

WOODS 'N WATER™

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\$4.50

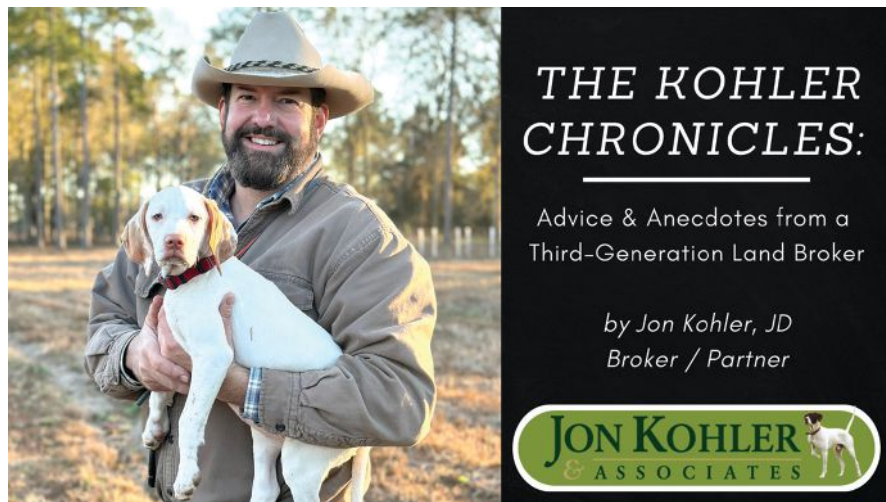
BUCK
OF THE
YEAR
EDITION

Florida's
Bear Hunt
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Fishing
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Real Estate
Listings





On Point: Faith, field trials and the future of bird dogs

The Spark

Some people chase trophies. I've spent my life chasing hunting dogs.

From Taylor County's flatwoods to the storied plantations of the South and the windswept trial grounds up north, there's nothing quite like watching a dog do exactly what God designed it to do. Field trialing elevates that instinct. It's not just a sport, it's a passion, a tradition and, for me, a lifelong addiction I've never wanted cured... though my wife,

Erica, might feel otherwise.

The Competitive Tradition

The competitiveness of field trials rivals anything in sports. On the storied grounds of the plantations we represent, I've seen Type A personalities, backed by fortunes, operate with the precision of professional franchises.

Ted Turner, for instance, once spoke with Architectural Digest about the Georgia-Florida Field Trial. He said:

"For 20 years we entered it and



lost. The joke was that I'd already won the America's Cup and the World Series. I just thought it'd be colorful to win the field trial, too. And last year I was there when we did with Tucker, a beautiful four-year-old English Setter, and I got a wonderful rush."

Across the South, there are four great "Plantation Belts" – the Red Hills, Albany, Union Springs and the ACE Basin – which account for over 1.2 million acres of the finest bird dog grounds in

America. Turner's once 30,000-acre Avalon and 17,000-acre Nonami in Georgia embodied the "all-in" commitment. In Alabama, client Bud Moore's Shell Creek comprised 4,000 acres tailored for trial training. I even had one client who flew his champion bird dog to competitions in a private jet.

I came from a different world. My first dog box was cobbled together from 2x4s – dubbed the "Elephant Box" by

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NEW RELEASES

by Taylor County's own Monroe Morgan

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"Tomorrow"

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Also available on many music store apps.

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SmokinInThePinesBBQ.com

The Next Generation

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friends in Perry, Florida. In a town that invented the aluminum toolbox, my wooden contraption was an early reminder that the capitalistic system was leaving me behind. Every three-dollar quail I trained with was treated like a hundred-dollar bill, yet I loved every minute of it.

As a broke law school student, I once called the legendary Bob Wehle about getting on the waiting list for one of his Elhew Pointers.

The call ended shortly after he told me the price – \$1,000. And that was thirty years ago.

The Modern Gold Standard

Wehle's methods still hold up, but others have since raised the bar. Today, Sean Derrig and his Erin's Covey Pointe line of dogs are as close to perfection as I've seen. Erin's Perfect Storm recently won the National Championship at Ames Plantation.

We sold Derrig his original plantation and watched him turn it into one of the finest bird dog grounds in America. Like the New England Patriots of the early 2000s, he hasn't just won – he's defined what winning looks like. The difference is that he's shared that success, generously giving his time, knowledge and dogs to others.

Just as God created the earth for us to inhabit, enjoy and share a relationship with Him, Derrig and other like-minded landowners have created their own "mini worlds" for enjoying all types of hunting dogs.

My First Steps

My own journey began in law school in Michigan. I missed watching dogs work, so I went to a summer trial just to see them run. I knew no one, and I had only one English pointer, Jake, who would later become our company's logo.

Standing near a picnic table, I greeted some strangers in dusty chaps and clean whistles. As I walked away, one called out: "If you ever want to work some dogs, come by my kennel."

