

THE OUTDOORS PAGE

Portrait

of a pointer

By MATT MARKEY and JEFF BASTING

Bird dogs show exceptional ability to lock in on a scent

You might say that Tom Davis has a good eye for a great nose, but it's a lot more than that. A championship bird dog is not born into royalty — it is trained to be king or queen in that field.

"With a good bird dog, the only thing that's natural instinct is the point," said Mr. Davis, a native Toledoan who has been training bird dogs for more than 40 years and has produced many national champions.

"After that — getting them to hold and to retrieve — it's all in the training. Some dogs have a propensity to do these things more naturally than others, so the better bred dog you have, the more likely it is to accept the training."

In the bird dog world, the debate can rage endlessly about which breed is superior in all of the traits that make a dog very effective in the field, whether it is competing for trophies in structured trials or on solitary hunts for pheasants, quail, or grouse with its owner.

A number of breeds perform very well, but for Mr. Davis, a retired teacher who started his career at Toledo's Bowsher High School in 1968 and taught at Whitmer for 25 years, German shorthaired pointers are his bird dog of choice.

"I just like their traits, and they are outstanding hunting dogs, outstanding companions, and outstanding pets," he said. "They are pretty affectionate and they quickly bond with you."

A hunter since he was young, when the meadows, fence rows, and stubble fields in the area had a good population of pheasants, Mr. Davis soon learned the importance of having a capable bird dog.

"It was tough to shoot pheasants without a bird dog, so I went out and got one," Mr. Davis said. "I didn't know a thing about how to train it, but I met some people and learned from them. You spend so much time with that dog while you're training it that you really get attached to it."

Mr. Davis began taking his dogs out of state so he could work with top-flight trainers, and was also traveling the country to have his bird dogs compete in field trials. He said that while bird dogs "have to be like a

statue" when holding a bird on point at a national competition, that skill is not as important to hunters.

"All a hunter wants is a dog that will point and retrieve," Mr. Davis said. A championship caliber bird dog is worth thousands of dollars, and Mr. Davis said about 90 percent of the dogs that come up through field trial competitions end up with hunters.

With a bird dog, however, it is tough to discern real talent without seeing the dog work. The dog's ability to follow a scent, point, hold, flush, and retrieve are all essential.

"Your wife can easily tell you the difference between a Gucci purse and a purse from Wal-Mart, but it is really hard to sell her on the difference between a \$200 dog and a \$2,000 dog," Mr. Davis said. "But in the bird dog world, it really matters."

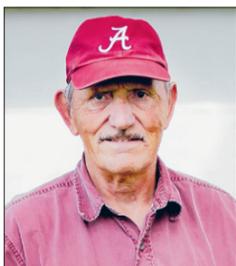
Mr. Davis, who has been heavily involved in competitions with his bird dogs for decades, trains his dogs on five acres of property he owns in Sylvania Township.

He said it will take four or five years of training for a dog to have enough maturity to win a championship, and although he devotes a lot of time to that process, he hasn't lost his enjoyment of the bond between bird dog and hunter in the field.

