

Shooting for the stars: the CH/MH Labrador

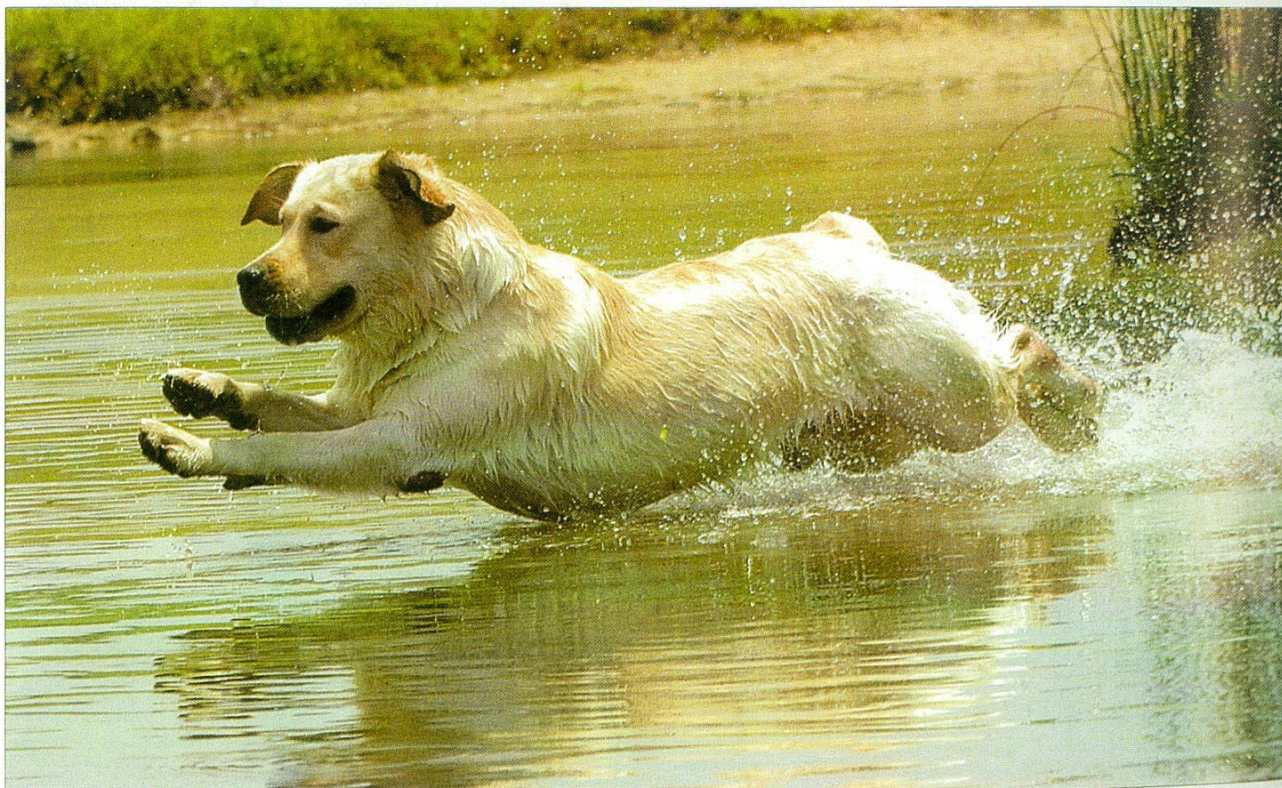
By Anne Evans

“**B**oom, boom,” then a delayed live shot flyer. A Lab intently watches on line as it marks the two previously shot birds and then must continue to remain steady as a live shot flyer soars into the air 40 feet away. He picks up these birds “clean” but a diversion shot is fired after the last bird is picked up in order to run a double blind. Now you turn to handle on the blind which is challenging since it is through changing cover and other obstacles. Two more series to go in this Master test.

