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Where Grouse Are King

by Craig Doherty

In the woods of the Northeast, Pennsylvania, and the upper Midwest there aren't any native quail, pheasants, huns, chukars or chickens. There are grouse. Ruffed grouse. The most fabled of American game birds. And from the first field trials run in the Northeast to today there have been many devoted grouse trialers and just as many great grouse dogs.

In an article that appeared in *The American Field*, written for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Grand National Grouse Championship, titled "Historical Memories", H. Lee White wrote of the first grouse trials, including those that were run by the New England Field Trial Club at Assonet, Massachusetts starting in 1891, followed in 1899 by the Connecticut Field Trial Club running at Hampton, seven miles north of Scotland, Connecticut. Clubs dedicated to grouse trialing were also started in Pennsylvania, New York, and Michigan in those early days of field trialing.

Many of the early grounds have long since been cut down and paved over but the fire has continued to burn for grouse trialers. Today, there are more grouse trials than ever and much of the current enthusiasm can be attributed to the unifying efforts of the Grand National Grouse Championship.

In the early 1940's, grouse trialers began discussing the need for a single grouse championship that would be free of regional influence. Three men have been credited with being the spark plugs behind the idea. Hall of Fame members Sam R. Light and W. Lee White led, respectively, the Pennsylvania and New England contingents, while John Hadaway spearheaded the efforts in Michigan which brought together 33 men at the Hotel Statler in Cleveland, Ohio on Saturday, August 21, 1943, to discuss and organize a national grouse championship. These were men of action who quickly crystallized their ideas into



Pauchek's Tommyknocker

1st Woodcock Futurity - 1994
Wr. Grand National Grouse Championship - 1995
Wr. Venango Classic - 1996
Wr. Grouse and Woodcock Invitational - 1996
R/U Nellie DiSalvo Grouse and Woodcock Classic - 1996
R/U Northern New England Woodcock Championship - 1996
R/U Grouse and Woodcock Invitational - 1997

an organization and format whose trial has become the most coveted win in the woods. During that meeting, the Grand National Grouse Championship was born and continues with only minor modifications today.

The organization that was formed to oversee the Grand National consisted of directors from three regions; the Great Lakes: Ohio, Michigan and Wisconsin; the Central Atlantic: Pennsylvania, New Jersey, West Virginia and Virginia; and the Northeast: New England and New York. It was the intention of the charter that the Grand National would move about from region to region each year as long as suit-

able grounds were available. The first Grand National was started on Wednesday, October 27, 1943, and was run in the Black Forest near Jersey Shore, Pennsylvania. Caviar, a pointer male, owned by C. R. Barton and John S. Applegate bested the field of 22 setters and 4 pointers to become the first Grand National Grouse Champion.

For many years, the Grand National had a mandatory two hour second series before a champion could be declared and its name added to the coveted grouse bowl. That practice ended in 1959 and since that time, although there has been an occasional call

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Elhew Autumn Whisper

3rd North American Wood Futurity - 1992
Wr. Seminatore Walking Shooting Dog Classic - 1994
Wr. Northern New England Woodcock Championship - 1995
R/U Northeastern Woodcock Championship - 1995
Wr. North American Woodcock Championship - 1995
R/U New England Open Grouse Championship - 1995
Wr. North American Woodcock Championship - 1996
Wr. New England Open Grouse Championship - 1996
Wr. Grand National Grouse Championship - 1996



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back, the champion and runner-up have been named on a single one hour performance, a change that was very controversial at the time, but which has for the most part faded from the memory of grouse trialers.

The original charter for the Grand National called for the trial to be held in the location that the board of directors felt was best suited for the event each year. The intent was that the Grand National would run in a different section of the country each year as long as suitable grounds were available. The vagaries of grouse populations and the ever-changing habitat were to be taken into consideration. As it has turned out, over the last 54 years the Gladwin Wildlife Refuge in Michigan has hosted the trial 27 times, with the grounds at Marienville, Pennsylvania coming in a distant second with fourteen runnings of the Grand National, and the grounds at Pharsalia, New York third with the event being held there 10 times. The Grand National has only come to New England twice: it was held at Andover, Massachusetts in 1945 and in the Willowdale State Forest in Ipswich, Massachusetts in 1959. The last time the Grand National came to the Northeast was when it was run at Pharsalia in 1977. It is the hope of a dedicated group of New England grouse trialers that it will return to the Northeast in the near future (see related article on page 36).

