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THE KOHLER CHRONICLES:

Advice & Anecdotes from a Third-Generation Land Broker

by Jon Kohler, JD
Broker / Partner



Engaging the next generation about benefits of the outdoors

By Jon Kohler

Of all the post-COVID lessons learned, the inestimable value of time outdoors was one of the greatest.

As schools and businesses shuttered for extended periods, isolation grew and more children became consumed by life spent on tiny screens. The damage to developing brains during this brief but impactful time is becoming increasingly apparent.

In contrast, children with encouragement and access to safe outdoor spaces have thrived, showcasing the profound benefits of time spent in nature. This is especially evident in this corner of the world, where quail hunts and field trial handling are gaining popularity with the next generation of sportsmen – faster than you can shout, “Bird!”

As author, artist, podcaster, upland hunter and bird dog fanatic Durrell Smith of *The Sporting Life Notebook* fervently concurs: “It’s an urgent matter that we take the time to recognize that one of the greatest responsibilities – in

an age of increasing conservation and climate awareness – is to lend a giving and generous hand to the younger generations of outdoor kids and engage them in the lifestyle that we love so much and is so dear to our hearts.”

Chris Mathan, founder and one of three directors of the Youth Field Trial Alliance (an organization that has applied for its 501(c)(3) nonprofit status), agrees wholeheartedly.

She emphasizes the positive benefits of field trialing, a sport that has seen incredible growth in recent years:

- Promotes physical and mental health and wellbeing by encouraging kids to be active and outdoors – and off their digital devices.
- Teaches responsibility through caring for and working with animals.
- Instills confidence and healthy competition while fostering real-life social skills like friendship, cooperation and sharing.
- Develops a lifelong love for the outdoors, dogs, horses, wildlife and



AUTHOR, ARTIST, UPLAND HUNTER AND BIRD DOG FANATIC DURRELL SMITH of *The Sporting Life Notebook* says, “It’s an urgent matter that we take the time to recognize that one of the greatest responsibilities is to lend a giving and generous hand to the younger generations of outdoor kids and engage them in the lifestyle that we love so much and is so dear to our hearts.”

good sportsmanship.

- Engages young people in local community activities and builds their understanding and appreciation of long-standing traditions.
- Cultivates an interest in wildlife

conservation while encouraging active involvement.

The timing around this organization’s formation is especially noteworthy. Since 2008, Mathan has been

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CHRIS MATHAN OF THE YOUTH FIELD TRIAL ALLIANCE says field trialing promotes physical and mental health and wellbeing by encouraging kids to be active and outdoors – and off their digital devices. *(Photo courtesy of Chris Mathan Sporting Dogs)*

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'Passing knowledge of wing-shooting and bird dogs is one of the greatest joys'

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producing an online publication, *Stride-away*, dedicated to covering adult field trial events.

Inspired by a growing interest and a surge in regional clubs hosting youth-centric events, she started the Youth Field Trial Alliance Facebook page in 2019, "to promote field trials and training days for youth handlers" across the country.

"Traditionally, kids would get involved in the sport by attending club weekend events with their parents, or plantation managers would bring their kids – those growing up around bird dogs – to watch," Mathan explains.

Field trialing often takes place astride a horse. For some parents, learning that their child might need their own horse to participate can seem daunting. However, field trialing can also be done on foot, eliminating the need to own a horse.

"What we are trying to promote are trials where you don't need a horse. We want to get them hooked from the beginning," Mathan shares.

Naturally, the next question is: "Don't you need a dog to participate in

field trialing?" Field trial dogs are supreme athletes, with pedigrees as impressive as their physical prowess.

Mathan smiles as she assures, "Not having a dog is NOT a barrier to entry for these kids. If they want to participate, we will get them a dog."

For example, at an event last fall, a retired liver-and-white pointer named Belle took home first place in the Tommy Traylor Memorial Youth Field Trial with her handler, Shelby Street. Retired pointers find new life working with youth handlers, making it a win-win situation.

In years past, field trialing has been a male-dominated sport, but Mathan notes significant growth in female participation.

"Traditionally, this has been a very male-oriented sport, largely due to fewer women participating in bird hunts or upland bird hunting. That is changing. While women have been involved in this sport since its origins in 1863, now at least half of the kids in youth field trials are girls."

She recalls the progress of one young woman, Daley Dalton of Moultrie, who began participating at age 14.



FIELD TRIALING TEACHES RESPONSIBILITY through caring for and working with animals and helps children develop a lifelong love for the outdoors, dogs, horses, wildlife and good sportsmanship, according to Chris Mathan. (Photo courtesy of Chris Mathan Sporting Dogs)

"When she started, she was nervous and anxious. This past spring, I watched her run a dog at the National Amateur Derby Championship at Livingston Place, and she was brimming with confidence."

Durrell Smith's sentiments align: "The gains made when young stewards of the outdoors experience a bird dog on point, practice animal husbandry and learn about humanity's impact on nature are exponential. It's a revelation into the future of our joy."

Working his dogs with his own children, he has experienced these ben-

efits firsthand.

"Passing the knowledge and wisdom of wing-shooting and bird dogs from forefathers to the children of our futures is one of the greatest joys I've experienced in the Red Hills."

To learn more about youth field trials and how you can support getting more youth involved in this precious time afield, visit YouthFieldTrialAlliance.org.

To learn more about Durrell Smith's work, visit TheSportingLife-Notebook.com and MinorityOutdoorAlliance.org.

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