

Scott Chafee: A History of Excellence

By Bob Owen

When one thinks of grouse trials or cover dogs, one of the top handlers and breeders that comes to mind is Scott Chaffee from Clare, Michigan. He has accumulated over 200 wins and 33 championship placements, more than any other cover dog handler in Michigan history. Scott is a laid-back, soft-spoken gentleman with a great passion for his dogs and the grouse trial sport. Recently, he showed me around Pioneer Kennels and his training grounds, which indeed, are great places to start and build up a champion. The area is picture perfect and surrounded by mature woods, which makes it ideal for training on grouse and woodcock.

We eventually moved our way into the pole barn where Scott has pictures of some of the great setters that he has handled over the years. It was impressive to see pictures of some of the champion setters that have come and gone as well as those still competing today. Over coffee, we discussed how Scott acquired his love for pointing dogs as a kid, growing up hunting pheasants in Michigan. It was his responsibility to take care of the dogs, so he figured he would try his hand at training them a bit as well. Everything, in the way of training, was just trial and error at that stage in his life. The further Scott got involved in bird dogs, the more he started hearing about the grouse trials. Pretty soon he found himself absorbed by copies of the *American Field* owned by Pop Melton, a friend of

Scott's dad. Scott tried to soak up all of the information that he possibly could about cover dogs. Scott attributes his love for competition in the trials to his involvement in college sports as a basketball and baseball player.

After college, in 1978, Scott bought his first grouse trial English setter from a gentleman named Dan Casteel, also from Clare. He had to have a setter because that's what he had growing up, and everything he heard and read, at the time, said that they were the prominent dog in the grouse woods. The dog's name was Pioneer Pat Finder, who was out of The Pat Finder, another Michigan-bred grouse champion. Scott trialed him quite a bit and was able to obtain four wins. He went through a couple more dogs, and then landed upon his foundation dog, Pioneer Train, who went on to win several trials and a runner up championship. Scott was gaining quite a bit of exposure at this time and had others asking him to run their dogs. At that point, in 1985, Scott decided to turn pro. His foundation dog became an excellent producer. One of his offspring was the much talked about Pioneer Train Jake.

Pioneer Train Jake's dam was Andy's Sugar'n Spice, owned by Andy Eaton. Scott handled Jake to

his first championship win in 1986 at the Lake States Grouse Championship. Jake and Scott came back the following year to repeat their Lake States victory. Jake also went on to obtain a runner up championship



*3X Champion and 1990 – 1991
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and has produced over 60 winners with a total of well over 300 wins.

Since that time, Scott's trialing career has exploded as he has won numerous championships and runner up championship in cover dog trials. He has handled and trained, in most cases, the likes of 3x Ch. Country Express, 2x Ch. Pioneer Train Jake, 2x Ch. Cracker Jack Train (who was known for finding birds when no other dog could), 2x Ch. Jet's Aimee, Ch. Pioneer Ghost (who had a remarkable 35 wins), Ch. Kalamity Seekah (who was injured by a dog attack in her prime), Ch. The Full Train, Ch. Grouse Hollow Gus, Ch. Hickory Run Buddy, and currently he is handling 3x Ch. Pioneer Will, who just won this year's Grand National Grouse and Woodcock Invitational in Gladwin, Michigan at the remarkable age of nine.

Pioneer Will is Scott's latest multi-champion out



of Achy Breaky Jakee and a Pioneer Ghost Dam. He is co-owned by Michael Halley of Iron Mountain, Michigan and Jack Harang of Metairie, Louisiana. Scott said that Will is the type of dog that nobody ever counts out of the competition. Until he runs his brace, the trial isn't over! Scott is also very grateful that Will won two prestigious awards this year. He received the Michael Seminatore award, given to the best cover dog setter of the year, and he also was the recipient of the William Harden Foster award, given

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to the top cover dog in North America. Scott believes he probably could have accomplished even more with Will, but he willingly gave up some of his travel time in order to spend it with his wife, Tammy, and their two daughters, Amber and Shannon.

Scott explained that people often don't realize what it takes to become a cover dog champion. The dog has to be in top physical condition, because the heats are an hour long. While running through the woods with only a bell on, against a brace mate, at top speed, the dog must slam on point when it makes game. Grouse spook very easily, so if a dog gets too close, the bird will fly off and the dog will have an unproductive point. So, the nose on a grouse dog must be remarkable in order to be able to wind a bird, and hold a bird while going top speed. Once the dog goes on point, it must remain steady to wing and shot. Once released, the dog must stay with the handler and not chase the bird that just flushed. Another extraordinary thing about the grouse trials

is that a dog must have a forward ground pattern of about 200 yards or so and still check back with the handler, trying to remain within a two o'clock and 10 o'clock pattern on the course. The dog may encounter deer, coons, porcupines, etc., in the woods, but it still must stay with, or navigate with, the handler. These are just a few of the characteristics upon which the grouse trial dogs are judged.

Just in case you're wondering, the following characteristics are what Scott looks for when clients come to him to campaign their dog. The dogs must have drive, hopefully a naturally forward pattern, high head, high crackling tail, smooth gait and trainability. Most of all, though, the dog must have a natural tendency to find birds. If the dog does not possess these traits, Scott is truthful, and informs the owner that the decision for trialing, with that particular dog, is not advisable and would be a waste of time and money. He says that sometimes he has to force himself to be hard-hearted. If he doesn't see a champion while looking at a dog for trialing, that dog will not become a member of Scott's string.

Scott could not pinpoint any greatest moment, but said that through his trialing career, his earlier championships with Pioneer Train Jake were certainly very exciting to him. He also felt the need to mention Pioneer Will's latest achievement as the Grouse and Woodcock Invitational champion as a great highlight of his career. Will, at nine years of age, was braced against his younger full sister, Centerfold Rose, owned by Dr. Harold Holmes. The gallery was packed full of anxious spectators and Scott could feel the excitement in the air. After a tough and very close race, Will was named the champion, and his younger sister was runner up.

Scott Chaffee, owner Jack Harang, and Seminatore Award committee member Fred Wills pose along with 2X Champion Cracker Jack Train as the dog is awarded the 1992 – 1993 Seminatore Award during the running of the Northeastern Woodcock Championship in Rhode Island on Labor Day weekend 1993.



Scott's tip to newcomers to the cover dog trial world is to read all that you can get your hands on regarding the trials, and then get to one and actually see what goes on. He says that the grouse trials have always had very kind people who will answer any questions that you may have. If, after reading and viewing, you still have the desire to pursue it, then go for it! Scott didn't hesitate to let me know that this has been a very rewarding journey for him and he has made some lasting friendships along the way.



Scott poses Champion Kalamity Seekah next to artist John Curry and the dog's portrait which she received as the winner of the Fruchey Classic.

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