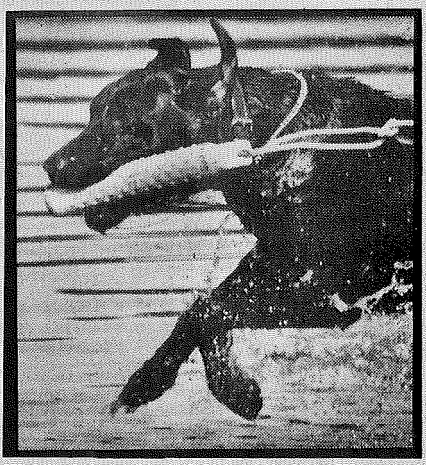


Dogged Determination

Of all the contests in the show, one tops the others nose over heels in showmanship — the retriever competition.

Watching the hunter's canine accomplice retrieve a "dummy," or fake fowl, from the water is amazing at best and hilarious at worst.

Straining to remain obedient while itching to dive into Lake Pohatcong, the retriever waits for the owner's signal to bound in and fetch the rubber object. Nose bobs comically as paws doggie-paddle back to shore. Wet dog emerges dripping pride, and the crowd goes wild.

"I think it does draw the biggest crowd because dogs do have universal appeal," noted main judge Sandy Godfrey of Tuckerton, a former Labrador breeder and trainer whose Nugentown Minuteman placed best of breed in the 1978 Westminster Kennel Club competition at Madison Square Garden.

"Almost everyone, whether they own a dog or not, likes to see them do what they can do well. The show normally does attract some very well-trained dogs," Godfrey noted.

Hunters and conservationists tout the use of a good retriever in waterfowling, because they can bag their limit instead of shooting birds that they can't collect.

The ultimate retriever will wait until he's sent, take the most direct route to the bird, retrieve it gently, give it up when asked, then go back to the heel position and wait for the next command. The better dogs can watch more than one bird fall and remember where each lies.

The audiences also love to see what not-so-trained young dogs do so well. Puppy obedience gone awry fetches laughs.

"Last year one puppy went tearing out there and went right in the water and picked up the dummy and started back with it, and then stopped," Godfrey related. "He looked around at the crowd, threw the dummy in the air, rolled on the dummy, and played to the spectators. That is why everybody likes to watch the contest; it's fun."

Fun is actually okay; as Godfrey explained, enthusiasm in a pup shows potential. Judged separately, the retrieving contest for puppies is an event on the light side.

"We try to judge them on their enthusiasm, their attention span. You want to see a puppy be happy, having a good time, because that's going to be a dog that's going to be a good retriever later," Gotlfrey said.