

# on the World Stage

by Bill Dillon

The *Star Spangled Banner* was being played, and I was standing in front of the judges with teams from 14 other countries competing in the FCI's 2008 *Coupe d'Europe* for Continental pointing breeds, a competition that is representative of the best examples of the Continental breeds in the world. This year it was held in Mlada Boleslav in the Czech Republic, which not too many years ago had been an Eastern Bloc country. In 2009 it will be hosted by and held in Spain.

The U.S. had never been represented before nor had there ever been dogs qualified to run in the Euro Cup previously, so this moment was a historic one. With the blessings of the American Kennel Club and the *Federation Cynologique Internationale*, and with the approval of the Continental Field Trial Commission, I was proud to be standing with all the other teams with the American flag and two of my *Epagneul Bretons* (French Brittans), CH. Tatoo du Bois Courcol, Tr., and CH. Ultra de la Source Aux Perdrix, Tr. as the official representative of the U.S.

I can't put into words how I felt when the national anthem was played. Nor can I express the emotion of receiving resounding applause at the awards ceremony as I accepted the award for Tatoo's winning a *Tres Bon* earlier in the day.

At the Euro Cup, there were three judges, all from different countries, judging each dog. The fields were good and the weather was fine, but a wind that kept constantly changing direction, the scarcity of partridge (the trials are run on wild birds), and the abundance of hares and deer made it one of the toughest days in the field I've experienced in trials. Though Ultra performed well, unfortunately, there were no birds on his course and thus no placement was possible. Tatoo encountered

hares five different times as well as two *chevreuil* (deer) during his run. So much distraction can be too much temptation for a dog, and some good dogs were eliminated due to that; but both my boys honored the hares without giving chase, and both gave performances throughout their courses that I was proud of. Tatoo was successful in taking a *Tres Bon* award for his run, one of only eight dogs to receive an award out of all the competitors that day.

This journey had taken eight years of learning, competing, and traveling across France to get here, beginning, annually, in 1999. At first simply attending the spring field trials to observe, I saw a style of competition that closely resembled actual hunting conditions. And having been a hunter for nearly 50 years and owning a wild bird-hunting lodge in South Dakota, I respect the challenges



Ultra



*Bill, Tatoo, and Ultra represented the U.S. very well.*

*Bill moves in on Tatoo.*



that only wild birds afford, and thus my interest was piqued because the spring trials in France are held strictly on wild partridge.

For the next three years, I traveled to France each spring to walk with judges to learn the rules and how they are applied – and to be with my French friends who are handlers in the trials to learn the nuances of the game. I first began handling in the spring trials in France in 2005, winning our first CACT with Tatoo, a first for any American dog and handler. He went on to obtain his trialer title and a ranking of “Recommended Stud” that year.

In 2006, Ultra obtained his trialer title and his championship title. By my third year of competing, I had dogs that were qualified to run in the French Cup; and in 2007, Ultra was awarded a reserve CACT in the Cup. This was another first because I was the first American to compete in the Cup or to ever have dogs qualified to run in the French Cup.

The next level up from that is the Euro Cup (*Coupe d'Europe*), but because America was not

a country in the European Union, the FCI had to approve the entry of an American who would be officially representing the USA. The AKC had to officially approve it as well, a process that was too lengthy for a 2007 entry but that was completed in time for the 2008 season.

The UK and European countries, of course, are the origin for Continental and British breeds. The FCI trial system in France that I have been involved in has been used to test the hunting ability for many generations, creating, maintaining, and improving the breeds over the decades. *The Federation Cynologique Internationale* is the international regulating body for all European dog events, both field and show, with each country having its own national registering bodies. There are 84 member countries and 339 different breeds.

