

FROM JUST PLAIN AWFUL TO RESPECTABILITY

Airedale Terriers In The Field

By M.J. Nelson

In the space of roughly 30 years, a group of dedicated people within the Airedale Terrier breed have accomplished something truly outstanding. They have taken a breed that for at least 50 years or more had not been selectively bred for its ability to hunt and brought it back to its roots and to respectability as a versatile hunting dog.

To be fair, this remarkable feat has been achieved by other breeds, most recently and specifically by the Poodle folks, but the Airedale people started from virtually nothing where the Poodle people have always had a core group that had never lost sight of the fact that Poodles are retrievers. The Greenspring Poodle Club in Maryland, for example, was holding Poodle retriever trials in the 1950s. Until the late 1980s, there was no formal criteria designed to test and evaluate Airedales as hunting dogs which makes this turn around in such a short time all the more amazing and very much a tribute to the dedication of the Airedalers to what has not been an easy task for a variety of reasons. I can speak with authority on this subject because I judged their dogs at some of the Airedale Terrier Club of America's Hunting and Working Committee's early hunt tests and I can testify as to just how truly astonishing the breed's improvement in the field has been in this brief span of time.

At some of the first hunt tests for the breed that I judged, to be perfectly candid, most of the dog work was just plain awful. While it was clear that many of the dogs participating had retained at least some of their instincts to hunt, despite the many years they had not been selectively bred for that trait, the qual-

ity of their performance, with a few exceptions, was woeful. For many, even basic obedience was absent to say nothing of the more sophisticated training that is needed to be successful in meeting the standards required to earn a qualifying score in the tests. Those few dogs that did earn qualifying scores, in those early years, belonged to Airedalers who had spent a considerable amount of time working their dogs with sporting dog people who were training for field trials and hunt tests or had worked with professional retriever or spaniel trainers.

Those Airedale owners understood that in order to be successful in the tests, their dogs had to be trained the same way as were retrievers, pointing breeds and spaniels. And, in order for Airedales to have credibility, even within the breed, as hunting dogs they had to prove they could do the work by earning the available hunting titles first from the Hunting Working Aire-

