

HUNTING DOGS By Larry Mueller

Best of the Best

The “no champion left behind” way of enhancing the hunting breed gene pool

A “NAVHDA championship” might sound like an oxymoron. For 36 years, the North American Versatile Dog Hunting Association (NAVHDA) has held noncompetitive tests. Whether it was the Natural Ability Tests for young dogs or the Utility Tests for trained dogs, the challenge was always the points, not the other dogs.

That’s still the case. But starting this year, the NAVHDA Invitational, which will be held annually going forward, has higher performance requirements for entry. Only dogs earning a Prize 1 in Utility Tests will qualify; those that earn a Prize 1 in the Invitational are given the title of Versatile Champion, with VC prefixing their names in the registry.

The best thing about NAVHDA tests is that no judge is looking for eliminations to narrow the field to one winner. No judge is allowed a personal preference, which can lead to fads that often change hunting breeds into racing dogs.

So why call dogs champions when they pass the Invitational Test? Because Americans love champions, and the extraordinary dogs that are capable of earning a Prize 1 in the Invitationals are in every way true champions. The concept of reserving “champion” for a single dog that has had a better day or better luck that day, is actually quite brilliant. What follows is notoriety, after which these Versatile Champions raise the ability level of NAVHDA dogs by being in greater demand as breeders.

Shorthairs on Top

The 2004 NAVHDA Invitational, near Mexico, Mo., drew 99 qualified dogs, and 32 went home Versatile Champions: 23 German shorthairs, 6 German wirehairs, 1 vizsla, 1 and a *German Shorthair* pudelpointer. The shorthair dominance is explained by the fact that there are many more shorthairs, and therefore many more good ones to be found. Wirehair breeders must focus on flawless coats, and the gene pools are smaller in the other breeds.



A passing score at the NAVHDA Invitational is 166 out of a possible 200. Field work is scored on backing, steadiness to wing and shot and retrieve to hand. Water work adds heeling, steady at the blind, marking, honoring and blind retrieve.

THE SUM OF THEIR PARTS

All NAVHDA tests are based on evaluations of nose, search, pointing, desire to work, cooperation and physical attributes. Nose gets the highest number (6), or weighting, in the scoring system. A good nose will scent birds quickly and easily and from a considerable distance but will function poorly unless the brain has learned, or can learn, to discriminate subtle differences in scents. Is the bird here? Was it here? Which way did the pheasant run?

A good nose well connected to an intelligent brain still needs desire, that animated determination to do whatever it takes to get a bird to the gun so the dog can have it in his mouth. Desire shows up in search by helping the dog quickly discover what cover holds birds, then inspiring him to hunt that cover holds birds, then inspiring him to hunt that cover so thoroughly that no birds are overlooked.

Cooperation holds it all together, with the dog staying in contact with his hunter right up to the moment of point, which should be rock solid and intense. And finally, NAVHDA dogs are judged for conformation and coat, because the assembly of a dog determines how well he moves and how long he holds up in hours of hunts and years of life.



Calculating the True Cost of a Pet

It's Steeper Than You Think, but There Are Ways to Avoid the Bite

GREEN THUMB By Ron Lieber

That doggy in the window costs much more than you think.

How much? Almost \$12,000 over a lifetime for a small dog that lives 15 years, and more than \$23,000 for a larger breed that lives for 12. Those are just averages; the numbers grow quickly if, say, illnesses require trips to the vet.

These figures come from Jim Wilson, a veterinarian, lawyer and consultant who has created a detailed spreadsheet, down to the last chew toy, using data from the American Pet Products Manufacturers Association, the American Veterinary Medical Association and owners. Dr. Wilson crunched the numbers as part of his research into damages in lawsuits over pets and his work for a pet-insurance company.



Numbers like that might give anyone pause. "People think they can get the puppy from the pound for \$125," he says. "And they honestly don't have a clue as to what the annual costs are going to be."

Some highlights from the spreadsheet: "Destruction of Household Items" averages \$1,000 for a larger dog. Dr. Wilson knows of a Weimaraner that chewed up \$3,500 worth of SUV dashboard. "Sometimes a tail takes out a whole table, and then you have broken china, red wine stains," he says. "Nobody takes that into account."



Thinking about pets in these terms may make you feel dangerously like the Grinch. In fact, it's precisely because animals can end up playing such important roles in our lives that it's crucial to consider the economic cost ahead of time.

After all, once that pet becomes part of your household -- a playmate for the kids, a friend and companion -- you'll likely find yourself determined to spend whatever it takes to shield it from pain.

It's the veterinary bills that can really add up. These days it's a snap to spend a four-figure amount or more on care that wasn't even available a decade ago. That can lead, inevitably, to difficult choices. Trade journal DVM Newsmagazine asks vets every three years for the dollar amount at which most clients would stop treatment. In 2003, it stood at \$961, up 67% from the 1997 figure. A 2004 American Kennel Club survey of dog

owners found that 14% said their current ownership costs would deter them "significantly" or "quite a bit" from getting another one.

There are several things you can do to avoid finding yourself in that group. Before you buy, see a vet for a "pet selection" appointment. Once there, ask about recurring costs and potential genetic and behavior problems.

Also set a realistic budget. Fran Hickman, a financial planner with JSF Financial LLC in Los Angeles, sets aside almost \$14,000 annually for her African green parrot, two Jack Russell terriers and a horse named Temptation. Her advice? Be honest with yourself about what you're willing to sacrifice for an animal (or a menagerie). "It impacts your family vacations when you spend \$5,000 on an ill pet," she says.

Finally, consider insurance. Some employers offer it, or you can buy it through outfits like Veterinary Pet Insurance Co. Deductibles and payment caps may apply, just as they would for humans.

