

THE 2007 NAVHDA INVITATIONAL

On September 27th Zeus and I were in Mexico Missouri to run in the 2007 Invitational. We arrived in Missouri feasting on dreams of versatile championship and we went home swilling on also-ran-soup.

The Invitational is the North American Versatile Hunting Dog Associations championship. Only invited dogs can enter and only the best versatile dogs in the US and Canada are invited. The Invitational is based on the German hunt tests and is dominated by continental breeds. To my knowledge Zeus is the first UKC registered Epagneul Breton to be invited.

As we lined up under the banner for the opening ceremonies I looked up and down the row and all I saw were shorthairs and wirehairs. Zeus was the smallest dog in line by half. Wally Wahl, a senior Judge, must have read my thoughts for as he walked by he says in a gruff voice: "it isn't about size but heart".

Our first event of the morning was the "Blind Retrieve". The blind was 113 yards of water followed by a 30-yard drag. The water looked right, but to me the drag looked short. Zeus ran second, following Laura Picard and her shorthair VC Sharpshooters Lil-Hottie.



The Blind Retrieve was from here to just left of the second bush from the right. According to a range finder the distance is 113 from wetted edge to wetted edge. In my opinion this was a nice easy send with a good bottom and a clear visual of the far shore at all times for the dog.

As we walked down to the waters edge conditions were perfect. The fog was lifting, the water was like glass, and there was just the faintest breeze coming across from the far shore.

We set up carefully and just as I am about to send a cormorant flies over, so I reposition Zeus get everything in order and just as I am going to send him a shotgun goes off in the field to our left, so I reposition him a second time and wait a little longer then normal and when his eye is fixed I send him.

He enters the water purposefully then stops comes back out urinates then reenters and swims directly at the mark. At about 30 yards out he lift his head in recognition of making scent, and adjusts his path a little to the right. He hits the far shore on the drag trail, drives up the bank, picks up the bird and returns to delivers and we are one down and three to go.

Our second event “Honoring” comes off without a hitch and as I am driving over to the third event “The Shackled Duck” I am feeling pretty good as this is a strong event for Zeus. The shackled duck is composed of three parts. The first is healing a hundred yards through a winding path, the second is marking a launched shackled duck, and the third is searching for and retrieving the shackled duck.

We arrive at the pond to discover it covered in giant emergent lily-pad type plants that Zeus had never trained in before. The plants called bonnets or elephant ears are giant leaves that lie on or stick out of the water and the big ones are larger in diameter then Zeus is long.



Close up of the bonnets or elephant ears. Once a dog gets accustomed to these he can navigate through them easily and the bird leaves a good scent trail.

When our turn comes I get a little unnerved heading a hundred yards along a trail that had been traveled by twelve former contestants. At the water's edge, relieved that Zeus didn't add any urine to the trail, I notice Zeus is staring at the pond trembling. I interpret his posture to mean he knows the duck is coming but actually he is staring at the strange plants thinking - "What the heck are those?"

The duck splashes down 70 yards out in plain view and I can't help jinxing us further by thinking this was going to be easy. At the end Zeus is still staring at the plants and his delay lets the duck escape into the vegetation turning what should have been an easy retrieve into a 19 minute duck search from hell.

As the duck swims right Zeus swims straight by and I get so excited I forget the rules. In the excitement, I become convinced that to achieve the best score in this event I am to demonstrate water handling. Not sure how the idea was planted, as the rules clearly state otherwise, but I have this handicap of being half German Hungarian and half German Russian which makes me insane in such a way that the more wrong I am the more I'm convinced I'm right. When the Shackled Duck event is finally over Zeus had retrieved his duck but I had ensured him a falling score.



This is the "Shackled Duck Site". Our duck landed just left of the bare pole in the center of the picture. There is about three acres of the flooded vegetation in the immediate area and I am not sure how much beyond.

The fourth event for us was the field. Knowing I was out of the running made this both the most and least enjoyable of the test events. Our brace mates were Laura Picard, and her shorthair, VC Sharpshooters Lil-Hottie.

Zeus is the finest bird finding, bird holding, bird retrieving dog I have even known but he believes backing is for sissies. I thought we had come to an agreement on this, and that at least during training and testing he was to play nice, but I was mistaken.

We stayed in control enough that Ms. Picard's Hottie could get her backs so I didn't have to suffer the additional humiliation of being pulled from the field, but having your dog blink his brace mate for an hour with another handler, six judges and an international photographer documenting the offense is a special kind of embarrassing.



This is the field we ran in. I believe it was in the high seventies with humidity in the low eighties when we ran. The field was broken up into small acreages of crop and hay land with strategically placed “iced” watering tanks large enough to immerse your dog. It was our last event after a long day but Zeus still put enough into it that he was staggering and vomited when it was over.

While talking about mistakes and crow soup I don't want to leave the impression that attending the NAVHDA Invitational was a negative experience. On the contrary it was a great experience. The setup, grounds and judging were ideal and impeccable. Zeus and I were treated like royalty. Every judge and handler went out of the way to help and I am convinced that every judge, handler and spectator wanted the little black and white dog to succeed.

If you are a dog person and live within a reasonable distance of the Invitational I would recommend making the trip. You will see spectacular dogs, spectacular dog work, meet legends, and soon to be legends, witness the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat and above all have a good time with good people – “dog people”.



Wally Wahl and 2007 Versatile Champion Sharptail's Miracle Anika.

In a lifetime I could not begin to repay Wally Wahl for the amount of time he has put in helping me train my dogs – yes multiple dogs. Wally has never asked anything in return for tons of advice, thousands of hours of training, and the free use of his equipment. He always has extra pigeons, ducks, pheasants, and chukkars or whatever you need, as well as an earful of colorful stories told in the unique “Wally Style”.

There are those that will say this is the NAVHDA way but I would argue that this is the “Wally Wahl Way”. It doesn't matter your age, sex or experience Wally is in his element when he is teaching. The more novice the handler the better, and instead of getting tired he gets more energized each year. Kids and dogs are the finest judges of human beings next to God and I have never met a dog or child that didn't immediately take to Wally.

Congratulations Wally on your third generation Versatile Champion and Thank You.