Fast forward ... You are waiting patiently with this same special Lab at ringside for your Open class. You thought the entries would be large, but you're also wishing that a major holds. Your dog gaits flawlessly. The judge points to your dog and is named Winners Dog.



Am/Can/UKC Ch. Poplar Forest Play It Again Sam CDX, RE, MH, "Sam."



BIS. CH MHR Caer Bren SuberHero CD, RN, MH, "Hero."

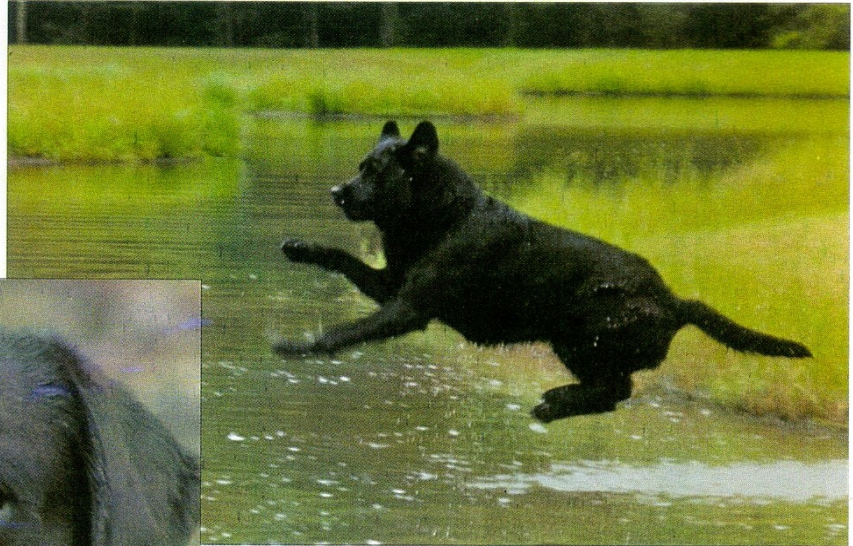


Ch. Ransom's Armbrook Indigo Hue CD, JH, SH, MH. Owned by Ellison Armfield.

You're ecstatic. One major down, another to go towards a Breed ring championship. Maybe, just maybe, a Champion Master Hunter may be "in sight."

We, who own Labrador

Retrievers, are almost certainly blessed with one of the



Above: Duckback Armbrook Indigo JH, SH, MH, "Tiger," four legs on Master Hunter by two and qualified to run the 2011 Master National. Son of "Digs," owned by Ellison Armfield.

Left: Ch. Ransom's Armbrook Hole In One CD, MH. Owned by Ellison Armfield.



most, if not THE most, versatile dog breeds existing today. At times this versatility presents a quagmire, so to speak, due to the fact that our breed is so capable of mastering numerous activities. First and foremost, the Labrador, after being introduced to America, was a sporting breed bred to retrieve game on land and in the water. Since

this introduction, their repertoire has increased due to their trainability, intelligence and eagerness to learn. This has also given us the opportunity to observe the Labrador participating in activities such as search and rescue, agility, rally, obedience, military work, guide dog and service dog work, tracking, field trial tests, and hunting

retriever tests as well as many other activities. At the same time, they have been our devoted companions and friends.

In previous years, a Dual Champion Labrador Retriever was one that obtained both a conformation championship as well as the title of field champion. This has not been accomplished since the '70s, and we will look at various reasons why this is true. The present-day retriever field trials have changed extensively since the early '30s in this country when the Labrador was introduced in America. Fred Kampo, a very successful owner of field trial Labradors, has written a book, *The First Ten Years of Field Trials* which demonstrates this rather complex issue. Initially when Labradors were imported, they were used as a hunter's companion and frequently participated in field trials.