I almost kept walking. Instead, I turned around. That decision changed my life. I miss a lot of opportunities God gives me, but I got this one right.

Soon I was working dogs, learning professional training techniques, and competing. That handler, Ed Hart, would later winter 40 dogs at Lick Skillet to train for the Continental at Livingston Place and other major trials – a dog man's paradise.

Over the years, I've owned more than 20 dogs, sometimes a dozen at a time, and competed across the country. I eventually bred my best bitch to Elhew Fibber McGee at Pinebloom Plantation, and the pups were everything I'd hoped

for. Today, my pointers carry Erin lineage.

I've never craved the trappings of status – country clubs, sports cars or big boats – but I can easily overspend on anything to do with bird dogs. In my career I've represented some very famous people – most recently Jake Paul, whose plantation purchase drew over a billion media impressions. I don't get starstruck, but I will admit when I met Shell Creek Coin, the back-to-back National Champion in 2006 and 2007, I wasn't leaving without a picture.

The Next Generation

Representing legacy properties means always thinking about the next generation. Society changes. The original "Yankees who created the Southern sport of quail hunting" are long gone. We recently listed Maytag Plantation, LB Maytag's lake portion of his original 12,000-acre Sedgefields Plantation in Union Springs. Because of him, the town is known as the "Field Trial Capital of the World." Will the next generation continue these traditions?

It seems that almost everyone I know hunts, but the reality is that only 1% of Floridians now buy a hunting license. Nationwide, it's under 5%. And if someone doesn't start as a youth, chances are they never will. How many of the 60% of four-year-olds who now have an iPad will grow up falling in love with the outdoors like we did?

The Firearm Industry Trade Association (NSSF) found that 90% of hunters were introduced by a family member or mentor. I serve on the National Board of Quail Forever/Pheasants Forever, and at every meeting someone raises the concern of R3 – Recruitment, Retention, and Reactivation. This is a huge storm on the horizon.

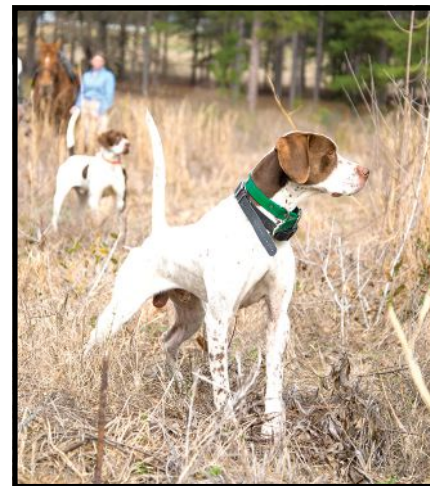
The type of hunting has also shifted. Trophy deer properties now often sell for more per acre than even wild quail plantations. Why? Because a generation ago, the mentors of today's buyers weren't talking about how many coveys they found – they were telling stories around the campfire about shooting big bucks. The young impressionable minds sitting there soaked it in. The key takeaway was simple: true success meant one day owning a great deer place.

Closer to home, people like Chris Mathan, founder of the Youth Field Trial Alliance (YFTA), are making a stand to reverse the tide. Since 2008, she's published Strideaway, an online field trial magazine. Her approach is practical – get kids started by running retired trial dogs and help them bypass the intimidating need to ride horseback. These sparks matter.

Without them, the next generation



"WITHOUT SPARKS LIKE THESE, THE NEXT GENERATION WILL TRADE BIRD DOGS FOR SCREENS," said the author (right), who has taught his kids (above) from an early age about the importance of sharing in God's great outdoors.



will trade bird dogs for screens, and the traditions we cherish could fade away.

Why It Really Matters

When I think back, I remember Jake, the dog who started it all, and that chance meeting at a picnic table. I think of the people I've met, the friendships forged and the dogs that shaped my life. Running bird dogs has never been just about covey rises. It's about stewardship, tradition and the bond between handler and dog.

The older I get, the more I see God's fingerprints in all of it. The reason we have these dogs, and the little worlds we build for them, is for our enjoyment – for their companionship and the joy of watching them do what they were created to do.

Isn't that the relationship God wants with us? Scripture says we were created by God for His pleasure – to have a relationship with Him, to walk faithfully and to glorify Him. And just

as a bird dog is happiest on point, we are most fulfilled when we are living out the purpose for which we were made.

The Bible states we don't truly own any of this – not the land, not the dogs we train, not even the breath in our lungs. What we call "ours" is only on loan from the true Owner. Our calling is not ownership, but faithfulness. Maybe that's why dog people are good people: they understand loyalty, trust and devotion to a loving Master.

As for me, I'll keep running dogs and sharing God's great outdoors for as long as He allows.

But I know, at the end of the day, that God also has expectations of me. He seeks a relationship with me just as I enjoy one with my favorite dogs.

Life is about walking in His fields, managing what He's entrusted and living in a way that points – like a faithful bird dog – toward the glory of a loving Creator.