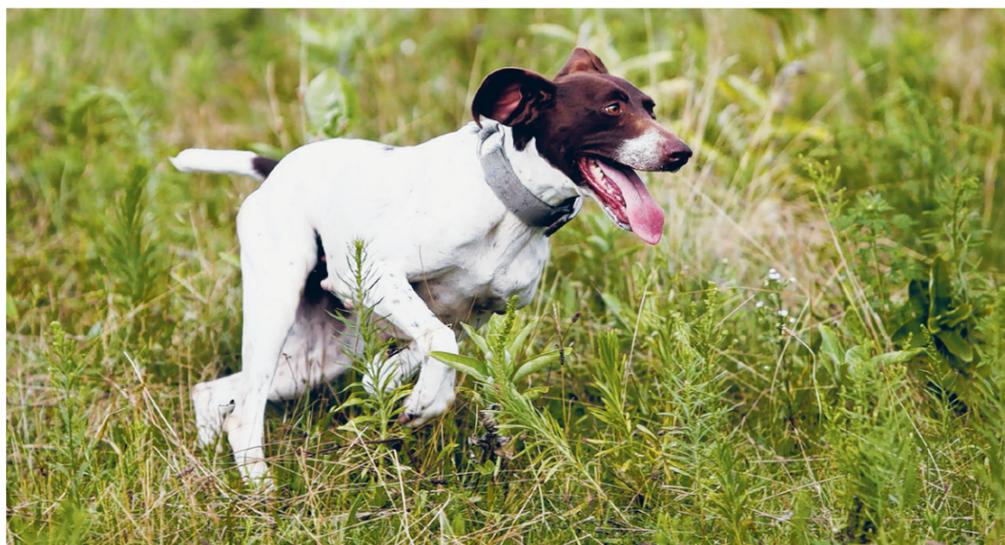
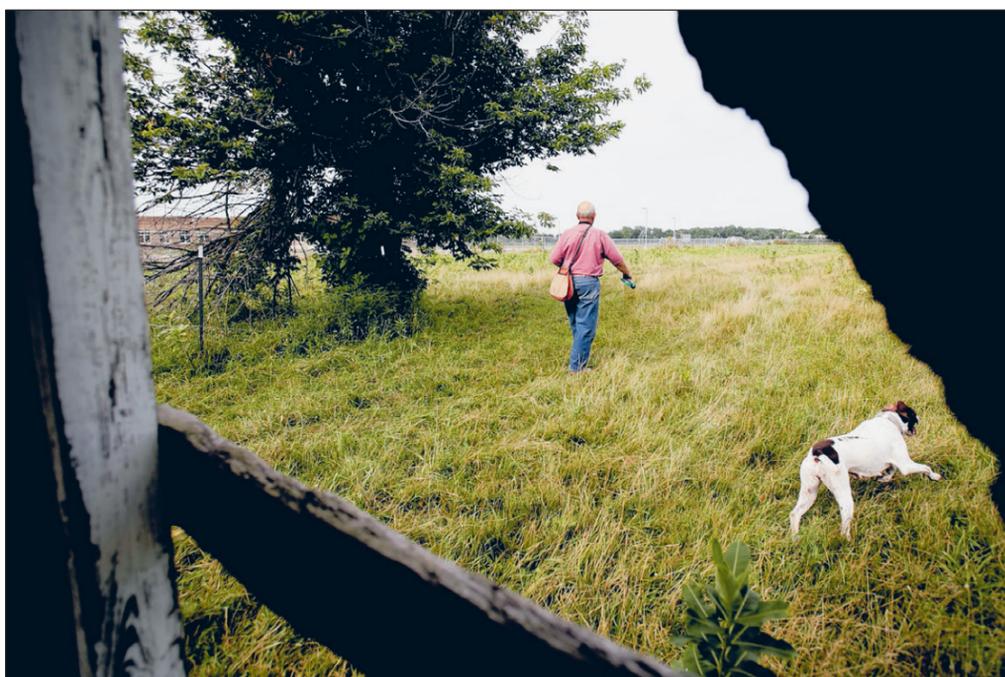
"I still hunt with my dogs, because a bird dog will find game when hunters don't," Mr. Davis said. "Their sense of smell is really incredible. No matter what the conditions are, a good bird dog will figure out where the birds are. There are just some things you can't explain about their senses."

Dogs have a sense of smell that is many thousands of times more acute than a human's, and bird dogs have some of the most sensitive noses in the dog world. Mr. Davis said that despite working with great bird dogs for so many years, he still marvels at the way they can hunt.

"Bird dogs are amazing animals, and I can't tell you how many I've had, but when you lose one, it's a hell of a loss," he said. "You pull over to the side of the road and cry for 20 minutes. And anybody that says they've never cried over a dog dying isn't much of a dog man."



German shorthaired pointers trained by Tom Davis have won eight national championships.

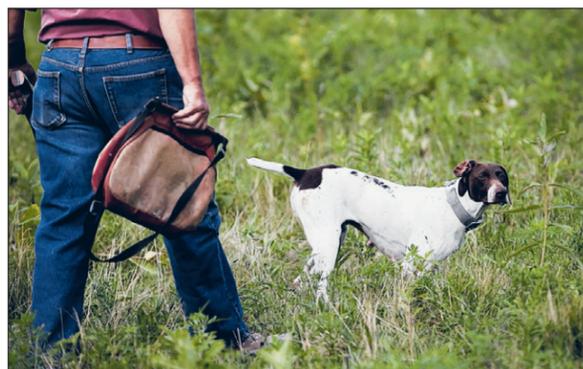


PHOTOS/JEFFREY SMITH

Tom Davis works with Tessa on his property in Sylvania Township. The German shorthaired pointer won a national championship field competition in March.

Mr. Davis says a pointer can hold a point for as long as 15 minutes or as briefly as five seconds, but the training the bird dog receives determines what the dog will do after it points.

German shorthaired pointers are bred to be versatile hunting dogs.



Other bird dog breeds



Weimaraner: known for agility in the field and obedience.



Vizsla: versatile dog that can hunt, track, point, and retrieve.



Brittany: the only spaniel that points, and highly intelligent.



English setter: first trained to sit or 'set' when it found game.



English pointer: a muscled, athletic, high-energy dog.