



THE CROWNING OF A NEW CHAMPION

Ben Randall reports on the 2014 IGL Retriever Championship, held at Windsor Great Park.

PHOTOGRAPHY: BOB ATKINS

The excitement, the nerves, the anticipation – I could sense them all. Months of training and thousands of miles of travel across the country to qualify was over. Now was the time to put it all on show at the country's premier event. But this year was extra special. The IGL Retriever Championship was being hosted at the famous Windsor Great Park, by gracious permission of Her Majesty The Queen and the Crown Commissioners.

The judges were Keith Bedford, John Stubbs, Ian Openshaw and Jamie Bettinson – four experienced dog and shooting men. In fact,

John Stubbs was actually the former headkeeper at Windsor Great Park. Current headkeeper Peter Clayton was steward of the beat.

We started in parkland with rough grasses, bracken and small wooded areas. Instantly noticeable was the high quality of cover. I was walking with John Halstead Sr, one of the most respected dog men the world over, whose wife and son were competing – this was a proud moment for him.

David Latham was one of the first to be put to the test with Beileys Aguzannis of Fendawood. He was sent for a cock bird shot in front of the line. One cast out and it was picked,

nice and clean. Soon after, a hen was shot at the far left of the line, landing just short of a fallen tree. FTCh Asterix Aguzannis of Chatsworth, handled by John Halstead Jr. was sent from the top of the far right bank. It must have been hard to see the fall but John held his dog in the area well and picked it.

It soon became apparent that the scent was poor as dogs were having to be held in areas to help them locate the birds. Craig Perry, a good friend of mine who was running FTCh Cynhinfá John, failed on a runner, top-side of the line under the woodland edge. Shortly after, a hen bird was shot out in front, which



Swapping notes – the judges, Ian Openshaw, Jamie Bettinson, John Stubbs & Keith Bedford

Jayne Coley picked with FTCh Waterford Featherman with one cast and a clean retrieve.

Shortly after, the judges held the line as one of the Guns saw a previously shot woodcock running from hawthorn across grass into bracken. Andy Latham, brother to David, was sent to an area in the high bracken and, despite there being a lot of live birds in the area, FTCh Rimrock Hurricane held well and picked the running woodcock.

Tadhg Kelly's Carrickview Holly was sent for a blind partridge shot behind. He handled the distractions of the other birds being driven over him well and, after a couple of handles, picked the bird. The same dog was then sent for a lightly-hit hen pheasant, 80 – 100 yards behind the line and nearly out of sight. Holly made the fall well, but this was a strong runner. A few tense moments followed as she disappeared into the high bracken, but she soon emerged with the bird in her mouth, bringing it quickly to hand.

Another cock pheasant had been shot on the left, over a ditch and up on a bank, which saw our first golden retriever, FTCh Holway Cider, sent. One perfect line, one cast, and picked straightaway. A great nerve settler!

FTCh Jobeshill Lotta of Stauntonvale was brought in for a hen shot on the far right up a bank, some 150 yards away. Laura Hill's bitch lined well, made the area and after a few casts located the bird, completing with a clean, controlled retrieve. Another hen had been shot in a similar direction some 30 yards on, close to the gallery. FTCh Levenghyl Jacana of Abbottshall was sent but could not make the area. The second dog called in was Artistryn Quail, handled by Roger Colver in his first

championship. Roger got his bitch up to the area, but she pulled up onto the woodland edge and so was called in, too. This saw Laura Hill called in for a two dog eyewipe opportunity. One straight cast and her bitch made the distance and located the bird.

FTCh Saxaphone Brown Ale of Lincswold – a strong yellow lab dog owned and handled by Richard King – had a long bird shot behind the line soon after. Richard made this look very easy

with a nice clean retrieve.

There were whispers in the crowd that Her Majesty was arriving and, sure enough, as we made our way to a field of mustard a Range Rover appeared through the park and Her Majesty joined the line, walking for some 2 – 3 hours – a true ambassador to our sport and incredibly knowledgeable about the dogs and handlers. This really made for an exciting second half of the day. It was a true honour for all those involved to be running in line with Her Majesty watching.