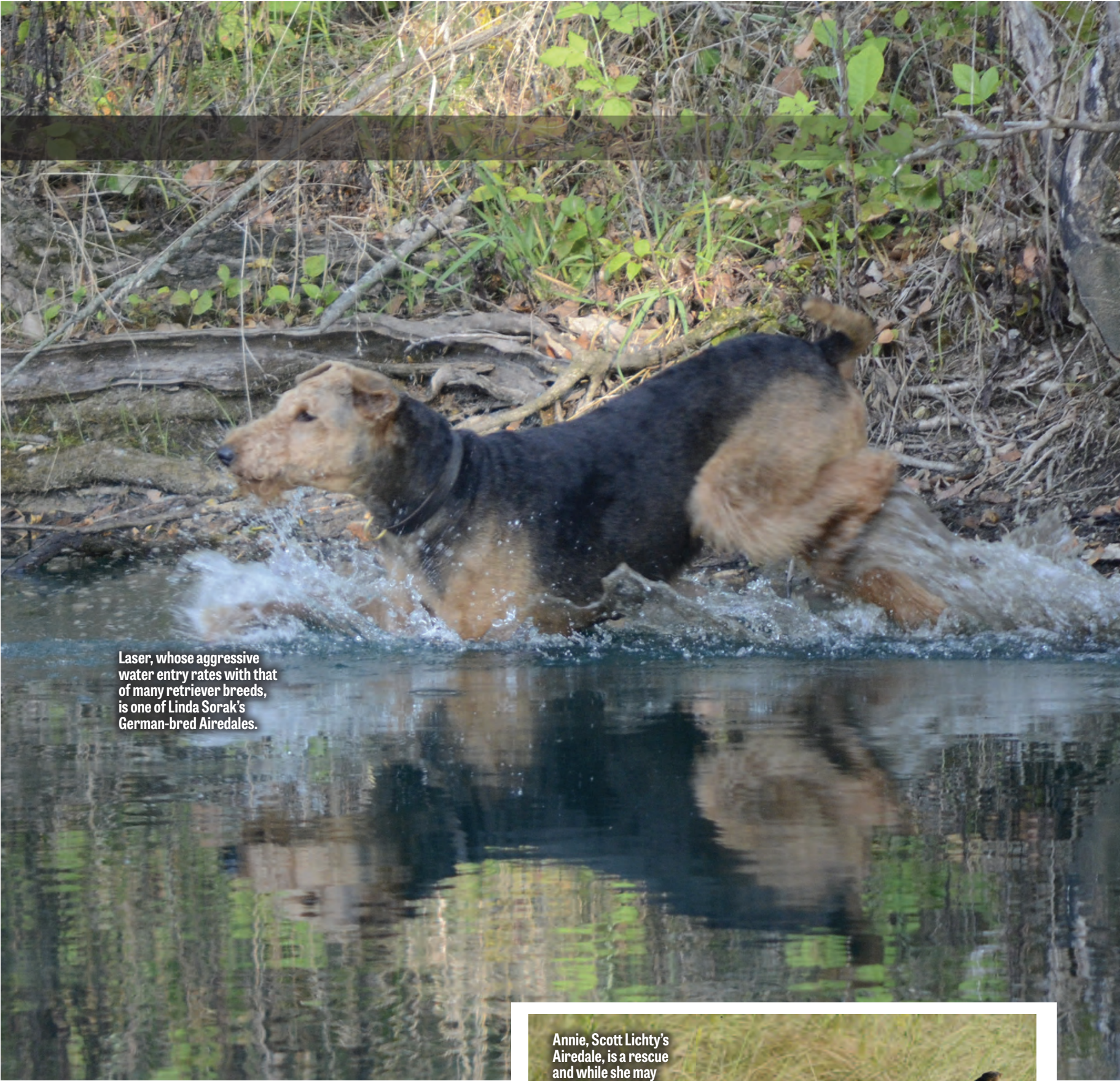
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Euro, Linda Sorak's Airedale, says "Gotcha" to a chukar at the HWA national test.




Mikey, one of Chris Halvorson's Airedales who has his junior hunter title from the AKC and his master fur hunting title from Hunting Working Airedales, decides that he'll have to learn to climb trees in order to get as close as he wants to the caged raccoon at the HWA national fur test.



Laser, whose aggressive water entry rates with that of many retriever breeds, is one of Linda Sorak's German-bred Airedales.



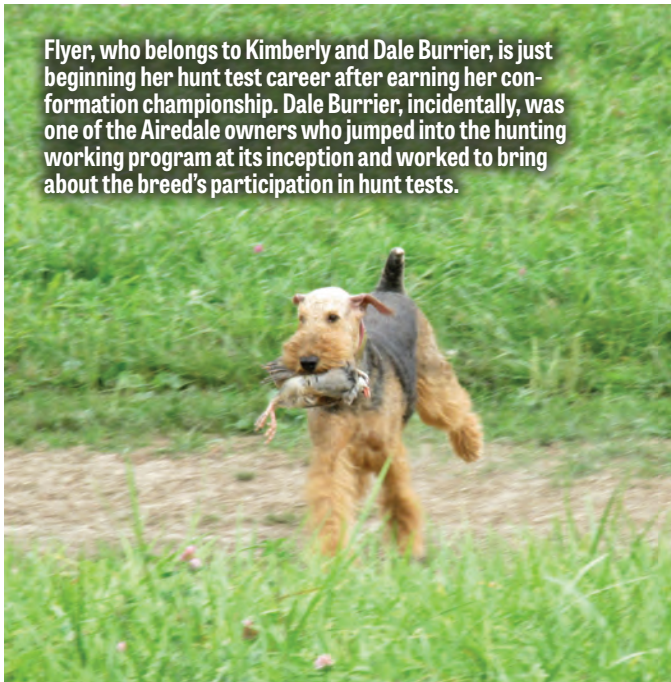
"Hey, this really is a lot of fun" seems to be Mikey's view of fetching ducks.



