

The Ultimate Foo-Foo Returns To Its Historic Roots

by Chris Robinson

This article was printed in the Canine Chronicle.



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If this story was being written by a headline writer using the Associated Press stylebook, in all likelihood, what you see above is the form that “head” would take. And it probably would be a screaming banner in boldface type because it truly is news. For, shocking as it may seem, that much-maligned ultimate “foo-foo” dog, the Standard Poodle, even after generations of ribbons in its hair, painted toenails and an embarrassing hairdo, is making a successful return to its historic roots as a fine retriever.

Not that all Poodle folks through the years had abandoned the idea of this breed continuing to be a useful hunting dog. Here and there, dedicated Poodle owners refused to let this important part of the breed’s genetic make-up die. For example, in 1943, National Geographic magazine ran a photo of a Standard Poodle (Ch. Blakeen Café Parfait) making a water retrieve of a duck. A decade later, members of the Greenspring Poodle Club in Maryland did a lot of field training with their Poodles, used them as their waterfowl hunting dogs and the club hosted annual Poodle retriever working trials. As has frequently been the case with other hunting breeds where the historical purpose was ignored for generations, the people stepping to the front and leading the movement back to respectability as a sporting breed are folks who also compete in the show ring and other performance events.

However, it was not until the mid-1980s that the Standard Poodle was able to take its first tiny steps toward returning to its primary historic job of duck dog. This was when the Canadian Kennel Club, at the strong urging of Jacqueline Harbour, decided to allow Standard Poodles to compete in its Working Certificate program. At the same time, the hunting retriever movement began to develop in the U.S. in response to the unrealistic tests being set in licensed field trials. By 1985, both the AKC and the UKC were holding non-competitive retriever hunting tests. Since the UKC has always considered the Poodle to be a sporting breed, Poodles have been eligible for the UKC’s Hunting Retriever Tests since the program’s inception. In 1993, the Poodle Club of America implemented a retriever working certificate program which was a prerequisite to making Poodles eligible for the AKC’s hunt test program and in 1996 when the CKC initiated its own retriever hunt test program, Poodles were automatically included among the eligible breeds. Finally, in 1998, simply because Dr. Grace Blair refused to let the idea die and continued to badger the AKC’s

performance division, Standard Poodles became eligible to run in AKC hunt tests. The CKC's WC/WCI/WCX tests were opened to Miniature Poodles in January of 2002.

The result has been a significant number of Poodles that have earned hunt test titles or working certificates and this change has created some re-thinking among many Poodle fanciers about the breed's inclusion in the non-sporting group. Cheryl Ingwersen, who owns Can. Ch. U-CD HRC SHR Tudorose Roman Emperor WD JH CDX AGN PCA-WC, RAMCI CGN, said flatly that the Standard Poodle's presence in the non-sporting group is an insult. "Anything would be welcome that would get Poodles out of a group called non-sporting. That designation is a complete insult both to Poodles and all the other dogs that are in that group with them. Poodles should be in the sporting group. That is their heritage and their birthright."



Mulligan hitting water - Mulligan demonstrates her water entry on her way to fetching a duck.
(Days Afield Photography/Chip Laughton.)



Mulligan working her way - Mulligan (Ch. Ascot Boucheron Joalleria CD, RN, SH), Claudia Straitiff's senior hunter Poodle, returns with a bird during a hunt test.

(Days Afield Photography/Chip Laughton)

Joyce Carelli, the Poodle Club of America's chair for the club's WC/WCX program noted that there had been a good bit of conversation within the club on this issue recently. "Personally, I think Poodles belong in the sporting group. It would highlight the breed's functionality and perhaps we could get away from the hairdo being such an important factor in winning. The breed should be judged according to the standard and this perfectly describes a dog that is a terrific retriever. Unfortunately, when you exaggerate any of the parts, as is commonly rewarded in the show ring today, you lose some of what allows the dog to be able to do its job efficiently."

Jac Harbour, who has bred and owned more Poodles that have hunt test titles than any other Poodle breeder said, "It would be desirable to have the Poodles in the sporting group especially since this would encourage more people to show their dogs in the shorter HCC or historically correct clip."

Dianne Wigelsworth, who owns Ch. Sundance Irresistible Fire CD SH said "I believe that both Standard and Miniature Poodles should eventually be returned to the sporting group especially now that both are proving themselves as successful hunting dogs.

On the other hand, I can understand the apprehension of many breeders and handlers. The jump into the sporting group is so great. It is already so large that it would make it much more challenging to get group placements and best-in-show wins on Poodles. Still, that's where the breed really belongs."

However, Claudia Straitiff, who owns Ch. Ascot Boucheron Joalleria CD RN, sounded a note of caution. “Personally, I don’t think it matters what ‘group’ the Poodle shows in as much as how the Poodle is perceived by the general public and judged by conformation judges. I believe in some ways that we have done a disservice to the breed by letting handlers in the show ring take the hair to such extremes, which makes it a grooming contest in some cases, rather than an evaluation of the structure, temperament and attitude of the dog. Besides, historically, Poodles were guard dogs, hunting dogs, circus dogs and companions so putting them in the Sporting Group would really only recognize one of the many hats the breed has worn.”

