

A First in FRANCE

by Bill Dillon

After seven hours of flight, the pilot announced that we were landing at Charles de Gaulle Airport in France, but the trip had actually been much longer than that. This was the next leg in the process of four years of learning, meeting new friends, walking behind judges, and helping and watching friends train and compete with their dogs in the FCI European venue of pointing dog field trials that I have come to respect so much.

So here I was, at Air France's cargo hold to get my *Épagneul Breton* (French Brittany), Tatoo, that had accompanied me on the trip; and, renting an Avis small cargo van, we started on our way.

No American had handled a dog in the spring trials before. In 2004, I had spent three weeks training and assisting my friend Dominique Pozo with Tatoo in preparation for trials – Tatoo was born in France at Dominique's kennel. Dominique is one of the top amateur handlers in France, and my dream was to handle my own dog. The field trial season starts in Spain in February on wild chukars, and in March they move to France on wild gray partridge and continue through April when they end due to the nesting of the birds.

This year I had entered seven field trials with the average entry of dogs at 200-plus. Except for one trial being a breed-specific event, the rest were comprised of all Continental breeds including *Épagneul Bretons*, GSP's, griffons, Vizslas, Drathaars, Weimerciners, etc. These trials are all run on wild gray partridge and are on a continuous course of fields, never running over the same ground. The cover is winter wheat, *colza*, sugar beets, and woods and is, depending on what part of the country, a lot like Nebraska, Kansas, or



South Dakota, with large fields, rolling hills, and woodlots.

Each breed is judged according to its running style. They aren't running to objectives; rather they are quartering to cover the field in shooting-dog fashion. An example of the quarter would be that the dog goes out 100 yards to each side and crosses at about 40 yards in front of the handler to cover the field. The quarter must always be to the front, working into the wind. When the bird is pointed, the dog must be steady to wing and shot – it is as close to actual foot hunting as possible.

I've trained dogs and hunted for 40 years. My wife Kathy and I own a wild-pheasant hunting lodge in South Dakota, and I also raise and train foot-hunting shooting dogs. The French system of trialing promotes shooting dogs. I'm in no way saying that it's superior to trials in the U.S.; its objectives are just different and fit into the objectives that I and other foot-hunting people require.

I'm very lucky to have met so many friends in France and to have had many of them visit us here in America and hunt our wild pheasants with us. While I was in France, I had the privilege of being invited to stay at their homes and at the farmhouse rented by several trainers where we trained together and which we used as a base while trialing. I was the crazy American who didn't speak French and was competing against folks who, in many cases, were the latest in several generations of handlers and breeders. For the first couple of years, they were very polite, but I was still a guy from America. But there's something about the common ground of hunting dogs and the passion and

respect that we all have for the dogs that creates a common bond that goes further than language, country, or breed.

Tatoo had been working almost perfectly in training on wild pheasants in South Dakota, so he was ready. However, the weak link was his handler, and the first three trials were a learning curve for me, with nerves, excitement, and it being my first attempts at handling him myself in this venue, all of which affected the end results. Finally, one evening at supper, we were all sitting around the table and all my friends agreed, "Bill you're a hunter, we know – we've hunted with you in America. Just go out tomorrow and 'hunt' Tatoo."

The next morning at Fontaine, one of the biggest trials for Continental breeds in Europe with somewhere around 250 dogs entered, the judge gave me the word to release Tatoo, and I decided to take my friends' advice and just "hunt" him. We had a great time with three exceptional points on three pairs of gray partridge, and a perfect run. The gallery, made up of other competitors and onlookers who had been silent and probably skeptical, were now smiling at me on my walk back to the van and were giving me the thumbs up, saying, "Tatoo tres bon!"

Returning to the rendezvous point, I knew that we should get something because of his great performance, but I wasn't sure what. Then it was announced that Tatoo had won the

Certificat d'Aptitude au Championnat de Travail (CACT) – a dog needs four CACT awards in trials to achieve a champion title. I was floored, excited, and happy all at once – everything that goes with winning, especially in a foreign country.

The judge, M. Louis, remarked that Tatoo had run a perfect course and was an excellent *Breton*. He reiterated that he had not cut the American and his dog any slack. Everyone there was extremely happy for Tatoo and me – the old, gray-haired American had done it: the first CACT ever for an American handler and an American-owned *Breton*.

