

50 YEARS OF RETRIEVING TRIALS IN VICTORIA!

THEIR ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT

Reminiscences by Bob Maver

In July this year the Labrador Retriever Club of Victoria is celebrating 50 years of Retrieving Trials in Victoria with a commemorative trial. Due to my involvement in the introduction of these trials (and the fact that of those people involved at the beginning I may be the last man standing!) I have been asked to write an article on the history and saga of events leading up to their introduction. I hope you will find it interesting.

The Early Days

The first major event was the importation of Labrador Retrievers into Australia. The records show that Mr. & Mrs R.A.Austin, of Lake Bolac imported the first Labradors in 1929 – a dog and two bitches of the best bloodlines in England - from the famous Liddly Kennels in England. Next, in 1930, Miss Hilda Lascelles purchased a dog from the Austins' first litter and became totally rapt in the breed. After buying a bitch from the Austins in 1932 to begin breeding, Hilda embarked on a program of importing from Liddly Kennels - a dog and bitch in 1933, the working bitch, Liddly Appleblossom in whelp in 1934, and yet another bitch, Liddly Queencake, a year later. Hilda's consolidated Winlaton line became the cornerstone of the breed in Australia.

The retrieving trial saga really began when Hilda wanted her dogs, Appleblossom in particular, to be able to compete in their natural field work as retrievers, as in England. In the English style retrieving trials, live birds are driven by beaters across a line of handlers with their dogs, the birds are shot and then retrieved by the dogs as nominated by the judge. Clearly there was no prospect of reproducing this type of trial under Australian conditions. At the time, the only retrieving work here was a component of the hunt/flush/retrieve of Spaniel Field Trials, conducted mainly on rabbits. Towards accommodating Hilda's aspiration, in the late 1930s the Kennel Control Council's Field Trial Advisory Committee (FTAC) decided that retrievers would be included with spaniels in what then became Spaniel & Retriever Field Trials.

The next significant factor was when Russell and Rail Bridgford of Taumac Kennels purchased a puppy bitch, Winlaton Wheatsheaf (ex Liddly Queencake) as their foundation Labrador bitch. Russ was a keen competitor in Pointer & Setter Field Trials with English Setters, and he held all possible judging licences of the time - All Breeds in conformation, Pointer & Setter Field Trials, Spaniel Field Trials and Obedience. Russ offered to assist Hilda by handling her dogs in the new S&R Field Trials and achieved immediate success, with Liddly Appleblossom gaining the title of Field Trial Champion in 1940.

The Water Test Era

When World War II intervened and Field Trials were abandoned, this did not deter Hilda, as she and her friend and ally Rail Bridgford began testing their dogs by throwing tennis balls into the Yarra River at the Burke Road Bridge, Ivanhoe. They

gained support from others and requested the FTAC to allow the Victorian Gundog Club to conduct a new type of event, a Water Test (the tennis balls were replaced by dead pigeons!). The FTAC and KCC agreed and the first Water test was conducted in 1942, on the firm basis that no championship points would ever be awarded as it was not field shooting – not the real thing! The rules stated that the event would consist of one retrieve from water and another across water, using ‘simulated’ dead game. The qualification to judge a Water Test was a licence to judge S&R Field Trials.

The Water Test proved successful, but the VGC decided to limit it to an annual event as they already had a large commitment to ‘real’ field work.

At the end of the war, returning servicemen were attracted to various shooting sports, and particularly duck hunting with a retriever. This created a great opportunity and demand for Labrador Retrievers. It also resulted in a lot of interest in the VGC’s annual Water Test.

My involvement began in 1946, when I obtained my first Labrador– a yellow bitch puppy named Taumac Cinderella (Rella). We trained with Rail Bridgford and her team and I duly entered Rella in the 1947 VGC Novice Water Test, at the Burke Road Bridge, Ivanhoe. She was 8 months of age and I was a teenager. From memory there was a combined total of 33 entries for the Novice and Open, and 29 of those were first or second generation descendents of the prolific Winlaton Wheatsheaf. I was given the job of throwing the game – wading into the river, waving the game in my hand to attract the attention of the competing dog, then throwing it. Rella did well, but lost by prancing around when she thought it was playtime. I learnt the lesson and determined to do better the next year.

