RAYLE, NAVHDA Versatile Champion

By TOM SWEZEY, Trainer and Handler

The NAVHDA Invitational, Versatile Champion title, is one of the most prestigious titles in the versatile hunting dog world.

**BASICS OF THE TEST**

* An hour in the field braced with an “unknown” dog, where every pointed bird is flushed, shot and retrieved to hand. Wild flushed birds are shot where safe, and backing by the brace mate is required.
* A 120 yard blind retrieve across open water for a duck.
* A double marked water retrieve of ducks.
* Honor another dog’s water retrieve of a duck
* Off-lead heeling at several areas of the test

For specifics on the NAVHDA Invitational Versatile Champion test please refer to <https://www.navhda.org/invitational-test/>

Historically only 30% of the dogs that run in the test, pass. Rayle’s performance throughout the day at every aspect of the test was outstanding. I was proud to be her partner and watch her perform each challenging task throughout the day.

**WHO SAID AN OLD DOG CAN’T LEARN NEW TRICKS**

At 9 years old, one thing is for sure, Rayle dispelled the myth, ‘you can’t teach an old dog new tricks”. Rayle’s temperament, natural bird-dog skills and intelligence made my job easy as I helped her earn a NAVHDA Versatile Champion title.

Rayle began her career as a horse-back field trial dog. The Richardsons decided she had what it took to become a VC and decided to change tracks with her. I began training her in May 2020 after she had just turned 8 years old. She earned a UT prize 1 three months later at her first UT test. A tremendous achievement on its own. Her first invitational training period lasted just under two months: August 24 to October 15, 2020. Her second training period was from May 24, 2021 to September 7, about six months of training in all. Rayle was over 9 years old when she earned the title: Versatile Champion.

**THE TEST IS HARD AT BEST, BUT RAYLE WAS DEALT SOME EXTREME CHALLENGES**

DOUBLE MARK

At the double marked retrieve we were challenged by a strong 12-15 mph cross wind that blew the long-marked duck into the weeds and out of sight. The challenge of the test is to remember the location of the first launched duck after retrieving the second duck that crosses the path of the first. The long duck is the ‘memory’ duck. After retrieving the second duck, I lined Rayle up for the long retrieve but there was no duck to mark, it was hidden in the weeds. I sent her straight and she swam straight past where the long-duck originally hit the water and kept swimming. The far shore was over 130 yards and I waited until she hit the shore to give her hand signals to where the duck had blown. Rayle took the hand signals, found the duck, and retrieved to hand. After retrieving to hand she walked at heel off lead to the finish line and I breathed a huge sigh of relieve.

BLIND RETRIEIVE:

The same 12-15 mph cross wind met us at the “blind retrieve” portion of the test. As we walked off lead at heel from the starting point down a slight grade to the water’s edge I remember thinking “that wind is going to blow her off course as she crosses the 120 yards of open water”. At the water’s edge I put my hand straight in front of her head to line her up. Watching her eyes closely, I sent her when I saw her focus straight across. She knows the job, now it’s up to her. The wind blew Rayle to the right and she hit the far shoreline 40 yards down wind of where the duck had been drug. Within seconds of climbing the bank she was out of sight. Seconds felt like hours until I saw her emerge out of the cover and find the duck. She returned with the duck, delivered it to hand and immediately we were heeling off lead to the next part of the test.

HONOR BRACEMATE’S RETRIEVE

Rayle was set up at the water 5 feet from the edge. I walked up the hill 20 feet behind her. Duck is launch, shot fired and another dog standing 4 ft from Rayle is sent directly in front of her for the retrieve. She never moved a muscle.

60 MINUTES IN THE FIELD

You don’t know who your brace mate is going to be until the morning of the test. I signed in and picked up my running orders for the day. The first thing I always do is look to see whom my brace mate will be for the fieldwork. A Cesky Fousek, I hadn’t even seen that breed in over 25 years and I could feel my stress level rise due to the tremendous difference between both breed’s range and manner of working the field. Rayle took it in stride and never waivered in her field performance. One of her backs in the field was spectacular. The cover was tall and thick in many areas. Calling Rayle in for a back I tried to get her the best advantage to see the Cesky on point. As she came in for the back and while in mid-air leaping over some of the thick cover she spotted the Cesky on point. She actually locked up in mid-air and never moved a muscle when she landed. I quickly looked at the closest judge to me. He glanced at me, raised his eyebrows and continued walking. No words were spoken but I knew he saw this impressive back. Smiling inside we finished our brace with no major issues. Her stellar field work totaled 6 staunchly pointed birds which were all shot and retrieved stylishly to hand after waiting to be sent. She had two stops-to-flush and four backs with no commands.

**SUMMARY**

Less than 1 in 3 dogs have what it takes to pass this demanding test, and most older dogs taking the test have tried for years to get it done. Starting out at 8 years of age with a minimum of training and earning the VC title exhibit exceptional intelligence, superior trainability and desire to please, innate skills, athleticism and endurance. On top of all of this Rayle is a wonderful dog to be around, and a pleasure to train. When I think of Rayle the first thing, I think of is how sweet she is and how smart she is. The time we spent together as we walked the path towards her VC title was special and unforgettable.