Many ask: What is the difference between the trials over there and those here in the U.S.? The trials there are always held on wild birds. No field is ever covered twice, and the courses are run concurrently. The dogs are required to quarter and thoroughly search the ground rather than run to objectives. Each dog is expected to work *according to the style that is correct for that breed*, which means that the judge takes into consideration the run, the movement, the range, the style of point, how the head is held while on point and during the dog's run, and assesses it all according to its breed. A Brittany works differently from a GSP, a griffon is different than an Italian pointer, etc. The Continental breeds (Bretons, GSPs, griffons, vizslas etc.) and the British breeds (setters and pointers) have separate trials but utilize the same rules, the only difference being the British breeds run wider.

The trials begin at a central meeting location called a rendezvous where you find out which concourse you are assigned to and who your judges will be. The spring trials average about 150 dogs per trial. Some may have entries nearly twice that number. If a trial has 150 dogs, it would be divided up into 10 concourses of 15 dogs each, each concourse having an assigned judge and a guide, who is a person knowledgeable of the area and the land that is to be run. Each group will run in a different area, sometimes several miles apart because each dog will run on a field just once because of the wild bird factor: You wouldn't hunt the same field over and over again, so each dog begins where the last dog ended. The fields are very large, and the cover varies in density and height.

There are, of course, hare and deer that can also be encountered in these natural conditions. Your dog must honor and not chase any game but continue on in its pursuit of partridge. The dogs must be absolutely steady to wing and shot and always in control of the handler. At the completion of a point with no faults, the driver (handler) leashes the dog while the dog remains steady, and they return to the judge. The dog is then released again to continue its search until the completion of the course. The dog must cover the ground completely with perfect running style to achieve a top score (CACT). *Should a bird be missed anywhere on the field, the dog is eliminated. Should the dog move even slightly while on point, it's eliminated.*

The rules are demanding and strictly enforced. How much drive and enthusiasm is displayed by the dog has a part in the scoring. How you handle the dog and how much you

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have to handle the dog also plays a part. Then you also have to factor in that about 25 percent of the time your dog will not encounter any birds during its run. Though the areas utilized for the trials are chosen because they historically hold birds, there is no guarantee that they'll be located in your concourse. It's just like actual hunting: Wild birds are not always found on every field. It's pretty unfortunate when your dog's worked perfectly only to come up empty at the end of its time, but it's a part of the scenario, and everyone who competes realizes that.

**T**he awards system is made up of three levels of awards, the CACT, Excellent, and *Tres Bon*. Only the CACT counts towards a championship title. There are four CACTs required for males and three CACTs for females to be awarded a championship title. In addition to the field awards, the dog must also receive at least a "Very Good" placement in a conformation show prior to the championship title for the trials being designated.

The average qualification for an award in a trial of 150 dogs or more is 10 percent or fewer per trial. For example at the *Coupe d'Europe* where Tadoo was awarded a *Tres Bon*, out of all the dogs entered, as I mentioned earlier, there were only eight qualifying dogs that received awards. The spring trial season begins late February and runs to mid April when nesting begins. Only one to two percent of the dogs competing in the spring trial season progress to the championship level. The average time that it takes a dog to complete its championship title in spring trials in France is two to three trial seasons. There are about 30 trials every season with people from many countries participating and hundreds of dogs competing for a few select awards.

With the Internet and communications that we have today, the world has become a much smaller place. When we first began communicating with people in Europe it took two weeks to send a letter and another two weeks to get one back, and phone calls were very expensive. But today with e-mail, text messages, and low phone rates, communication is as simple as contacting someone here in America. I have many friends I talk with on a weekly basis in Europe and friends from France, Ireland, and Germany who have come here to visit us and hunt with us and have gone back with a new understanding of America. By visiting their countries, I was able to see so many breeds of hunting dogs in their country of origin, and I learned the traditions and methods that have been used through generations of hunting, breeding, and trialing those breeds that have maintained their consistency and natural abilities over decades.

If you hunt a GSP or a Weimaraner, or if you hunt test a vizsla or griffon; if you field trial a Brittany or a pointer or any other pointing breed, you may want to visit one of these trials to see your breed of interest competing and to talk with owners of the breed who love them as much as you. If it's just for one visit or the beginning of a competing journey, I promise you it will be worth it.



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