

FINDING YOUR DREAM DOG

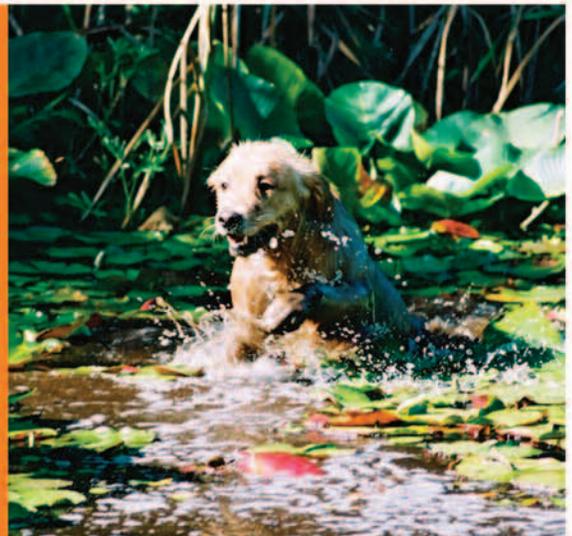
GRCA JUST BROUGHT THE SEARCH CLOSER TO REALITY

BY JAMES B. SPENCER



The GRCA has a new program to help you find the kind of dog you've always wanted.

On October 11, 2004, at their annual National Specialty in Malibu, CA, the Golden Retriever Club of America (GRCA), AKC's member club sponsoring the Golden Retriever in America, brought your dream dog a little closer to reality. Regardless of which sporting breed you prefer, GRCA just did you a big favor. Your dream dog, I assume, is an animal of your chosen breed that hunts as he should, has a simpatico personality, and looks like a "proper" dog of his breed.



Finding Your Dream Dog

“But, wait a minute,” you say. “Who said anything about looks? If a dog works well and minds me, I don’t give a hoot what he looks like!”

Oh? You *really* don’t care? Or have you just never had the opportunity to own a good worker that was also good looking? Given a choice, would you actually choose an ugly dog over a beauty, other things (like working ability) being equal?

The Problem: Competition

Trouble is, historically, we’ve had to choose our puppies from either show or field lines. Show lines produce physically attractive dogs, but they’re usually no great shucks afield. Field lines produce dynamite workers, but often with looks that are best overlooked.

Intense competition in conformation shows and field trials has split most sporting breeds into two dissimilar “sub-breeds.” To win, show breeders must focus on physical appearance, field breeders on working ability. Breeders who attempt both win at neither, and competitive people like to win.

Competition in field trials has produced wonderful workers that often don’t even superficially resemble the standard of their breeds...and, let’s face it, we spend much more time looking at our dogs than we do shooting over them!

Similarly, competition in conformation shows has led to various fads that make the dogs undesirable as workers. Many breeds (setters, Golden Retrievers, and spaniels) must have excessive coat to win in the show ring. Others (especially retrievers, but also pointing breeds, and spaniels) must be too heavy and cumbersome. And so on.

Partial Solution

Shortly after WWII, the various national breed clubs began implementing non-competitive “working certificate” tests to allow conformation breeders opportunities to prove their stock’s working ability in a venue more stable and less demanding than field trials. These tests vary from breed to breed, but have the following common characteristics: tests in two or three graduated levels of difficulty; non-competitive pass/fail judging; and appropriate titles (WC, WCX, WD, WDQ, RDX, SDX, and so on) to be placed after successful dogs’ names in pedigrees.

In general, the work expected in these tests, although less demanding than that of field trials, is sufficiently challenging to make these titles meaningful to hunters, especially when studying pedigrees of prospective litters.

Thus, the working certificate tests of the various national breed clubs solved the field half of our problem long ago, long before hunt tests offered us an even more thorough solution. Any dog capable of doing the work expected of his breed can earn a working certificate title, even if most such dogs can’t succeed in competitive field trials.

But the conformation half of our problem remained. In reading pedigrees, we could still assure ourselves of good conformation only through competitive dog show titles, which competition puts beyond the reach of most dogs with acceptable conformation.