As a schoolboy then I had plenty of time for training, which we both enjoyed immensely - she would do anything for a tiny reward of cheese. We trained steadily for the next year, in the only water available within reach for me on my pushbike and Rella running alongside – Landcox Park, East Brighton and Caulfield Racecourse. We achieved the target by winning the Open Water test in 1948. I was elated, but suddenly realised that the full talents of the Labrador were not seriously challenged by the limitations of the Water Test, and why should a specialist retriever be required to do spaniel work to achieve a title in the field? I began a long-term plan for development of really worthwhile trials with the prospect of championship titles. I talked to Russ Bridgford about my ideas, but, as he pointed out, the powers-that-be in the FTAC also ran the VGC and were all hardened field shooting enthusiasts who were strongly resisting even an additional VGC water test. The VGC President Alan Penrose was a very friendly guy, so I spoke to him on the subject too, but he smiled as he gave his opinion - a plain and simple no, as it was only simulated field work. I wrestled long and hard in my mind as to how the nexus could be broken.

I had joined the VGC in 1946 and enthusiastically attended the monthly meetings held at the Railways Institute, at Flinders Street Station. It was better than doing homework. I showed Rella regularly and competed in S&R Field Trials when possible, more for experience than with the ambition of winning, as without transport we had no opportunity for training for rabbit hunting.

The Labrador Retriever Club is Formed

I found a number of owners of working Labradors with the same desire for more retrieving competition. Some were so strong in their feelings that they resigned from the VGC in protest, including the long-term committee member Charles Behrendt, who as early as 1928/29 had been a committee member of The Sporting Dog Club and its successor the VGC. The upshot was to plan formation of a new club to better cater for retriever work. Ollie Mickelson, a Curly Coated Retriever owner, also expressed interest in the proposed new club and so it was named the Victorian Retriever Club (VRC), formed in 1952 at a meeting of interested owners at Ensign Dry Cleaners premises at Northcote, with Len Matthews as President and Jim Gear Secretary. I was a foundation member, but made the point in a letter to that meeting that our objective should be to provide the vehicle for development of the breed in all aspects rather than be seen as a rival to the VGC. The VRC was able to gain approval to conduct a Water Test, which was held in August that same year.

Ollie Mickleson did not join the VRC and so in 1953 the name of the club was changed to the Labrador Retriever Club of Victoria (LRC). Two Water tests were approved for the LRC for 1954.

Years later I discovered that Charles Behrendt owned Ensign, and his son-in-law, Bill Badham, was Manager. Bill was a most successful owner/trainer, and later became LRC President.

The Proposition is Put

After gaining a licence to judge S&R Field Trials, in 1955, I was appointed as the Club's FTAC representative. In those days each of the clubs conducting field trials had the right to appoint their own representative to the FTAC, which met at the KCC offices on the 8th. Floor, Temple Court, 422 Collins Street, Melbourne.

When Jack Pontin became LRC President and Charles Allison Secretary, and with the rest of the Committee all field competitors, I felt the time was right to formally put forward my retrieving trial concept. I had prepared draft rules, based on the Water Test rules, expanded to provide the much wider scope of the intended work. At a committee meeting in 1955, held at the Russell-Collins Restaurant in the City, I proposed that the Club apply to the KCC for permission to conduct a new type of retrieving event on land and water with a variety of retrieves, to closely resemble duck shooting in the field, using simulated game, which if considered successful would provide the retrieving breeds with the opportunity to gain championship points towards a title in the field work for which they were traditionally bred. The motion was carried unanimously. The draft rules were submitted along with an appropriate motion as an agenda item for discussion at the next FTAC meeting.

At the next LRC committee meeting we had a long discussion on strategy and tactics to gain approval for the motion on retrieving trials. I admitted to concern due to the firm stance of the VGC and my previous knock-back by the FTAC Chairman. Charlie Allison had become a good friend and advisor to me. His business acumen was illustrated by his long years of experience as a nurseryman selling pot plants to Coles and making a good profit. He could 'talk the leg off an iron pot'! He proposed that he replace me as representative for the vital FTAC meeting, predicting that it would take an experienced campaigner to overcome the resistance of the 'greybeards'. We could all see the logic and readily agreed.

