



dogs

## Rebuilding The Brittany

*"Field-trial competition has brought out all of the extremes you never wanted in a hunting dog"*

he attributes of a good Brittany are measured on multiple scales. To do well in field trials, for instance, a dog needs excesses of both energy and range. But to please a hunter, it needs to be cooperative and work at a reasonable distance. As a consequence, there is an incongruence in most of the contemporary breed that seems unnecessary and illogical—Brittanies that are great field-trial champions are rarely great hunters. One breeder, thankfully, is aware of that fact.

"Field-trialers love dogs as much as hunters do, but they're on different sides of the playing field," says Brittany breed-



STEVE DEL ROSSI breeds and "teaches" Brittanies so that they don't have to be force-trained as do many field-trial dogs.

er/trainer Steve Del Rossi of Salem, New Jersey. "The field-trialer says that only 5 percent of his pups will run big enough for competition, and hunters can have the rest. But most of that other 95 percent still have 100 yards too much range for today's hunters. On state grounds or other public areas they'll end up in front of another hunter when they point—so it doesn't matter how rock solid those dogs hold their points. Or they'll be in a field where there's no trespassing. They'll also be too hyper to live in peace with the wife and kids—in the house or out. A hunter's dog has to be naturally biddable—a calm, sweet dog that hangs out with the family."

### Exactly!

When Del Rossi said that, it was like hearing my own words about the need to return to breeding a greater cooperation in gun dogs. Apparently Del Rossi and I are not alone—witness the growing interest in "pointing Labs," a breed that is being viewed as a threat by most pointing-dog breeders.

Del Rossi was the first such breeder to shrug his shoulders and go with the flow. "Some of my Brittany hunters are majoring in upland birds and minoring in waterfowl," he says. "So we're doing a lot of water retrieving work. Also, down South, they're using our Brittanies on doves because the dogs sit and tolerate the wait between retrieves. I would guess that many pointing-Lab owners are the opposite—majoring in waterfowl and minoring in upland game."



By Larry Mueller,  
HUNTING DOGS EDITOR

Del Rossi breeds the classic Brittany that dates back to the 1930s. About 15 years ago he bought Hunterlane Kennels from Halantha Lee. She was a died-in-the-wool hunter married to a fanatic hunter. She had bred her Brittanies for 30 years. Her father owned them before her, and his stock traced back to the original four or five dogs imported in 1931.

Growth of this cooperative breed should have told us something. In just 35 years this intelligent, hard-working, naturally biddable, highly affectionate hunting dog rose to 20th place in popularity among 116 American Kennel Club breeds. But even as the population and popularity of Brittanies grew, it was apparent to knowledgeable outdoorsmen that by breeders selecting dogs for running (a prime requisite of horseback trials) instead of for bird finding, such pointer/setter trials were no longer working for the best interest of hunters.

### Goats Aren't Good

Not too many years ago, I watched a Brittany run like a goat in the National Amateur Field-Trial Championship, covering vast amounts of ground in long, high bounds. And I heard the gallery "ooh" and "aah" over this dog that leapt over and passed more scent cones than it found. A more recent field-trial Brittany that I saw looked like an American pointer with a docked tail. The contemporary, smoother coated Brittanies suggest an English setter cross. To my way of thinking, competition has brought out all of the extremes you

never wanted in a hunting dog. It has nearly destroyed the very traits that made Brittanies so popular in the first place.

In contrast, the line of Hunterlane dogs (Quail Run Brittanies bred by Del Rossi) are slower, more square, thicker-bodied animals than most Brittanies that you see today. (He also studs a two-time Shoot-to-Retrieve champion—judged by hunters' standards.) Del Rossi's dogs will bore into the brush and briars, not over or around them. During the woodcock hunts he guides, he often hears clients say, "Hey, there's' already somebody hunting through ahead of us."

"That's OK," Del Rossi says. "Those dogs aren't getting into the cover." And that's what it takes to hunt tight-sitting woodcock.

## Breed Needs

Unlike woodcock, ruffed grouse are easily spooked into flight. In very quiet, wet woods, a fast dog may slam into a bird and hold it. But more often, the slower, more cautious dog gets the point. "People brag about their dogs pointing 20 feet from the birds," Del Rossi says. "I want mine pointing at 20 *yards*. A Brittany should be so biddable that a shake of the hat is enough to correct it. Once they're trained, I don't call my dogs in the field. They keep track of me. Well-bred gun dogs shouldn't require beepers except in super-thick cover."

A Brittany had better be a natural retriever, as well. Because of their soft, affectionate personalities, many will fold under force-fetch training. "That's my whole thing," Del Rossi says. "Why are so many training techniques geared toward bullheaded dogs?" Without waiting for a reply, he answers his own question. "It's because these methods originated among field-trial trainers. If you have to muscle a dog when it's young, you'll always have to muscle that dog. It's ridiculous to buy that kind of field-trial reject when we can breed dogs specifically for hunting that are close working, eager to please, easy to train—and stylish. Training and hunting should be fun, not an aggravation."

Amen! Although field-trialers have a right to breed canines any way they want for their separate sport, it's unconscionable to pass them off as hunting dogs—genuine strains of cooperative, close-working, naturally retrieving gun dogs. 4