

Drama in the Woods:

The 2004 Grouse and Woodcock Invitational

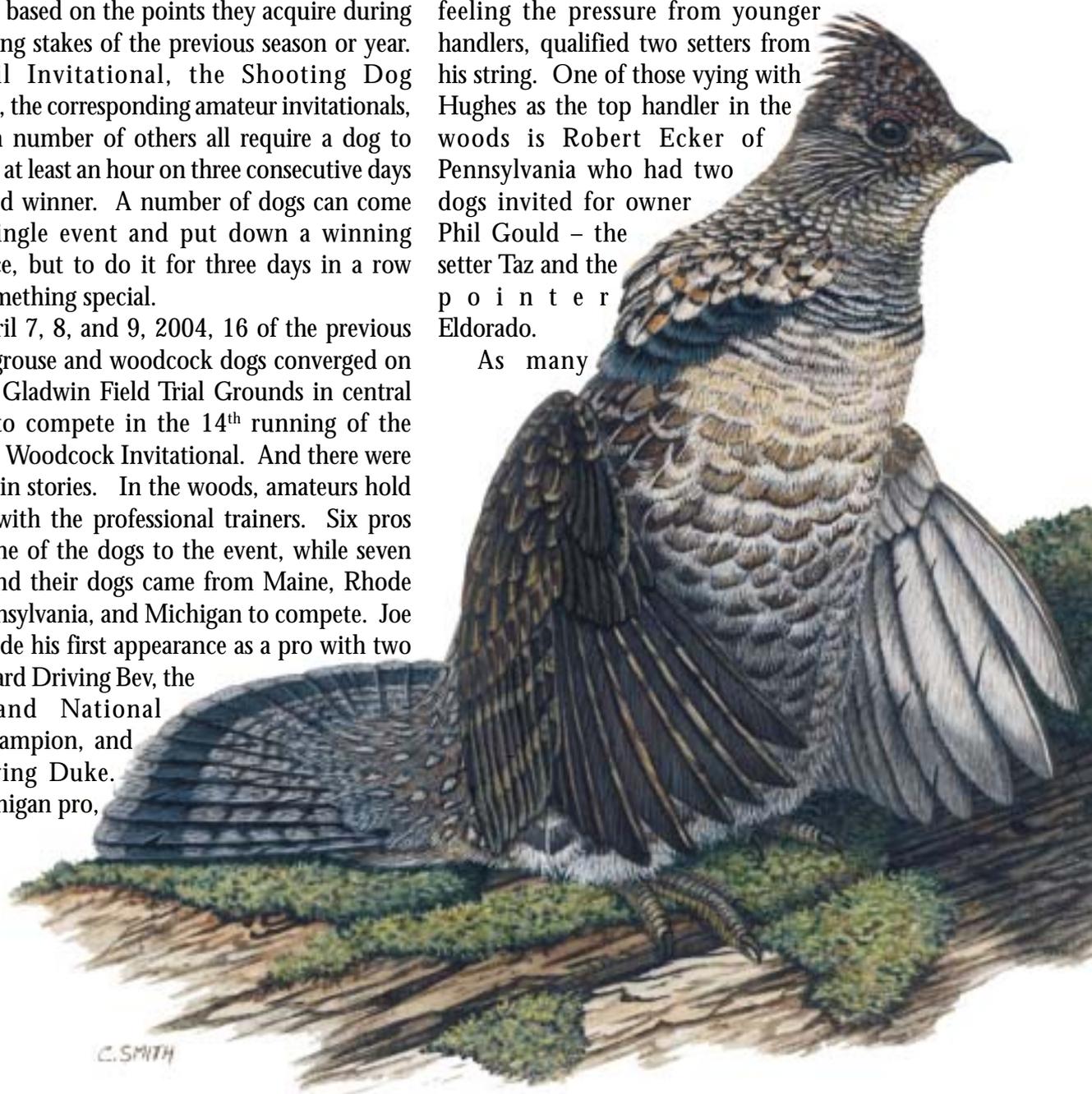
By Craig Doherty

Maybe the toughest field trials to win are the invitational events. They all follow a similar format. The best dogs on the various circuits are invited to participate in an invitational based on the points they acquire during the qualifying stakes of the previous season or year. The Quail Invitational, the Shooting Dog Invitational, the corresponding amateur invitationals, as well as a number of others all require a dog to perform for at least an hour on three consecutive days to be named winner. A number of dogs can come out in a single event and put down a winning performance, but to do it for three days in a row requires something special.

On April 7, 8, and 9, 2004, 16 of the previous year's best grouse and woodcock dogs converged on the storied Gladwin Field Trial Grounds in central Michigan to compete in the 14th running of the Grouse and Woodcock Invitational. And there were stories within stories. In the woods, amateurs hold their own with the professional trainers. Six pros brought nine of the dogs to the event, while seven amateurs and their dogs came from Maine, Rhode Island, Pennsylvania, and Michigan to compete. Joe McCarl made his first appearance as a pro with two entries – Hard Driving Bev, the 2003 Grand National Grouse Champion, and Hard Driving Duke. Young Michigan pro,

Vance Butler won his first championship in Minnesota last fall and brought Roger Bryant's Modak's Jazzy Jeff to the line. Dave Hughes, who has dominated the woods in the past, but is now feeling the pressure from younger handlers, qualified two setters from his string. One of those vying with Hughes as the top handler in the woods is Robert Ecker of Pennsylvania who had two dogs invited for owner Phil Gould – the setter Taz and the pointer Eldorado.