Derek Hill's FTCh Stauntonvale Fastnet had a cock bird shot 20 yards in front, landing in 4ft-high mustard. It looked like a potential runner. Fastnet was sent, hit the fall and went. Ian Openshaw ran forward and raised his stick – she had it.

One partridge shot on the far left of the line near a small woodland provided a key moment in the opening day of the Championship. FTCh Brindlebay Gertie of Birdsgreen, handled by

Sarah Gadd, was sent and called up after some time. Second to be sent was Phil Highfield's FTCh Waterford Harris of Featherfly, again called up. The 2013 defending winner, FTCh Ellijas Danny handled by Leigh Jackson, tried next. Unfortunately, he was also called up and Fastnet was brought across to try, succeeded on the bird and eyewiped the three dogs before her, putting them out of the running. It was hard to see Leigh go out in such a way – only a few years ago I was in his shoes trying to win the Cocker Championships for a second year in a row. I can imagine what it meant to him.

After the halfway point, Sandra Halstead, running Greenbriar Thunder at Drakeshead, had two retrieves picked cleanly, with a cock bird running a short distance. Jayne Coley's FTCh Waterford Ganton had a good eyewipe, with quiet controlled handling. A good afternoon for both ladies – testament to their vast experience.

A very exciting first day concluded at 2pm. Windsor had proved to be a great ground so far. Judge Jamie Bettinson further praised the natural cover in the parkland, but noted poor scent at times and cold temperatures. Dogs needed to show their natural ability, as did the handlers, their marking ability and control to get their dogs to the right areas in particular.

Headkeeper Peter Clayton had orchestrated the walk-ups and mini drives to perfection.

DAY TWO

For the second day we were mostly in beet fields. Partridges were the main quarry, and it was cold, starting with mist and rain. Early on, Andy Latham was sent for a long partridge that had landed out of sight across the line. Andy



Sandra Halstead completes a successful retrieve with Greenbriar Thunder at Drakeshead

GUNDOGS

made one really good straight line and picked it well with Rimrock Hurricane.

A small drive of mixed gamebirds landing behind the line followed, proving a challenge for some handlers and dogs as they tried to mark birds down and handle their dogs off others they had marked. FTCh Waterford Ganton was sent for a partridge shot behind the line. Both Jayne and the judge had marked the bird but from their view it did not appear as deep, and Ganton was called up. FTCh Jobeshill Ragnar of Flypatch, a powerful yellow dog handled by Alan Rees, tried next, hit a line along the track and winded the bird.

Peter then moved us all into a wet field of low, dense rape – a test for both the handlers' marking and the dogs' noses. An early partridge was shot some way out, but only hit lightly. Mike Tallamy with FTCh Garrethall Quill of Brindlebay was sent as the bird hit the ground. He made the fall, hunted well but unfortunately failed and was called up. A couple of other dogs tried but found nothing. The judges went

FTCh Jobeshill Ragnar of Flypatch & handler Alan Rees



forward to check but the bird was long gone. This put Mike out as the first dog down.

As we continued into some beet, birds were lifting out a good distance in front of the Guns, making for testing shooting. A partridge was flushed and clipped some 50 yards away. David Latham's Beileys Aguzannis of Fendwood was sent. I had already guessed the outcome and sure enough, after counting 3 – 4 seconds for the dog to hit the fall, it immediately indicated and started hunting the area. David allowed him to use his nose and gave him every chance to pick it, but to no avail, and so was called up by the judges. This saw Barry Taylor's dog try – also failing. Again, the judges checked but nothing was found. David was out – the first dog down – a brutal way to be knocked out. One more pellet in the right spot, and his dog would have picked in one cast. That's trialling for you.

The second day continued with two more partridges shot in front, only 30 or so yards out, and both looked dead. The first was picked cleanly. The second was tried by Carrickview Holly, a bitch that impressed me with some great work on the first day, but Holly would not hold in the area and so was called up. Laura Hill's bitch was asked to try but again would not hold the area of the fall tight enough to locate the bird. Richard King then sent his dog, over-shot the fall by a small distance, used a slight recall, 'stop' and 'hunt' command, and the dog's head hit the area and picked without any fuss – two more dogs left the competition. A second partridge for Richard followed, one clean cast and nicely retrieved – he was starting



Headkeeper Peter Clayton

to put together some quality dog work, which was surely lifting him in the judges' books.