The present-day licensed field trial differs greatly from the beginning and early field trials. It is indeed amazing to watch the perfection and obedience required for a Lab to make multiple retrieves of distances as far as 350 to 400 yards. Dogs are judged against each other in



Ch. Hiddensprings Blue Goose MH. Owned by Paul and Edna Schenck, Colorado. The 45th CH/MH Labrador.



order to determine placements and wins. In field trials, handlers wear white coats as well as the gunners in order that the dog and handler are visible to one another at those great distances. Additionally, a "field trial" Labrador does not have to meet the written standards of the breed in conformation. Perhaps one could make the comparison to the horse world. A Thoroughbred and Quarter Horse both participate in racing events. However, the Quarter Horse, built solidly and with a different body structure, can beat a Thoroughbred the first quarter of a mile. However, if racing together at the same time, the Thoroughbred basically leaves the Quarter Horse "in the dust" as it gallops down the

Ch. Ransom's I Wanna Be Good CD, MH. Owned by Ellison Armfield.

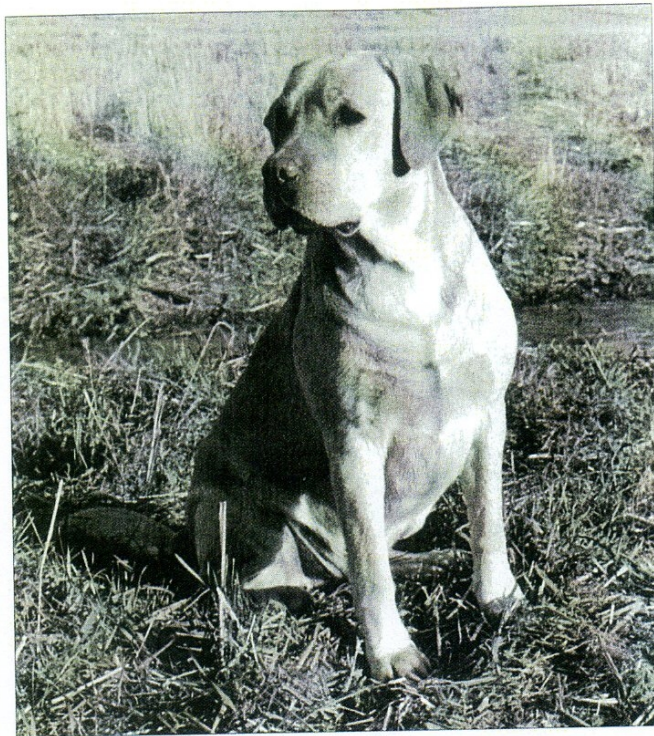
stretch for a mile or so. We oftentimes hear the phrase, "form follows function," and a highly competitive field trial Labrador may not be able to compete in the conformation ring today.

The original intent of the AKC Hunting Retriever test was to enable individuals to train their dogs in hunting-like atmospheres, thus also wearing appropriate clothing which one would wear to use in waterfowl or upland hunting. The AKC Hunting Retriever test was developed around 1987 with divisions at the Junior, Senior or Master level; progressing significantly more difficult at each level. Various scenarios and tests are set up which emphasize accurate marking, superb obedience as well as superior control and response. These tests are based where a dog's performance is compared to a written standard, not against the performance of another dog. A dog must achieve an average of seven out of ten in order to qualify at that specific level. As the levels and difficulty increase, so do the number of qualifications required to obtain a specific title. Since the initial introduction of the AKC Hunting Retriever tests, it appears that the Master level test has also increased in difficulty and complexity.

One of the most unique and challenging titles to have your Labrador earn today is the Champion Master Hunter which many, many owners aspire to obtain. This presents many obstacles and challenges when trying to do so. Currently, approximately 54 Labradors have obtained the coveted Champion Master title since the first AKC Hunting Retriever tests were introduced in 1985.

Although the Labrador Retriever is the most popular dog breed and is number one (having held that position for the last twenty years), in AKC registrations, a relatively small percentage of AKC registered Labradors are shown in the conformation ring. Statistically, the percentage of Labs shown each year to those who finish their AKC championship, the percentage of Labradors earning their championship title compared to the number of registrations is very significant. We find that obtaining an AKC Breed championship on a Labrador is a

notable obtainment at any time. For instance, approximately 60,000 Labradors were shown in the Breed ring in the previous year, and only 210 obtained their Breed championship.



