleu v MiCyn,

Fieldfine XcaliBard MiCyn and Fieldfine's DotsGeall v MiCyn ('Elle'). The only birds our dogs knew before this was the cooked chicken variety. All the dogs showed promise — the result of good breeding and good athletic ability.

The training progressed to the first time off lead. Bruce took XcaliBard into the field, and was out about 400 yards when he dropped the lead. Bard was freeeee! He worked fine and listened to the whistle. Bruce then unhooked him. They walked for a while and then headed back toward Cynthia.

She was a wreck, with her babies running loose in the field. As Bruce got closer, he saw Cynthia looking at him through binoculars — caught in the act. When he got closer I asked, "You're not going to break her in easy, are you?" Bruce just laughed.

Cynthia's special talent is connecting with the dogs. But this mental connection was distracting them in the field. Bruce and I decided that the dogs did not need the distraction; Cynthia had to be sent to the "penalty box." The penalty box was on top of the motorhome. So up she went. Sitting in her chair, umbrella keeping the sun off, drink at her side, she could have been any fan at a NASCAR race. But she intently followed her dogs with her binoculars. By the way, the dogs worked fine.

Fast forward to the hunt tests. All four dogs had a grand total of about 12 hours of training, but Bruce held firm to his promise — the dogs should have no trouble earning their Junior Hunter titles.

Seneca, Md. The inaugural Hunt Test, Day 1. The first Junior brace was our 7-year-old 'Treffen.' The Hunt gods frowned on him as he flushed a wild covey of quail.



'Bard,' nicknamed the "Birdinator," was the first to earn his Junior Hunter title, in four straight tests.

With his brain overloaded, he didn't qualify this day. 'Bard' and Elle passed their tests. The Hunt gods frowned again as 'Niki' got her first sight and smell of a mule. Possibly it was the smell of, well, something else, but we will blame it on the mules. Niki would not go around the mule. The score — Mule 1, Niki 0.

Bruce explained the Hunt gods and a number of variables that can affect the test; Cynthia started her slow slide into madness.

Day 2. Everyone passed their tests. So, the first test weekend under her belt, Cynthia had six successful legs on the four dogs.

Rimersburg, Pa. The second Hunt Test weekend. Seven successful legs, with Bard finishing his Junior Hunter title in four straight tests. Bard is an awesome, big-running dog, nicknamed the "Birdinator." I did say seven successful legs — the Hunt gods puffed their cheeks and blew the sweet smell of horse manure right up the nose of Elle. With a snout full of manure, she couldn't smell a bird if it were perched on her muzzle.



Field trainer Bruce Shaffer, pictured with 'Elle,' told Cynthia and Michael McCracken that all four of their Shorthairs could earn Hunt titles. His love of the dogs combined with his talent as a trainer no doubt helped him keep his promise.

Cynthia's madness grew. After two Hunt Test weekends, we had one Junior Hunter and three dogs with three legs each.

Bruce's promise was coming true — the dogs were all working great. Would we finish the others this year? Before the weather turned cold? Before Hunt Tests conflicted with shows? Before Cynthia went off the deep end?

Hustle, Va. Day 1. Our third and hopefully last Hunt Test weekend for a while. The first day Niki and Elle fulfilled Bruce's promise. Each successfully passed her fourth leg, earning Junior Hunter titles! The 7-year-old show champion, Treffen, Cynthia's special dog — down in flames! The oldest and most mature of the dogs, Treffen decided he was going to go for a run. He ran immediately to the bird box and decided, "There are all the birds; I'm done. Catch me if you can!" He failed the test miserably.

Day 2. Three of the four dogs have earned their Junior Hunter titles. Treffen has to work one more time. Treffen was excited, Bruce was determined, I was expectant... Cynthia was going crazy.

Off they went. Cynthia and I were watching intently when we saw the Field Marshall's mule spirit off out of sight. What we saw next was enough to have Cynthia's toes gripping the brink. Treffen came trotting back toward us — alone! No trainer, no judges, just Treffen. Is he so far off course that he's at the starting point again? ARGGGH. Then word came over the walkie talkies that the judge had been bucked off



The four MiCyn winners proved that show dogs can be beautiful and also capable of performing the function for which they were originally bred. 'Niki,' 'Bard,' 'Treffen' and 'Elle' are pictured with Cynthia McCracken and Jennifer and Bruce Shaffer.

her mule. Great. What next? What does this mean? Is she OK? *Did Treffen pass?*

The story unfolded later when everyone returned to the group. The judge was life-flighted to the hospital fearing something serious. It was reported the next day that she had a couple of broken ribs. She is a true dog person. While lying there in pain, she gasped and kept repeating, "Both dogs passed." So Treffen finished his Junior Hunter quest in the most trying of circumstances.

Why did Treffen come trotting back alone to Cynthia? This is one of those amazing dog stories that dog people nod and smile at, and non-dog people find hard to believe. When the judge felt the effect of gravity and landed hard, Bruce rushed to her aid. Treffen was spooked by a riderless mule running past him, probably still bucking. Treffen was upset and confused. What did he do? He went to Bruce, trusting him for security and direction. Bruce was focusing on the injured judge, and told Treffen, "Go home, go find your Mom." Since I wasn't there, I don't know how

long Treffen thought about the command but he came straight back to Cynthia. He trotted right to her and stopped.

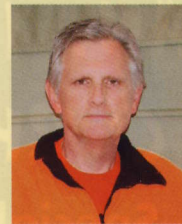
Cynthia's madness has subsided. All four dogs have their JH titles, proving show dogs can hunt, AND that 7-year-old show champions can indeed hunt.

We still continue to show, but we now own blaze orange vests, orange caps, whistles and training collars. You know — blaze orange looks good on me.

Bruce Shaffer — you kept your promise. You are a man of your word. Thanks.

We give dogs time we can spare, space we can spare and love we can spare. And in return, dogs give us their all. It's the best deal man has ever made. — M. Acklam. **DR**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Michael McCracken and his wife, Cynthia, have been showing dogs under the MiCyn kennel name since 1977. Starting in California and for the past 10 years in Pennsylvania, they have finished numerous champions in their primary breed, German Shorthaired Pointers, and Petits Bassetts Griffons Vendéens. The McCrackens are expanding into hunt and field trial performance events. When Michael is not working with dogs or being an amateur photo-journalist, he is a management consultant. The author can be contacted through his website at www.micynvpack.com



The four MiCyn Junior Hunters: Fieldfine Xcalibard MiCyn JH (top left), Ch. Bleugras Treffen v MiCyn JH (top right), Ch. SleepyCrk NikidaBleu v MiCyn JH (bottom left) and Fieldfine's DotsGeall v MiCyn (bottom right) with trainer Bruce Shaffer.