

SPORTS

Plum Creek Kennels trains, breeds canines for hunting, companionship

ARMOUR--Hunting has been a lifelong passion for Bill Dillon and his dogs--it's in their blood. Dillon, who together with his wife, Kathy, owns and operates Plum Creek Kennels in Armour, said the goals of their breeding program go beyond simply hunting, however.

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Six-year-old French Brittany Doc goes searching for a quail bird. (Matt Gade/Republic)

His intention is to breed a top-of-the-line bird dog, but he said that other traits, like temperament and family companionship, are just as important.

"It's about the joy that the dog brings to people at other times," Dillon said. "If you're out in the field hunting 14 days a year, you have the other 50 weeks where the dog fills the other criteria of being with your family."

He leaves it to the pups to bring joy to their new families during the off season, but takes responsibility for training the dogs how to behave and maximize their potential in the field

Plum Creek Kennels specializes in the breeding of French Brittansys, and the training of any bird dog breed.

As dedicated breeders, they make yearly trips to France to research and form breeder relationships that allow them to import the best French Brittany bloodlines in Europe, according to Dillon. They also compete in field trials and have obtained numerous international titles, with many of both Dillon and his dogs' accomplishments being the first or only breeder/dog from America to achieve certain distinguishments. For example, in 2005, his dog, Tattoo, after competing in the French National Breed Show, earned the status of Recommended Sire, becoming the only dog from North America to have done so.



Bill Dillon sends six-year-old French Brittany Doc out looking for a quail. Bill and Kathy Dillon are bird dog trainers that specialize in breeding French Brittansys at their place Plum Creek Kennels west of Armour. (Matt Gade/Republic)

Breed of choice

Although the French Brittany is the couple's personal breed of choice, Dillon said he doesn't think the breed is superior to any other.

He explained that an unfortunate circumstance of the hunting world is that many dog owners experience a "breed blindness" where they are dead-set on believing that the breed they own is best, and want to convince others of the same.

"I've been doing this 40-years plus, and I've seen a lot of breed blindness, and I think it's hindering the people that have never had a dog and are coming into the sporting dog world for what to get and not to get."

He compared choosing a breed to buying a car, saying that they all go from Point A to Point B, (when it comes to hunting) but they just do it a little differently (pointers, setters, flushers, retrievers etc.).

"There's too much of this beating up on each other's breeds," Dillon said. "Instead of keeping focus on what you're doing with the dog and the activities and the memories and the fun you're going to have with them, it's competitive."

When it comes to breeds, Dillon said he prefers the mentality of children. They don't care if it's a Labrador or a Beagle or a Brittany, they just want the puppy, he said.

Dillon explained his adoration for Brittanys by praising their looks, size, their gentle disposition that make them good with people, specifically his grandchildren, and for their consistency.

"They've been very consistent for us as a breeder and for someone that uses them every day," Dillon said. "I want to be able to close my eyes and pick a puppy out of a litter and know that they're going to hunt for me."

Such consistency leads to repeat customers, he said.



Six-year-old French Brittany Doc darts out looking for a quail as Bill Dillon sends him in different directions. Bill and Kathy Dillon are bird dog trainers that specialize in breeding French Brittanys at their place Plum Creek Kennels west of Armour. (Matt Gade/Republic)

Plum Creek Kennels has been a full-time business for the Dillons for 19 years, but Kathy said they didn't originally plan on breeding dogs.

"We didn't really plan on the breeding part, we would just hunt with our own dogs and people would like the experience so much that they'd ask if we could have a litter so they could get a pup," she said.



Six-year-old French Brittany Doc has his eyes on a quail as Bill Dillon keeps him under control. Bill and Kathy Dillon are bird dog trainers that specialize in breeding French Brittansys at their place Plum Creek Kennels west of Armour. (Matt Gade/Republic)

Training for finished dogs

As for the training, that's something Bill has been doing since he was a kid.

The majority of dogs they train, roughly 70 percent, Dillon said are young, within the 7- to 14-month-old range. Training periods are typically two months long, and then it's time for the dogs to practice what they've learned with their owners, he said. They also offer secondary, intermediate training if particular issues, such as gun shyness, persist.

Dillon referred to the CPR of dog training-consistency, patience and repetition-saying that each aspect is essential, and they take time to master. He said it takes about three years to get what he would consider a finished dog.

"We're in such an instant world today," Dillon said. "Everything's instant-from oatmeal, to the information that we get-and people want an instant dog. But you can't just put a collar on a dog and put him out in the field and expect him to be flawless."

He explained that one of the biggest problems he's seen throughout the years is owners not being able to control their dogs, and often relying on e-collars to do the work for them.

However, Kathy added that if you employ that repetition, consistency and patience with commands, the dogs will learn to obey you first, without an e-collar.

Dillon also offers one-on-one hunt train seminars in which the owner is present in the field on a hunt.

"A lot of times the owner needs to be trained as much as the dog does on how to handle the dog in certain situations, and during the seminars we can address it right then and there in the field," he explained.

For the South Dakota business, Dillon estimated that about 80 percent of their dog training clients are from out of state.

Kathy guessed this was because other states don't have the number of birds and hunting ground available for dog owners to train on. Whereas in South Dakota, many people will do the training themselves because they've got the birds/cover within 20 or so minutes to their house, she said.

Bill Dillon agreed, saying if there are three things that make a bird dog better, "it's birds, birds and birds."