MHR Ch. Romany Sun Jester CD, MH. Owned and trained by Alan Kotwitz, "Jess" was the first champion/Master Hunter Labrador [1988]. Alan notes "I like to think he helped dispel some of the stereotypes about good looking Labradors' abilities in the field."



Ch. Buddy of Cedar Bush Creek UD, MH [1989]. Owner trained and handled by Bill and Sandy Garrison. Bill notes: "He was our second Labrador, and our first dog to show in Breed and to run in hunting tests. I did all the training myself, and he was very easy to train."

60,000 Labradors were shown in the Breed ring in the previous year, and only 210 obtained their Breed championship. Additionally, depending on what area of the country one

resides, the conformation point schedule can be one of highest schedules of any breed being shown.

For instance, not only are the number of Labradors being shown in all breed conformation shows figured into the formula for different regions, the entries at regional Labrador specialties are also added to those specific numbers in order to reach the requirements for points one through five. As an example, the Labrador Retriever Club of the Potomac has the highest number of entries of any Labrador specialty in the world. This influences the point system in states included in that specific region. Unless you are very fortunate to have a Labrador who finishes quickly (and there certainly are those out there who do so), the championship title can be extremely challenging.

Several individuals who have Champion Master title Labs or dogs working in both venues with the aspiration of obtaining this title were contacted to share their insight into the characteristics they look for in an individual dog or puppy, "roadblocks" while pursuing this, challenges along the way and other suggestions or comments. Ellison Armfield of Armbrook Labradors, Paul and Edna Schenck of Hidden Springs Labradors and Phyllis Giroux of Deep Run Farm, as well as others were very helpful in sharing this information.

One consistent recommendation and theme shared by all individuals was the importance of pedigree. Although it is not absolutely imperative to have a puppy from lines holding working and conformation titles or points, each individual did emphasize that the road to the obtainment of this title was enhanced by such. Dams and sires of a puppy who have earned titles in both the performance and conformation arena set the stage for possible success. Ellison Armfield is unique amongst title owners. She owns three males, Ch. Ransom's Armbrook's Indigo Hue CD, MH (aka Digs), Ch. Ransom's I Wanna Be Good CD, MH (aka Christian) and Ch. Ransom's Armbrook's Hole in One CD, MH (aka JD) who have obtained the Champion Master Hunter title. What is so amazing about this feat is that each of



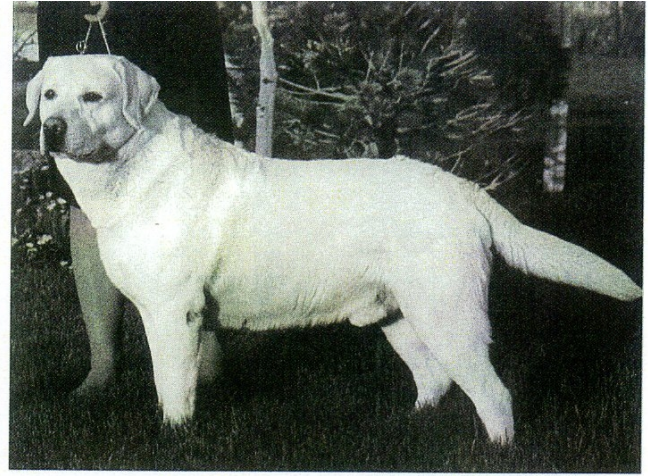
Ch. Broad Reach Trace of Grace JH, SH, MH, WCX, NMH. [1991] Owned by Susanna Joy. Finishing her championship quickly, "Gin" was owner-handled to her JH, then made MH with trainer-handler Bobby George. Susanna commented: "She was loved and respected by all who knew her, and with field trainers she definitely had to earn their respect!"