Annie, Scott Lichty's Airedale, is a rescue and while she may not possess grand champion conformation, she's a good hunter who has found a great home with someone who will hunt with her.

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Flyer, who belongs to Kimberly and Dale Burrier, is just beginning her hunt test career after earning her conformation championship. Dale Burrier, incidentally, was one of the Airedale owners who jumped into the hunting working program at its inception and worked to bring about the breed's participation in hunt tests.



Kira, an AKC master hunter who is owned by Michael Sites, stops to the flush of a chukar.

dales own hunt test program, then from the Canadian Kennel Club's retriever working certificate program and the United Kennel Club's Hunting Retriever tests and finally in the AKC's hunt tests. Since the breed became eligible to participate in AKC spaniel hunt tests in 2009 and through 2016, while HWA records may not be complete, 26 Airedales have earned hunt test titles—10 junior, eight senior and eight master—and three are also conformation champions including one Ch/MH dog, the closest an Airedale can come to having a dual (conformation and field) championship. While these numbers are not overwhelming, considering how far the Airedale folks needed to progress in their training and handling techniques to take full advantage of whatever hunting instincts remained with their dogs, 26 titles including 16 at the advanced senior and master levels are pretty impressive. Recently the American Kennel Club also agreed to recognize the HWA's fur tracking titles which can only add to the number of dogs in the breed having field titles and in which the instinct to hunt is still present. This, in turn, increases the number of dogs available for breeding who have proven they can hunt.

"Airedales have a small but increasing group of dogs doing well in the hunt tests and the Hunting Working Airedales tests. I believe that some of the show dogs I see could be good hunting dogs if given the opportunity just as my current dogs could have been show dogs if I'd decided that was what they should do. One way to find an Airedale that has the potential to

be a good hunting dog is to let breeders know you are looking for an exceptional pup that's always so busy it 'needs a job.' What you want, if you are looking for a potential hunting dog in a breed like ours where dogs have not been selectively bred for this trait for many years is a pup that has so much energy the average pet owner couldn't deal with it. And, then you need to have those pups tested by someone whose opinion you trust. You want a pup with lots of drive that's ready to chase moving objects, to grab and pull, to use his nose to find treats and who lights up at a bird wing or a real raccoon pelt. There are dogs in the breed like that and those were the kind of dogs that initially made the breed's reputation as a versatile hunting dog," said Chris Halvorson who is the information coordinator for Hunting Working Airedales and the group's immediate past president.

"There is a group of Airedale breeders who have successfully bred dogs for hunting and working purposes and have established a reputation for this. They have experience testing litters of pups and sometimes they import working dogs from German or Russia to help add drive to their lines. But, in order to expand the number of breeders who consider hunting ability an important trait and thus factor that into their breeding program, we need to increase the number of Airedales in the field. So, it's important for those of us who are already active in the field to mentor people who have Airedales and encourage them to train their dogs to high levels so the dogs can run

successfully in AKC or UKC hunt tests. With more dogs in hunt tests, we get more exposure as hunting dogs which, in turn, should lead to more Airedales in the field. Another thing we do is have a booth at Pheasant Forever's National Pheasant Fest each year but here we are exposing the breed and its capabilities to the hunting public directly. Again, we hope this will encourage more people to try hunting with an Airedale and thus more dogs will be in the field," said Scott Lichty whose dogs have earned senior hunter titles in the AKC's hunt test program.

The Airedale Terrier was once not just a highly respected hunting dog but a popular one. In the early 1900s, it was considered to be a sporting dog as well as a terrier. In fact, the 1905 edition of the AKC's Stud Book listed the Airedale as a sporting breed. The breed's ability as a big game hunter made Airedales very popular with hunters in the American west. In fact, in the 1920s and 30s, the Airedale was the most popular breed in the United States. But, in a move that proved devastating to the breed as a hunting dog, the Airedale was moved from the sporting group to the terrier group. In addition, tastes and demographics changed and the breed, for the most part, was relegated to the role of protection dog and family companion. There it languished, its hunting skills unexploited for the most part until

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Bruce, another of Halvorson's Airedales and an AKC master hunter, retrieves a chukar at a hunt test.

the 1980s when three men, Stephen Gilbert from Ohio, E. Forbes Gordon from Texas and Simon "Park" Peters from Michigan who were friends and used their Airedales for hunting, decided to try and do something about restoring the breed's reputation as a fine hunting dog. The first step was to determine if enough dogs retained the hunting ability of the breed's foundation stock to make this restoration feasible.