CC Programs

GRCA took a vigorous step towards rectifying this imbalance on October 11, 2004, when they introduced their non-competitive “Certificate of Conformation Assessment” (CCA) program at their annual national specialty in California. This program is to dog shows what the working certificate programs are to field trials.

It offers field breeders a chance to have the conformation of their dogs evaluated objectively against the breed standard in a non-competitive environment. The program offers a title (CCA) to be placed after successful dogs’ names in pedigrees, thereby enlightening puppy buyers about the conformation of a litter’s forebears much as the working certificate titles enlighten them about their field ability.



The three judges with their clipboards, from the left: Marcia Schlehr, Pluis Davern, Kaye Fuller, DVM

GRCA wasn’t the first to initiate such a program. Back in the early 1980s, the Vizsla Club of America (VCA) launched its non-competitive Versatility Certificate program, which includes a Conformation Certificate (CC), a Field Dog Certificate (FDC), and an Obedience Certificate (OC). In 1993, the Boykin Spaniel Society (BSS) began their non-competitive Conformation Certificate (CC) program. And in 1999, the Labrador Retriever Club (LRC) initiated their Conformation Certificate (CC) program.

These programs differ from one another in the details, but they are similar in the essentials: non-competitive conformation evaluations by qualified judges against the written breed standard, with no requirement for dog show grooming or handling techniques. (LRC conducts their CC tests only at field events, where the dogs are fresh from working, the handlers attired in hunting togs.)



A handler gaits her Golden as the three judges (at right) watch and evaluate the dog.

Why, then, is the GRCA program so significant? Because GRCA “has the numbers,” being the world’s largest single breed club, with almost 6,000 members! BSS has 2,400; while VCA has 850; and LRC has 650. Thus, GRCA has increased the number of people aware of these CC programs by over 150 percent.

Then, too, many GRCA members own other breeds, so they will influence other national breed clubs in this direction. As the word spreads, other national breed clubs will initiate similar programs, just as they initiated working certificate programs after WWII.

In fact, while researching this article, I contacted each sporting breed club to find out which has such programs. Three clubs responded that they had never heard of such a program, but liked the idea and will bring it up for consideration at their next board meeting.

Clearly, it’s not unreasonable to expect most sporting breed national clubs to initiate similar programs within, say, the next 10 years. Thereafter, you and I will be able to identify our potential dream dogs much more easily by reading pedigrees. The right combination of working certificates and conformation certificates in a litter’s immediate forebears (first three generations) will give us as much assurance as a pedigree can that the puppies will be what we’re looking for.

The GRCA Event

The GRCA committee that finalized the CCA rules consisted of: Betty Gay (chair), Terry Thorton, Barbara Loree, and Robin Bowen. The rules limit entries to dogs over 18 months old. Ten physical “categories” are judged: general appearance, head, neck and topline, body, forequarters, hindquarters, coat and color, gait and coordination, temperament, and overall impression.

Each of three highly qualified judges gives the dog a numerical score from zero (totally unacceptable) to 10 (exceptional quality) in each category, for a maximum



Judge Pluis Davern evaluates a standing but not “stacked” Golden.

three) from each of three judges, but not necessarily in the same event. If a dog fails to get the required three passing scores in two events, he cannot try again. Demanding rules, to be sure.

The judges for the inaugural GRCA CCA test were Pluis Davern, Kaye Fuller, DVM, and Marcia Schlehr. Pluis (a pro trainer) and Marcia are licensed AKC conformation judges. Interestingly, 40 years ago, at the 1964 GRCA National Specialty, Marcia was one of the four people who qualified a dog in GRCA’s first WC test. All three judges have extensive experience in dog shows, field trials, hunting tests and obedience trials.

