

# The Truth about Derbies:

## An Editorial

Some people can tell it's spring by the return of migratory birds, others look for the first crocus to bloom. However, if you are a field trialer, you know its spring when everyone starts talking again about broke derbies. The questions remain the same. Shouldn't a spring derby be more finished than a fall derby? Aren't broke derbies ruining field trials because they encourage breeders to hold back dogs? Isn't an important indicator of potential the ability to handle training, and if so, isn't a broke derby showing that ability? The usually staid *American Field* recently entered the fray when it printed a field trial report where the reporter of a prestigious derby championship raked the previous year's reporter over the coals for comparing the stake to an amateur shooting dog stake. The first reporter, apparently, was trying to make the point that so much pressure had been put on the derbies he saw, that they were for the most part mechanical, uninspiring dogs.

In the book *Field Trials: History, Management and Judging Standards* by the late editor of the *American Field*, William F. Brown, the section on derbies begins by stating "the derby is not a finished dog . . ." Brown goes on to state that a derby should be staunch but does not need to be steady. I know from experience that in certain areas of field trialing, like the grouse woods, even staunchness is often overlooked in judging derbies. At the other end of the spectrum, horseback derbies are often expected to show the same manners around birds as all-age and shooting dogs. There really doesn't seem to be a lot of common ground between the extremes, and the argument continues to rage without any signs of abating.

What those involved in the argument seem to be missing is the truth about derbies. First, there are way too many litters registered in January for

it to be believable. It is a safe bet that most puppies born in the late fall and early winter, that are going to be registered in the *Field Dog Stud Book*, are held until January. It is also widely reported that a handful of dogs are held back or reregistered a year or more after their true birth date. But more important than that is how we got to the idea of broke derbies and why we aren't going to go back. Not that long ago, a few very savvy trainers realized that they could break dogs at a young age and not take a lot out of them in the process. Training methods were evolving as was the idea of breeding more biddable dogs.

Once a few pros started showing up with broke dogs and winning with them, it was inevitable that their competitors would follow suit. The only time finished bird work was supposed to be considered in a derby stake was if all other aspects of the performance were equal. Then the dog with the more advanced manners on birds was to be given the nod. When almost all the derbies in the stake are broke, it's hard not to take it into consideration when trying to sort them out. It has gotten to the point where derbies are picked up in the same manner as adult dogs.

The argument about broke derbies on the major circuits has become just about moot. The people who make the most noise about not pressuring derbies to finish at an early age are those who haven't figured out how to break young dogs without making the signs of pressure obvious. Those who have figured out how to break derbies and still have them run an exciting derby-style race are going to continue to do it and continue to win. Those who can't, can either just keep complaining, or they can reexamine their training methods and learn how it's done.