Adequate grounds are a necessity when trying to run a trial on wild birds, but paramount to a successful championship is championship caliber performances. Only four times have the judges withheld the title of Grand National Grouse Champion and three of those times were before the changing of the running rules to eliminate the second series. In the

other fifty runnings of the Grand National, some great champions have been named and six dogs have truly distinguished themselves by winning it twice. Sam L's Skyhigh, setter male, owned by Sam R. Light and handled by Larry Tuttle won it in '49 and '50; Retina, pointer female, owned by John M. Hadaway and handled by Luther Smith won in '55 and '56; Sam L's Rebel, setter male, brought the bowl back to Sam R. Light under the whistle of Rich Tuttle in '60 and '61; Elhew Holly, pointer female, repeated in '67 and '68 for owners Robert Wehle and Dick Shear with Dick Shear handling; Pleasant Valley Liz, setter female, owned and handled by Dr. J. E. Stiteler won in '72 and '73; and Dr. Stiteler came back with Pleasant Valley Clyde, setter male, to win in '76 and '79.

Despite all of the great grouse dogs that have come and gone, only one has made it into the Hall of Fame: Grouse Ridge Will who ran at Pharsalia, New York in the 1970 renewal with owner Dr. Tom Flanagan handling. Will also won on quail, woodcock, and



6X Champion Grouse Ridge Will

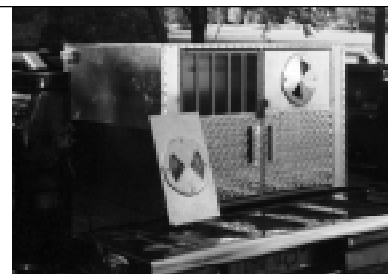


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pheasants showing great intelligence and adaptability as he went on to garner 84 placements in his career. His numbers of 84-139-909 place him among the elite dogs of any aspect of field trialing and many of the setters running in the woods today have Grouse Ridge Will sprinkled liberally throughout their pedigrees.

Trials are about dogs competing. They are also about the men and women who blow the whistles behind them. The grouse woods have their own luminaries, some of whom are in the Hall of Fame, others who should or will be. Hall of Fame member Luther Smith handled the winner in the Grand National five times between 1955 and 1963. Dave Hughes handled the winner seven times starting in 1977 with Teaberry, a son of Grouse Ridge Will owned by Dr. R. L. Hughes and his most recent win was with Grouse Ridge Storm in 1994. Jim Tande

was the winning handler four times in the 80's. Dave Grubb, recent winning trainer of the National Championship, set a record of a different sort when he won the Grand National in 1980. He achieved the unique record of handling dogs to wins on five different game birds: chickens, chukar, quail, pheasants, and grouse.

It isn't just the pros who have done well in the woods. Owners have handled their dogs to wins eighteen times in the Grand National. It is also the one area of the sport where setters still dominate having won the title 34 times. And, in 1995, the Grand National recorded another first as Kellie Fogg of Bar Mills, Maine became the first woman to own and handle the Grand National winner with Paucek's Tommyknocker, setter male. And to prove it was no fluke, Kellie and Tommy came back in the spring of 1996 to win the Grouse and Woodcock Invitational where the top 16 grouse and woodcock dogs of the previous season come together and compete head to head over three days of running.

The most recent running of the Grand National Grouse Championship was held at Gladwin and another New Englander, Dr. David Calcagni, won with his multiple champion Elhew Autumn Whisper who bested a field of 55 starters. The 1997 running of the Grand National Grouse Championship will be held at Marienville, Pennsylvania and will begin on November 4th. If you want to see for yourself what grouse trialing is all about, come to the Grand National or one of the other grouse trials held in the woods.