these dogs shares the same dam, Ch. Ransom's Duckback Indigo JH, who recently passed at the age of fifteen. Bernadette Brown of King's Ransom Labradors was the breeder of each of these dogs. Bernadette's lines are filled with very versatile Labradors, many with conformation points who also possess incredible working ability. The ability in the field of marking, memory of marks, driving desire, birdiness and enthusiastic working ability has been present

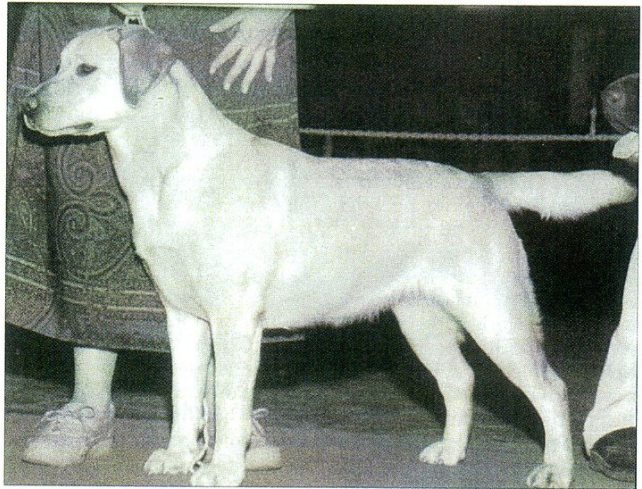
in multiple generations of Bernadette's dogs. For instance, Ellison's present incredible male, Duckback Armbrook's Indigo JH, SH, MH (aka Tiger), obtained his AKC Hunting Retriever Master title before the age of two and is qualified to run in the Master National this coming fall. Tiger goes back to generations on both sides of show champions and Master Hunters. His father is a CH MH, grandmother a CH JH, great-grandmother a Can. CD,



Ch. Harbortop's Redwick Valhalla MH. [1993] Owned by Steve and Julie Kirk. Steve and Julie note: "Odin came from a slow-maturing line and it took quite awhile for him to fill out and stand out in the ring. But it rapidly became apparent that he had exceptional field potential - retrieving was his thing!"



Ch. Simerdown's Royal Canuck SH, MH. Owned by Paul and Gail Grosscup. According to Paul, "It has been our observation that dogs from show breedings may take more nurturing, patience and inventiveness to perform at top field levels. This, of course, translates into more time."



Ch. Willcare Gypsy Chitina Am/Can CD, MH. Owned by Karen Kase, Alvin Shope III and Susan Willumsen. Susan noted: "We had many frustrating times when Chitina began to avoid picking up birds on land blinds after an unfortunate incident at a Senior Hunt test. Different approaches to solving the problem only helped magnify it. After two litters and a winter of duck hunting and continental hunts, she and I were back, more confident than ever, to earn her Master Hunter title."

CDX, MH, a great-grandfather has a MH and his maternal great-great-grandmother was the sixth Champion Master Labrador in the history of the AKC Hunting Retriever test. Ellison has chosen to delay Tiger's conformation showing until after the 2011 Master National, giving him an opportunity to mature more fully. Ellison also states, "Compiling that pedigree over generations takes dedication to the conformation side of breeding and to preserv-

ing the working ability of our wonderful Labs." Additionally, it is also wonderful to be either the breeder of one of these special dogs or to be the owner of the sire or dam, knowing that it takes a very special Lab indeed. Sprinkled in with obtaining this title entails the possibility of experiencing a bit of luck along the way.

