

The Chukar Challenge

by Michael C. Vogel

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One evening, I was checking email. The secretary of the local retriever club had forwarded me an invitation from the local upland bird dog club, The Arctic Bird Dog Association, inviting people and their dogs, to a Chukar Challenge. The Challenge was open to all breeds. I thought that this sounds interesting, so I call the contact to find out what the deal is and based on the information provided; decide to enter one of my Chessies, Tazlina or Tazzy. Tazzy is an accomplished upland bird hunter, possessing an extremely keen nose.

A little bit of background is pertinent. A number of years ago, my friend and fellow Chessie fancier from Lewiston, ID, James Mauney, invited me to go upland bird hunting. The result of which was that I switched from waterfowl enthusiast to upland bird enthusiast. The Chessies switched also, loving it all, birds was what they care about. This event, the Chukar Challenge, is an upland bird hunting test, complete with, you guessed it, chukars.

So we show up at the appointed date and just prior to lunch time. We kind of stood out. I am underdressed (dirty blue jeans and a t-shirt) and under-gunned for the event. We have entered the world according to Orvis complete with expensive and fancy side by sides (I don't own one), fancy khakis, fancy shooting vests, and Ruffed Grouse Society pins and emblems. There are pointers, setters, and spaniels. There is now a Chessie (who is blonde and beautiful), the only retriever present. We are rather out of place.

Never one to be self-conscious and being hungry, I avail myself of the very nice lunch spread, which was a nice touch. People trickle in from the test, sit down, eat their sandwiches, and make their acquaintance. Conversation ensues. It went something like this

"A Chessie, huh?"

"Yes a Chessie."

One gentleman says. "You must be a waterfowl enthusiast".

"Well, no in fact, I am an upland bird hunter."

Dead silence suddenly pervades the lunch group.

The question on everybody's mind, having very high opinions of their setters, pointers, and spaniels, which nobody had the audacity to ask, these being gentlemen, was "What are you doing with a Chesapeake if you really like upland bird hunting"?

Well, they were about to find out.

A number of the competitors, in discussing the morning's experience with their dogs, lamented that they had only been able to find one of the three birds. Four gentlemen in fact, had the same experience, and came to the conclusion, that "It must be field", "There was something odd with that field".

Sometime after lunch we were called, as it was now our turn. The rules of the test were explained. Three chukars are planted in a field; you and the dog have 20 minutes to find the birds. Now this is Alaska, the term 'field' is a misnomer. This is an approximately 50 yard swath

of land that has been cleared of forest, and now has had the brush which has grown up mowed. The 'field' is surrounded by thick spruce forest.

The dog is scored a number of ways. The dog gets a certain amount of points for finding the bird, retrieving the bird, delivery of the bird, how many shots it takes to get the birds, and if you finish under the 20 minutes. There may be other criteria, but I have forgotten.

Anyhow, the judge explains all this and I said fine, let's go. The stopwatch starts. We start out, Tazzy quartering the field, working like she does for pheasants. She is not quite sure what the gig is, these surroundings being new for upland birds, but there is a gun involved so something must be up. It isn't very long before she starts getting chukar scent from previous contestants. OK, she says there are birds here. Ooh boy, and it is only July. We work are way back and forth with the wind at our back, and all of sudden she reverses course and heads back to a thick patch of lupine. I know a bird is going to come up, and the flush is beautiful. Bam! The chukar lands in a thicket in the forest. She quickly retrieves. Now she is really amped up, this is a hunt, she has had a flush and a retrieve, there are birds, and we are out to kill them. The tail is wagging nonstop, the enthusiasm is intense, she is hunting and hunting hard. The next one comes up out of pile of brush, he did not like that brown nose being stuck on himself, bam!, another retrieve out of the forest. Eight minutes used up and one chukar to go. Chukar number 3 again flushes beautifully, bam! and falls in the thick forest. Our hunt is over in 12 minutes, more points. Tazzy has achieved the maximum possible score. The judge exclaims, "This is a really nice dog". Yes, she is and she has one helluva of a nose. On our way back, Tazzy flushes chukar #4, one that a previous participant's nose obviously missed, I ask if she is entitled to more points, no.

Over the years, James and I have hunted our Chessies together. The dogs have always found birds if there were birds to find. James lives where he gets a 4 month season and has been extremely successful with his Chessies. So, I never had a frame of reference as to how our Chessies compared to other dogs when it came to upland birds. My suspicions were that they were very good. Now, that has been confirmed. Our Chessies can hold their own against any breed when it comes to bird hunting.

The Chessie, my blonde Tazzy, won the Chukar Challenge. I was called the next day by one of the officers of the club to inform me of this, and the gentleman suggested that I should get a springer spaniel. A frigging springer! Yeah, right, I was very polite and did not say, that he ought to get a Chessie and then he could really get some birds, I just said that I really like the nose on my Chessie girl and that she amply demonstrated that now didn't she?

Tazzy represented her breed very well and I am very proud of her.