To avoid the pandemonium often associated with large entries, GRCA limited this first event to 12 dogs. Twenty-three applied, so they drew 12 from a hat. Of the eight earning CCA titles, one is a field trial qualified all-age dog (QAA), five have AKC hunting test titles, three have AKC obedience titles, four have AKC tracking titles, and four have agility titles. Names of the successful dogs:

Calliope's Lily of the Field TD, JH, MX, MXJ, MXP, MJP, WC (Patricia Lindquist)
 Smithhaven's Drivin' Miss Daisy CDX, JH WCX (June Smith)
 Morningstar Candy Apple Red CD, TD, AX, OAJ, WC (Cindy & Mike Mildbrand)
 Firemark's Piece of Cake MH*** (Mary L. Cole)
 Gracious Golds That's Amore (Steve & Sue Lusa and Deb Feagan)
 OTCH Coppertop Keepsake UDX, TDX, JH, OA, OAJ, WC (Terry & Steve Southard)
 MACH2 Coppertop's Live Wire VCD2, UDT, MH, WCX (Patricia J. White)
 Maritime Star Crowned Briton (Karen W. Webb)

Each of the other four entrants earned a qualifying score from at least one judge and can still try for the other one or two at a future event.

"Many thanks to each person who entered a dog," judge Marcia Schlehr said. "This was new to us, new to them, and we commend them all for participating. The dogs came from varied backgrounds: field, agility, obedience, all areas, really. I commented that one joyous Golden (that was so much fun!) perhaps needed some training, only to find out he has earned multiple obedience titles! Temperaments? Wonderful, all high scores."

"I tried to keep in mind," judge Kaye Fuller said, "that we were comparing these dogs to the 'average' Golden, and I feel like my veterinary practice helped me get that impression of the dogs. It was heartening to see so many dogs clearly above average."

"There are truly a number of Golden retrievers out and about that richly deserve recognition as worthy specimens and potential breeding stock," judge Pluis Davern said. "One dark red Golden whose type we used to see in the '60s and '70s was structurally so superior he made our three collective hearts sing!"

The Future

Since the sporting breed clubs' collective working certificate tests stimulated the major registries (AKC, CKC, and UKC) to initiate their excellent non-competitive hunt test programs, one needs no crystal ball to see where these breed club CC programs will lead in the foreseeable future.

In 1984, UKC (then associated with NAHRA) initiated its three-level "hunts" for retrievers, with appropriate titles for several passes at given levels. AKC followed suit in 1985 with its three-level retriever "hunting test" format, with titles for multiple passes at each level. NAHRA (divorced from both UKC and AKC) started its own three-level retriever "field tests," with titles for multiple passes at appropriate levels. Then, in 1986, AKC launched its pointing dog hunting tests, patterned after its retriever program. In 1987, AKC added similar spaniel hunting tests, thereby offering non-competitive field pro-

grams for all sporting breeds. For both AKC and UKC these programs have been the fastest growing (and most lucrative) in their long histories. In Canada, during that period, CKC initiated similar non-competitive hunting test programs for retrievers and spaniels. Of course, we shouldn't forget that, way back in the late 1960s, NAVHDA began conducting its highly respected non-competitive tests for versatile (pointing) breeds.



Here are the eight successful Golden retrievers with their owners. The three judges are in the second row on the right.

With such history, such success, AKC, CKC, and UKC will almost certainly initiate non-competitive conformation evaluation programs. Actually, such programs are far more promising today than hunt tests were in 1984. Hunt tests were limited to sporting and hound breeds, but conformation evaluations can encompass all recognized breeds. Think of the potential number of events, the potential number of entries, and (more crassly) the potential income such programs would generate.

After the major registries launch their conformation evaluation programs, every potential dog owner, regardless of breed, will be able to find his dream dog much more easily by limiting his search to litters with pedigrees lavishly decorated with appropriate non-competitive conformation and performance titles. Since the titles are non-competitive, any worthy dog can earn them, without having to "beat" countless other worthy dogs.

For More Information

If you like these non-competitive CC programs, why not contact your favorite breed's national club and encourage them to implement such a program. To do so, check the following websites: www.akc.org, www.ukcdogs.com, www.ckc.ca.

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