Dr. Phyllis Giroux of Deep Run Farm in Virginia has completed the Master title on two males: BISS CH MHR Caer



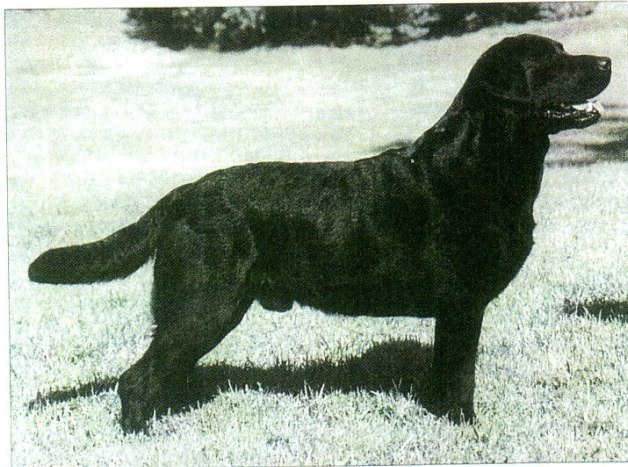
Ch. Duckback's Hi-Hope JH, CD, SH, MH. Owned by Anne and Neil Evans. Anne notes, "When one sees Hope's pedigree, one notices the all-aroundness of accomplishments of the dogs in her background."

Bren SuperHero CD, RN, MH, WCS and Am/Can/UKC Ch. Poplar Forest Play It Again Sam CDX, RE, MH, WCX. Likewise, she feels that the pedigree is very important and desires having working titles on both the sire and dam's side.

As Phyllis states, "It is not an absolute necessity, but a good indication we have the raw material to work with. If both parents are champions, or at least major pointed, we have a better chance of developing acceptable structure." Phyllis purchased both of these males from others at eighteen months

of age and two years of age. "Sam" had his JH, SH and two Master legs at the time of purchase and "Hero" was eighteen months old, already a "large, handsome, energetic and foolish big bear of a dog."

Edna Schenck of Hidden Springs Labradors in Loma, Colorado, and owner of the 45th Champion Master Labrador, Ch. Hiddensprings Blue Goose MH, also shares additional perspectives on the importance of pedigrees. She states that one must do their homework because there are not always a lot of proven pedigrees



Ch. Topform's Edward MH. [1995] Owned by Larry Rieder. Ed achieved his Master Hunter title with ease and finished his championship with 3 majors.

to go to if one wants to breed for conformation and drive. Goose indeed is a third-generation Champion Master Lab.

"Every cross will produce something different so you need to know what crosses well with your type of Lab. Probably in many litters there is a potential Master dog but it takes a lot of time to learn this. Some pedigrees have tons of intelligence but no drive. Others are almost over the top on drive but have low trainability," states Edna. She and Paul strive to breed the English-type Labrador with strong working ability both in the hunt test venue as well as hunting.

There are also other various challenges facing the obtainment of the Champion Master Hunter title. Owners of these great dogs also shared additional observations. Since each dog is an individual, time spent training and participating in each area is very dog specific. Thus, each individual dog or bitch may mature at a different time in relationship to its performance either in the field or Breed ring when pursuing conformation points or hunting test titles.

Another dilemma facing individuals with bitches can be scheduling and participating in hunt tests in relationship to heat cycles. This presents the problem of being unable to run in hunt test during that particular period of time. It is also interesting to note that when looking at the total number of Labradors holding the Champion Master title, approximately only fifteen bitches out of the total number have earned this coveted title. Can this be related to the bitch's seasons and possible whelping of a litter or is it related to other influences?

As with participation in any performance event or dog show, time and money is always a factor. Finishing a Labrador in the Breed ring can become an expensive proposition. Oftentimes a professional handler is hired in order to present that particular Lab in the manner in which it is more than likely to win. Also, some Labs may not show as well when being handled by the individual who is working him or her in the field which involves multiple days of training and running various drills and scenarios. This is cer-

tainly dependent upon each individual dog.

The higher one proceeds in hunt tests, the greater amount of time required for training. One must also train in various weather conditions as well as in a variety of settings, always looking for training grounds which present a multiple of varying conditions. Also, it is helpful to have multiple individuals who are also helping train at your level. Finding training grounds with adequate room and appropriate land conditions can be a huge challenge. That differs according to different parts of the country. Likewise, finding shows with majors and choosing judges who may prefer a specific "look" can also be time-consuming and challenging as well.