With Internet, e-mail, and other forms of modern communication and rapid transportation, the world we live in is smaller and unbelievably more accessible. A round-trip flight to Europe is not that much more than one to the East or West coasts from my home. The countries of origin for your breed of choice are, for the most part, in Europe, and I know owners of all the breeds would enjoy taking a trip to Europe to watch them run in the spring trials; to meet people who have the same passions; and to experience the landscape, fine cuisine, and traditions that are many generations old.

Am I going back? You bet. And I hope to do so for many years. Do I want to win again? Sure do. But even if I don't take the big win, the pure enjoyment of the whole experience will take me back again.



The author and Tatoo getting ready to make a mark in France.



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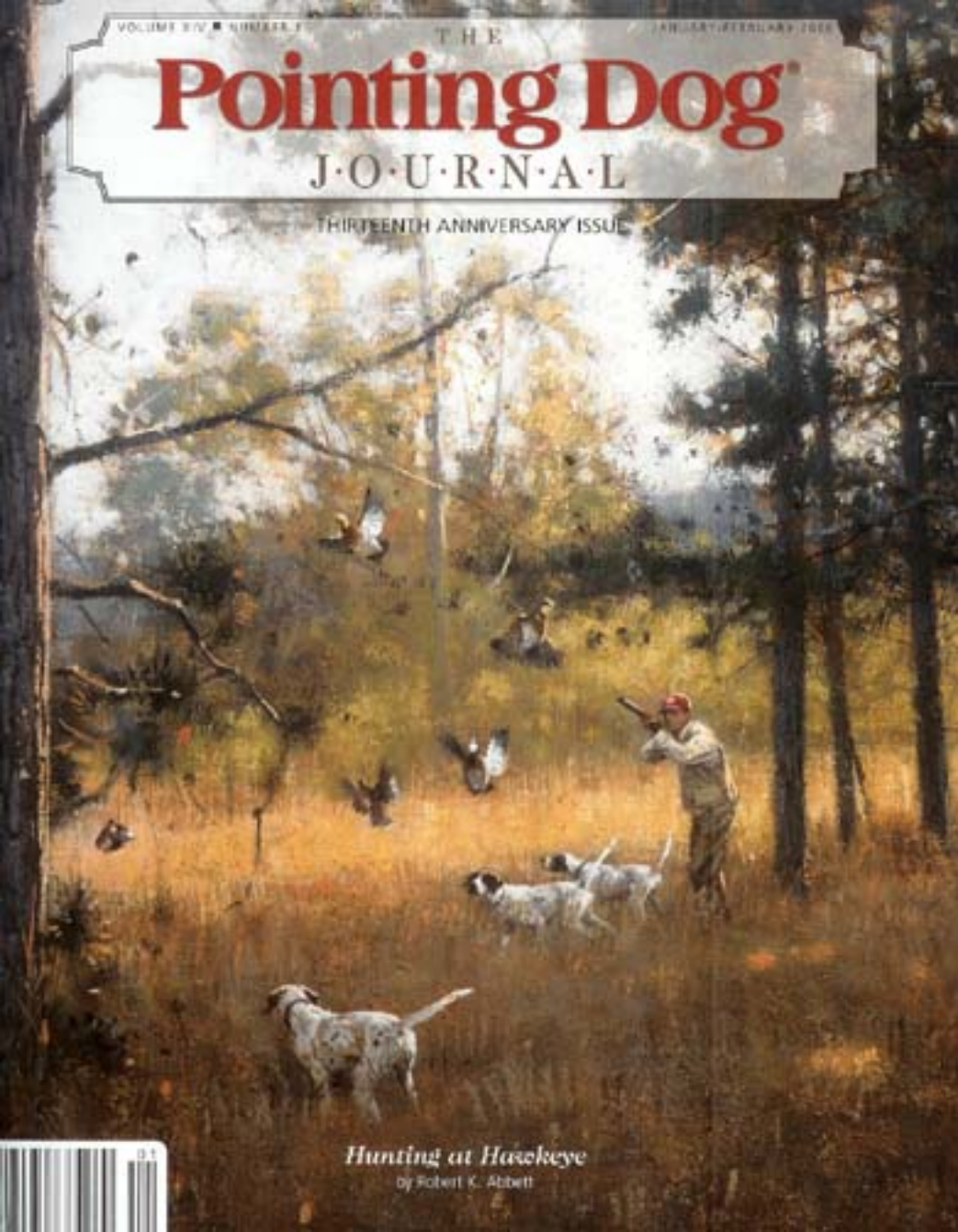
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