Not long after, Sandra Halstead had a pricked bird shot out in front and picked cleanly, followed by another which her dog just over-shot on the wrong side of the wind. But a

slight re-adjustment, a couple of handles and it picked well.

Next we moved into a rough grass field, where a few birds were shot. Kirsty Cousins picked clean, adding to her good performance so far, whilst Tim Brain built on a solid performance with Flypatch Alfa.

A rabbit was shot on the far right of the line, some 150 yards away from the handlers across the grass, through the crop and into a rough area. Alan Rees was sent from the opposite end of the line and his dog lined superbly and picked the rabbit in one straight cast.

Right until the end, one of the most impressive dogs, for me, was FTCh Waterford Hallmark, which was well handled over the three days by Shaun McGrath. Shaun had a partridge shot on the left of the line, which his dog picked cleanly with just one adjustment. A few more dogs ran in the wooded area before the second day drew to a close.

DAY THREE

The final day was crisp and sunny, with a cold nip in the air – and it began with a little drama.

No. 48 Tuscany Viking was called out of the car... but didn't appear. Much to the owner's dismay, he had accidentally brought the wrong dog! Nevertheless, after a few frantic telephone calls, Viking was delivered to the ground and



The gallery watching on



The award winners

was ready to compete.

We started in a mustard field, where I caught up with judge, Jamie Bettinson again. He was excited about the final day and commented on the first class quality of the 15 remaining dog and handler partnerships.

Before long, Richard King was in again, sent on a cock bird that was a strong runner. His dog hit the fall, lined and picked well, a long way out, following this up with a further cock pheasant retrieved in one command – further positives to Richard's already impressive two days.

Kirsty Cousins continued her run with two long, testing retrieves and completed both very well, whilst Shaun McGrath had a cock bird shot to the left of the line, which was back in his hand after just one command. The quality of dog work was rising with every retrieve.

Next followed a mini drive of partridges, ducks, pigeons and pheasants – those shot landing in the mustard. Amongst them, Shaun had another nice blind retrieve on a cock bird behind the line against the woodland edge, whilst the drive was still in full flow.

Just after midday, the line stopped as once again we were treated to Her Majesty's presence, arriving to watch the final dogs and present the awards. The quality of work continued, although some dogs had to use more whistle than they

would have liked. A cock bird rose from a rough grassy bank and was lightly hit, with nobody able to mark the fall. Shaun McGrath's dog was sent in its direction as both judges and handler moved forward to the brow of the hill and watched the dog work. Unfortunately, he was called up, and two more dogs were asked to try, also failing to make anything of it. The judges decided to keep Shaun in as no one really saw the bird down or the direction in which it ran. This, to me, was very positive and sensible judging. I was particularly impressed by Ian Openshaw, a true dog man and shooting man, who reads the dogs and the game so well as a judge.

Soon after, a hare was shot on the left of the line, which was picked by Shaun's dog after a few whistles, before Tim Brain finished off with a two dog eyewipe – a great way to end the final day.

The long walk back to the cars and the anticipation of the presentation is always an exciting but nerve-racking time. Everyone is trying to guess who has won, going over what they had seen and what they hadn't...

Her Majesty was waiting for the presentation by the time we arrived back. With 100 or more people crowded around the tent, the faces of the remaining handlers were a picture. A great place to be but only one person would be the newly crowned champion.

“... once again we were treated to Her Majesty's presence, arriving to watch the final dogs and present the awards.”

Richard King with FTCh Saxaphone Brown Ale of Lincswolds



RESULTS

1st Richard King with FTCh Saxaphone Brown Ale of Lincswolds

2nd Shaun McGrath with FTCh Waterford Hallmark

3rd Tim Brain with Flypatch Alfa

4th Andy Latham with FTCh Rimrock Hurricane

Certificates of Merit

- Mr D Marx with FTCh Lockthorn Tara

- Mr D A Rees with FTCh Jobeshill Ragnar of Flypatch

- Mr T Prentice with Hitowngreen Diamond Joe of Findpoint

- Miss K Cousins with FTCh Levenghly Malusi

- Mr W Steel with Denbrig Ace of Spades

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