Additionally, one incurs expenses associated with entry fees at both conformation shows and hunt tests. Some owners, such as Dr. Giroux and others, choose to have professional handlers showing their dog in order to obtain majors.

The approximate cost to enter a Master level AKC hunt test is \$75 at this time. A breaking honor dog at the Senior or Master level is like throwing money into the air, for it is an immediate disqualification.

Additionally, a Lab must have correct angles as well as being sound in order to compete in the field and in the Breed ring. In field training, teaching and running blinds is against the natural skills the dog is bred to have. The mastering of running blinds takes confidence, trust and the highest level of teamwork. The Master test requires that a dog have a good memory in order to recall where multiple marks have landed and which also may include a diversion bird. This requires a great memory as the dog runs multiple marks. The ability to mark and retain the memory of placement of the birds is of paramount importance when running the upper levels of the hunting retriever test. A dog who is either a poor marker or one which cannot mark will not be a successful Master dog. He or she also must possess the combination of trainability with a desire to please.

The Labrador Retriever Club, Inc. publishes an annual yearbook which lists the past and current Champion Master



Am/Can Ch. Plantier's Ruthless Ruthie CD, WCX, MH. Owned by Dick and Corinne Plantier. Ruthie was the first chocolate champion/MH in the U.S.

Hunters. In addition, Labs who are show pointed and have obtained the Senior title are listed. Also published are many other listings of Labs who have earned multiple titles, etc. A unique award presented at each

yearly National LRC Inc. Specialty is the "Dog for All Reasons." The requirements for this award are listed in the premium of the National Specialty each year. The LRC is to be commended for offering this



Ch. Broad Reach Gripper MH, CD. Owned by Martha Lee and Buddy Voshell. Martha commented: "I did all Gripper's JH training, but got help for her Senior and Master titles. However, I ran her in all trials for the 3 titles. No particular roadblocks - just a lot of hard work!"

...and it is my hope that many individuals sign up for this opportunity to showcase their Lab as truly an all-around Lab. This takes a lot of dedication and time to train in multiple events, as well as owning a Lab who has the desire to learn various skills, as many, many

...and, finally, hunting retriever tests and other performance events as much as possible. She has become extensively involved in therapy dog work with veterans and nursing homes, and these therapy dogs are the very same ones who are running in advanced hunting retriever tests



Ch. Devon's Rough Magic TD, MH, WCX, CGC. Owned by Susane Berman. Susane commented: "A roadblock in the field training was my having to learn alongside her. It made for slow but steady progress."

Labradors do so. Each Lab owner is encouraged to obtain the rule book from the AKC for the numerous performance events offered.

It is my recommendation that one have an aspiration to have the all-around Labrador and shoot "for the stars" in order that his or her wonderful Labrador demonstrates the most awesome level of versatility possible. Not an easy task to accomplish, but one each and every individual can look into their new puppy's eyes and say, "Let's do it." •

Anne Evans bred and owned Ch. Duckback's Hi-Hope CD, MH, CGC, and the sixth Champion Master Hunter according to AKC records. She is also an AKC Hunting Retriever test judge at the Junior, Senior and Master levels. She participates in conformation, obedi-

or participating in conformation shows. She too, continues to aspire to obtain that elusive title, not forfeiting the conformation of a Labrador who "should look like a Lab" but continue to have those incredible retrieving abilities. Anne is an avid proponent of puppy testing at approximately seven weeks of age. That specific test, which she has developed, can be found on her website: Duckbacklabs.com. Whether or not one reaches that coveted CH MH title on their Lab, what a wonderful experience and ride one takes experiencing the bonding, love, and training, as well as "running into brick walls" along the way as we say. The achievement of conformation points and hunting retriever titles is challenging and extremely rewarding; thus developing a special bond which words cannot describe. •