

JACK PINE TRIBUNE

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Scott Chaffee the Champion

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Not all hunting and field trial dogs are created equally. Most English Setters and Pointers can be trained to point at a grouse and fetch the downed bird when told to. They can run the field trial courses and be steady to wing and shot like they've been trained. It takes a special dog to become a champion though. Championship potential is something the dog is born with. The potential is realized only by focused training and handling. Scott Chaffee of Pioneer Kennels in Clare recognizes this potential when he sees it and uses his training techniques to fuel the fire inside the champions he handles.

Scott has been a professional trainer and handler since 1985. He's always had a love for dogs. As a kid he spent time pheasant hunting and he was always the first to care for the family dogs when they needed it. He has a competitive streak and knows how to win. He coached the Clare Girls Varsity Basketball team for years and led them to their most wins ever in a single season. He doesn't just train champions. Scott himself is a champion.

"The whole process is very rewarding for me," said Scott. "I love turning a puppy into a champion."



Autumn Moon is a 6 time champion.

The formal process starts when a dog, usually a setter or a pointer, is between eight and twelve months old. At this age the dogs begin preliminary training. Scott walks through the woods with them and gets them used to traversing prime bird territory. As the pups get a bit older, he can evaluate them and determine whether or not the champion potential is there. If the dog just doesn't have it, he often goes back to his owner to spend his days hunting grouse and woodcock. If the dog has what it takes to win, Scott will work with them until they're ready for competition. They must be conditioned mentally and physically to compete at the national level. He has a process called "roading" the dogs to help get them in shape. The dogs are hooked to harnesses that are attached to a slow moving four wheeler. These athletic and energetic dogs don't fancy the slow roll, so they pull hard, working their muscles each step of the way.

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Scott picks up the pace, allowing the dogs to run fast like they want to. This serves as an effective cardio exercise in preparation for the long days of trials ahead.

The dogs don't always start pointing grouse and woodcock right away though. First, they get some experience with pigeons. Scott keeps Homing Pigeons on hand for training purposes. He places the birds in a field inside live-traps that have remote controlled doors on them. The dogs are turned loose and immediately head for the scent of the bird. If the dog gets too close because he didn't get on point at first scent, Scott hits the switch and the bird is released. This imitates a flushed bird in the wild. In competition, a bird being bumped out of its spot before the dog is on point just doesn't cut it. Scott must teach the dog to stop and point at first scent, and stay there, with all its intensity until he gets to the dog. If the dog does get on point at first scent, Scott will make his way to him. Scott will release the bird when he sees fit, to closely imitate a hunting situation. He can then release the dog, or order him to fetch the bird. In this case, the homing pigeon flies back to the coop where it came from and the dog gets one step closer to competition. When the pigeon practice is done, Scott runs the dogs in the woods, working on wild birds before game day. Wild birds are the true test of a dog's abilities.



Moss Meadow Traveler is on point.

Many of Scott's Trials and competitions take place at The Gladwin Field Trial Area in Gladwin County. This huge game preserve is dedicated to the field trial sport and the cover dogs who take part in it. During a competition, the handler begins a course with his dog, along with another handler/dog duo. The dogs are released and the handler, Scott, follows along the path behind them. The dog will run for an hour at a time at race pace, looking for birds to point at. The goal is for the dog to find as many birds as he can during his run of the course. He must stop and point on a ruffed grouse or woodcock. The judges are looking for a dog that doesn't bump the bird. Instead, he must point with intensity until Scott gets to him, flushes the bird and releases the dog. They shoot shotgun blanks to mimic the hunting scenario. The dog isn't supposed to move even after the shotgun blasts. Only Scott can bring the dog out of his focused state. This is called "steady to wing and shot." Communication between handler and dog is key in this game of skill and concentration.

The dogs are judged on their ground application, or how they hunt. The judges want to see the dog hunting continuously without getting distracted or sidetracked. They look at how the dog listens to Scott and how easy the dog is to handle. The dog must have manners and class during the trial. Every detail is considered. From the tail cracking to the intensity while on point, it all matters. The slightest mishap or loss of focus can get a dog pulled from the competition.

In this winning equation, the dog is the variable, Scott is the constant. Scott trains champions, no doubt about it. But the dog has to have the fire inside him in order to achieve this status.

"The competitive fire is what you want in a dog," said Scott. "That's what wins championships."

The results tell the rest of the story. Scott recently returned from a trip to New Hampshire where he competed in the Grand National Grouse Championship against the best dogs and handlers in the country. He won it outright. In all, he has won 31 championships and has earned the runner up spot 27 times. He has also won hundreds of other classics and cover dog trials. Scott Chaffee has won more championships than any other professional dog trainer in Michigan's history.





The fire inside that wins a Championship is the same fire you see in Scott's eyes when he speaks of his work with these setters and pointers. It's the same spark that illuminates the room when he mentions his two daughters and wife. It's the same fire that led the Clare Varsity Girls Basketball team to their most wins in a season. It's a fire that lives inside all champions, including the dogs that make it to the top. The fire is fueled by Scott's passion for the sport and his dedication to the dogs. New Hampshire surely wasn't the last time Scott Chaffee becomes a champion.

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