At the FTAC meeting there were no speakers in support for the LRC motion other than Charlie, and so he began a dissertation on the merits of the Labrador Retriever breed, the history of its development by the 5th. Duke of Buccleugh and the 3rd. Earl of Malmesbury as a specialist retriever in the 1870's, the development of field trials for retrievers in the UK, the importance of such work to retain the wonderful retrieving instincts of the breed, the need to perpetuate this in Australia, and the exciting prospects of the proposed retrieving trials. Apparently the speech lasted for hours, with dissenters ignored by Charlie, until resistance caved in as it approached midnight, the time at which the building was due to close. Finally it was agreed that a preliminary trial would be approved for purposes of evaluation by the FTAC, and, with all resistance gone, Charlie then had that increased to two preliminary trials. Hooray for Charlie!

The First Trials

In 1956, I was delighted to be given the job of judging two LRC Water Tests for experience leading up to judging the preliminary trials later that year. It seems incredible that the site for the first preliminary trial was on a grassy swampland in Salmon Street, South Melbourne, where the Kraft factory was built soon after. There was nothing except the Yarra River between there and Flinders Street railway station. There were plenty of enthusiastic competitors on the day and all went well. The second preliminary trial was on the river at Werribee, immediately south of the bridge. That also went well.

Although most other FTAC representatives were conspicuous by their absence at the preliminary trials, and despite one member labelling the control work as a 'circus trick', the retrieving trial concept was approved by FTAC and two official trials were approved for 1957, with championship points available. The long battle had been won!

It was an honour to be selected to judge the first two official trials, scheduled for June 1, 1957 (Novice) and July 13 (Open) on Nat White's property on the Yarra at Templestowe. I have a copy of the catalogue for the Novice which shows me as judge whereas the records show Jack Pontin officiated. When I sat down to write this I had difficulty in recalling what great event could have prevented me from judging. Then I received an invitation to my son's 50th. birthday party – he was born in the early hours of June 2, 1957. It was a thrill to judge the Open the following month, challenging my brain to set an appropriate test of the ability of dogs and handlers, and then witnessing the high quality of work in response. Bill Badham's dog, Rosemoor Rajah, was outstanding. On one run I was testing the ability of the dogs to remember the line to the bird after being diverted by a 20 metre wide clump of blackberries. Rajah went straight through it and returned the same way. I can still picture his proud expression, even though thorns and spots of blood were all over his nose! Rajah was the first to achieve the title of KCC Retrieving Trial Champion and later KCC Dual Champion. He even won the Challenge at the Melbourne Royal.

Rapid Expansion and Development

Further trials were conducted that year and in 1958, culminating in the highly successful inaugural KCC Championship Retrieving Trial. The enthusiasm of owners and dogs was tremendous. That was my last judging appointment for some years as I was transferred to USA in my work. While there I was able to attend a number of

AKC retrieving trials. These were similar to our trials in most respects and it was good to obtain their rules and witness their judging methods and types of retrieves for future reference. However I could not believe we would ever adopt their use of shackled birds.

On returning to Melbourne I found that Retrieving Trials had expanded interstate. NSW had apparently developed similar trials in parallel, based on USA rules brought back by Len De Groen. Retrieving Trials spread quickly to all States and Territories. NZ was also conducting retrieving trials and Inter-Dominion Trials were held. After the ANKC was formed an annual National Retrieving Trial was introduced, conducted by Member Bodies on a rotation basis, with the title of National Retrieving Trial Champion awarded to the winner.

It has always been a very rewarding experience to witness the remarkable instincts and intelligence of the dogs and the capacity of the dog and handler team to meet every new challenge set by the judges and the other competitors. The more the capacity has been challenged the better has been the performance. I wonder just how far this can go?

It has been a wonderful experience for many people and their dogs to train and compete in Retrieving Trials over the 50 years, and a delight to judge them. Great thanks are due to the many people who have assisted in the formation, development and conduct of Retrieving Trials, and in particular to Jack Montasell for his 40+ years of tireless contribution in all aspects of trialing which this trial also commemorates. Well done Jack – from all your mates!

Photo of Liddly Queencake