These Poodle “Pioneers” said that a variety of reasons motivated them to “take up the cause” of returning the breed to its main historical function as a hunting retriever. Jac Harbor, one of the first to take this initiative said that a boarder at her kennel was what got her into the field with her Poodles. “I owned a boarding kennel and a client boarded his field trial Labs with me. Watching his dogs, I thought that Poodles were hunting dogs so I started going out with him and began looking for a Poodle of mine that liked and would retrieve birds.”



Tudorose Poodle
Water -
A Tudorose Poodle
bred by Jac Harbour
demonstrates the
proper water entry for
a Poodle



Tudorose Poodle
Land Decoys -
Another Tudorose
Poodle returns
with a bird through
land decoys

Inwersen noted that Harbour provided the inspiration she needed to switch from Labs to Poodles. “I was perfectly content running my Lab in field events until I went to a Canadian WC test and saw Jacqueline Harbour running a wonderful Standard Pood-le. I was thrilled to see how well that Poodle worked and then and there I decided my next dog would be a Poodle and I wanted to be part of the group of people who were helping the breed re-discover its hunting heritage.”

Wigelsworth said that she always wanted to know if her dog had any instinct for retrieving. “I knew about the Poodle’s history as a retriever and I always wondered if my dog had any instincts for this work but I didn’t really know how to go about determining this. One problem was that in 1998, when I decided to pursue this, there weren’t many places to go for information within the Poodle world. Finally, I surfed the Internet and found a UKC Hunting Retriever Club near me so I contacted them and someone got back to me right away encouraging me to come out and watch a hunt test. I brought Abby with me and we got the grand tour of all the tests offered that day. I was also put in touch with some local club members who were willing to let us participate in their training sessions. I’ve been hooked ever since.

Carelli said that the retrieving instinct still resides in a lot of Poodles although it has been hidden and suppressed for generations. “I happened upon field training because I had a dog who needed some fun in her life. She had been misdiagnosed with lymphoma and underwent 11 months of chemotherapy only to

discover that she had never had lymphoma at all. I was looking for something she would enjoy because she deserved it. The first time out training with a group of dogs and owners both she and I were hooked. She had such a love for retrieving and swimming that it was a joy to watch her have this much fun and we started on our journey of learning how to be a hunting retriever together. Once I saw the potential in the breed for retrieving and understood a little about the training, I also learned that the instinct is still there in most Poodles and this is an activity that they seem to enjoy to no end.”

Straitiff noted that it was an effort to persuade her husband to go along with her desire to have a Standard Poodle that brought her into the growing group of Poodle retriever enthusiasts. “I had a Standard Poodle when I grew up so I knew they were once retrievers. My husband hunts so I told him we would teach the Poodle I wanted to get to retrieve. He was skeptical but he went along with the idea. Luckily, Mulligan had all the hunting instinct she needed and as a bonus had good enough conformation to compete in the show ring. Once I saw her swimming and chasing ducks, catching sticks and all the other encouraging signs you look for in a young retriever, I really got into the hunting idea. So much so in fact that since training her, I have learned to shoot and bought a new shotgun last fall. Thanks to Mulligan, I rallied behind the hunting idea for the breed and here we are today.”

Training Poodles to hunt can sometimes be challenging. “They are often too clever to train as hunt test dogs,” said Harbour. “They do great as hunting companions since they love to problem-solve. Many often have such a sense of fun that they turn all training into a fun activity like tossing the bumper or bird in the air and catching it as they race back to the handler with it. There are some hunt test judges who frown on such a devil-may-care attitude. Also, their retrieving instincts are not as strong as you’d find in a Labrador, for instance. This means that like some of the other less-popular retriever breeds, they don’t bounce back from harsh corrections because they know a reward in the form of a retrieve is coming. Most Poodles have very strong chase instincts and you have to modify your training techniques to allow for these things.”

Carelli also noted that Poodles’ intelligence can pose problems in training. “They are quicker to learn what we’re trying to teach them but that also means they are quicker to try to find better ways to do things rather than just sticking to doing what they are told to do. It is a challenge to stay ahead of them but that’s one of the things I like about the breed. Some Poodles are not as fond of swimming as some of the other retrievers. They were originally bred to do their retrieving in marshy areas, not necessarily in wide-open swimming water. Some need more time to get comfortable in the water than other breeds. And, some have conformation problems which cause them problems in the water. A lot of Poodles have fronts that are not as angulated as they should be or the bottom shoulder is too short and set too far forward. This makes swimming much more