This led to the formation of Hunting Working Airedales and was followed, in 1986, by a formal request to be admitted to participate in the AKC's hunt tests. But it took many years of convincing to finally get the AKC to open the spaniel hunt tests to Airedales. Meanwhile, Gilbert had earned a qualifying score at a UKC/HRC retriever test with his wife's conformation champion just to show the AKC that Airedales could be competitive in a hunt test program. The HWA hunt test program, which paralleled the requirements of the AKC's hunt test program and began in 1989, provided further encouragement to Airedale owners to train their dogs for the field. Finally, in 2009, after nearly 25 years of essentially just refusing to give up and go away, the breed became eligible to participate in the AKC's spaniel hunt test program.

The dedication and hard work by Airedalers who hunted or did field work with their dogs was at last rewarded with some official recognition of their accomplishments by both the AKC and the UKC. However, at the time, most members of the HWA board conceded that their efforts to gain admission to the AKC's tests, despite the fact that Poodles had cracked the "sporting breeds only" barrier for the AKC's hunt test program ten years earlier when they became eligible to participate in the retriever hunt tests, might once again have been unsuccessful if the Canadian Kennel Club had not approved Airedales' participation earlier that year in their retriever working certificate program. This action by the CKC created a real breakthrough for the HWA people because it left the AKC as the lone holdout among the major North American registries and it became increasingly difficult for the AKC to justify continuing to deny Airedales the same opportunities given them by the CKC and UKC.

As to the Airedale's future as a hunting dog, it can only get brighter especially with people like Linda Sorak being drawn into the program. While she admits that she is very much the "new kid on the block" with regard to hunt tests, having earned

her first qualifying score in junior in May of this year, two of her dogs have already earned their junior hunter titles and are starting to work toward their SH. "I started in obedience about 14 years ago with an Airedale on a dare actually from a member of a club who said she'd never take a terrier in the obedience ring. Since then, I have put nearly 200 titles on my dogs in obedience, rally, barn hunt, agility, IPO, fur tracking and of course hunt tests which are the most fun for me because I get to see my dogs doing what they were intended to do. But, I think all of these activities work together and I think my dogs listen to me much better having been trained for and involved in so many different activities. This is a true thinking dog that wants a thinking person for its partner particularly in hunting tests. You can't cut corners with this breed as they won't do something just because you tell them to do it. They need to know the reason why you want them to do something even when it's something as instinctive as hunting. While I've gone to German-bred dogs, mainly because I wanted dogs with a lot of drive, I have seen a number of dogs both in the hunt test program and at the HWA events that are very capable in the field."

As for the possibility of more Airedales achieving the pinnacle of both a conformation championship and a master hunter title, Halvorson said, "There are dogs in the breed with enough quality both from the standpoint of conformation and their field abilities who are capable of being Ch/MH dogs but the problem is finding owners willing to work for both goals. I've finished championships on four of my dogs and one of my dogs has his master hunter title so I know what it takes to get to that level. But, in absolute candor, many people whose dogs are definitely championship quality get discouraged by the grooming and the politics of the handler-dominated dog show world and by what's currently in fashion from year to year in the show ring especially in the terrier world. Perhaps if there were greater incentives to achieve this more owners would summon up the ambition to do it. Certainly I would hate to see a split develop in the breed between 'show' and 'field' types as has happened with so many of the sporting breeds and I would hope that even as more and more people have success in the field with their Airedales that the importance of adhering to the standard as closely as possible in making breeding decisions wouldn't fall by the wayside."



Annie flushes a chukar in the junior test at the HWA national test.