As many



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Left: Pioneer Will (Achy Breaky Jackee X Ha Ja Susie) and his younger sister Centerfold Rose Have dominated the Grouse and Woodcock Invitational for the last five renewals.

Centerfold Rose, eight, had had their names engraved on the winner's trophy for the last four years. Rose had won in 2001 and 2003 while Will been champion in 2002 and is now a three time champion, three time runner-up champion, and has won two classics in the woods. Rose had experienced a life-threatening infection caused by an unborn pup and had almost died since she had won the title in 2003. Her amateur owner/handler Dr. Harold Holmes of Michigan expressed concern

know, the woods are the last venue where setters outnumber pointers and this was the case with this year's Invitational where the entry included nine setters and seven pointers. Among the pointers was one of the year's most amazing stories. Wynot Ace had won both the National Amateur Grouse and the International Amateur Woodcock Championships in the fall of 2003 as a derby. At 20 months of age last fall, he is the youngest dog to win a national amateur championship. When he came to the line at the Invitational, Ace had reached the ripe old age of 26 months.

On his first day, his youthful exuberance caused a 12 minute absence at the beginning of the hour and then he went on to dig out two scouted limb finds on woodcock to show his dual championships were no fluke. He had many fans in the gallery who hoped for improvement on the second day, and a shot at the finals on Friday. During his second hour, the open woods of the Gladwin grounds gave Ace the chance to remind all that he is still a derby as he visited the farthest reaches of the grounds seemingly oblivious to his handler. The dog is excitement personified on the ground and on point, and has a bright future ahead of him.

Joe McCarl's Hard Driving Bev earned day money on the first day but the buzz throughout the trial was about two old warriors who had owned the Invitational for the previous four years. The setters, Pioneer Will, nine, and his younger full-sister,

before the event that she was not back in top form for the event.

Will, on the other hand, had just gone out to Pennsylvania and bested a field of 58 dogs in the Armstrong Classic to show he was ready to get the job done for Michigan pro handler Scott Chaffee and owners Jack Harang of Louisiana and Woodland Kennels. On the first day, Rose showed she could still dig out the elusive grouse of Gladwin with two super finds on the often jumpy birds. Her race was solid and forward. Will also ran well the first day and pinned a grouse, but two nonproductives kept him out of the day money.

Rose and Will were definitely the sentimental favorites on the second day and each had a large gallery. Rose showed her big heart as she reached out farther and harder than the first day and again dug out a grouse. Will also improved his ground effort with his bell fading out from time to time but always to the front. His second day was complemented with two grouse finds, the second coming just at time. Will got the day money for the second day and everyone expected to see the two white setters run again on Friday. Most hoped to see them go head to head.

The announcement was made back at Alibi Hall, the headquarters on the grounds. Eldorado, Phil Gould's pointer handled by Robert Ecker, and Grouse River Rock, owned and handled by Jim Gingas of Michigan, would be the first brace on Friday morning.



Pioneer Will (left) with handler Scott Chafee and his younger sister Centerfold Rose with owner/handler Dr. Harold Holmes earned the right to be in the winners picture after beating the best of the year in the woods over three consecutive days on the courses at Gladwin, Michigan. In the back from left to right: Jack Harang and Micael Halley co-owners of Pioneer Will, Geroge Johnson and Scott Kinne, the judges, and unknown.

It was an honor for both dogs to make the finals, but barring a disaster, everyone believed the winner and runner-up would come from the second pairing of Rose and Will. Amateur against pro, brother against sister, both former winners of the event – it was no wonder that people came out of the woodwork to walk the final hour.

Moments like this are often anti-climatic. That was not the case as Chaffee and Doc Holmes turned Will and Rose loose on Friday morning. It was as if the two canine gladiators fed off the energy of their handlers and the gallery. Or maybe it was just sibling rivalry, as both ran bigger and harder than their two previous outings. Scouts were dispatched a number of times as first one then the other of the two bells faded out. The dogs however continued to show to the front. At about the halfway point, Rose drew first blood as she pointed and then relocated on a tight-sitting woodcock. Doc Holmes and most of the gallery surged forward as the course turned away from Will as he cast deep to the right. As Will turned to regain the front, his bell went silent and he too stood high and tight on a woodcock find.

Although that was to be the end of the bird work, it was enough as both dogs finished still running hard to the front. In fact, Will looked like he had not had enough as it took Chaffee a minute or two to round him up. There was no question that everyone had just seen the winner and runner-up. It was just a question of which one was on top. Those who were judging with their hearts wanted the nod to go to Rose. Her compelling story is what legends are made of. Those looking at the situation with a more objective eye were giving the nod to the older brother. He had beaten his sister on the ground and equaled her on birds. The judges concurred and Pioneer Will was named the winner of the 2004 Grouse and Woodcock Invitational with his little sister, Centerfold Rose as runner-up. That made five years in a row for Will and Rose. As winner and runner-up, they will get automatic bids to the 2005 Invitational that will most likely be run in Pennsylvania next April. If these two setters show up for the 2005 running, it will again be high drama in the woods.