HUNT TEST PROGRAMS

While there are some differences, all of the retriever hunt test programs bear a strong resemblance to each other. At the introductory or junior levels (started hunting retriever in UKC/HRC tests) dogs are expected to make four single, marked retrieves to hand (meaning the dog has to deliver the bird to the hand of its handler) with two being land retrieves and two from the water. At the second level, which is called senior in AKC /CKC tests and seasoned in UKC/HRC tests, dogs are expected to complete two double marked retrieves (two birds down at the same time requiring the dog to remember the second mark), one on land and the other in the water, a blind retrieve (where the dog does not see the bird fall) on land and water. They are also expected to do something called a “walk-up” which means the dog walks up to the line from which it will depart for a retrieve off-leash and under control of its handler and they must be steady to the shot meaning they can’t depart from the line until they are commanded to do so by their handler. In AKC/CKC tests, senior dogs are also expected to honor another dog’s retrieve. At the master (AKC/CKC) or finished (UKC/HRC) levels, the dog has to do multiple (doubles, triples and even quadruple) land and water marks, land and water blind retrieves and an honoring test. In other words, the master or finished dog must exhibit all the skills of a fully-trained retriever. The CKC’s WCIX program differs somewhat in its requirements at the various levels from the hunt test programs but the major difference is that

difficult for these dogs. Not that it can't be done but it is physically harder and the dog has to work more to get the same propulsion through the water."

Straitiff said that the breed has quirks that have to be taken into consideration when training and anyone who says they do not is either naive or full of it. "They are thinkers. You will see them pause, mark and then enter. They are cautious. They are not as forgiving for corrections when they are unsure of what they are expected to do. They need a relationship with the handler. They don't do well if all the handler does is train them for the field. They need to trust their handler. They get bored with repetition. The more creative you are, the better a Poodle performs. There are some trainers who say that we just don't know how to train our dogs. Others say they would like to train a Poodle with a Lab puppy to see if they got the same results. Believe me it has all been tried. I am one of the few Poodle owners who has placed a dog with a professional trainer for an extended amount of time. Since Mulligan started her field work so late, I thought I could catch up by sending her to a pro. While she developed all the right skills with him, she didn't have a relationship. He was able to take her through 'seasoned' (see sidebar) and to one qualifying score in 'finished' but then she just shut down and showed it by demonstrating a lack of effort at tests. Recently, I sent her to a more upbeat and enthusiastic trainer. She and Mulligan worked really well together through senior and to her first qualifying score in master. Then it happened again. She shut down. She's tired of the game again and needs to come home. This behavior is typical of a Poodle. Being away from home, away from their people and doing a lot of repetition just shuts them down. They are not mechanical and they don't 'live only for the bird' as is the case with most Labs. (Note: This is not an unusual situation with retriever breeds other than Labradors or Goldens. A long-time and very successful retriever trainer says that he would never keep Chesapeakes for more than a month to six weeks at a time because they would hit this same wall. He found that by sending them home to be with their owners for a few weeks, they could come back to him happy and ready to work once again. He said it was like they needed the reassurance that they were still loved by their owners in order to get their heads back in the game and he noted that he had similar experiences with Curly-Coats and several Flat-Coats.) Poodles aren't for the weak at heart as far as hunting goes and you can't 'correct' them into submitting, e-collar or otherwise."

hunt test programs require multiple qualifying scores at the various levels in order to earn the titles (JH/SHR, SH/HR, MH/HRCH) and the WCIX program requires only a single pass. For more information contact the AKC, CKC or UKC/HRC.

Straitiff also noted that there is a significant need to educate hunt test judges about Poodle style. "I think a lot of times they are compared to Labs rather than being evaluated for how they actually ran the test in hunt tests. They are never going to look like a Lab in the field. They have their own style. It is like watching a pelican catch fish versus a heron catching fish. They both get the fish but they don't look the same doing it. A number of Poodles hit the water cautiously and they mark deliberately. They aren't lightning fast but they do the work. So we see judges who are Labrador people mark them down for style. (Note: Again, not an unusual situation. Many Chesapeake, Flat-Coat, Curly-Coat and Irish Water Spaniel people say they have experienced the same sort of bias.) So, we have a lot to do with educating judges on what a Poodle is capable of doing and we need to keep taking the dogs out there. I think that the situation is improving. Lots of people show up to watch the Poodle run and they cheer for them. We run into very few critics anymore and most people are enthusiastic that we are bringing the breed back to its roots."

All of these Poodle lovers said they believed that dual-titled Poodles (dogs with conformation championships and field titles) were vital to the future of the breed. Ingwersen said it best. She said, "We do not want to change the essence of the Poodle to be competitive in the field or for that matter, any other performance event. I don't want to see Poodles go the same way as Labs and Goldens with distinct field and show lines where many of the field lines produce dogs that do not even remotely resemble the breed standard and many of the dogs from strictly show lines have lost all the ability to perform their original purpose. However, a retriever that will not or cannot retrieve, no matter how pretty it looks, is a disgrace to

its breeding. That being said, Poodle breeders should not be trying to produce ‘non-shedding Labs’ for field work. Instead they should be focusing on producing good-looking Poodles that can still perform their original job as a water retriever.”