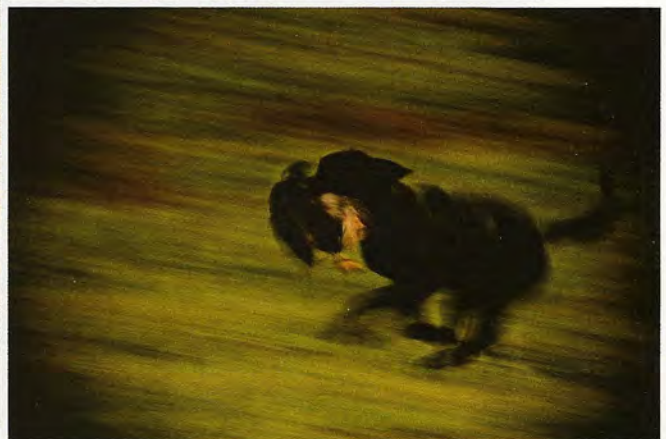




Left: Kristen Hoffman and Piper, a Chesapeake Bay retriever, at the Tidewater Retriever Club Pro Trial in Powhatan in October. Here: Tigger, a Chessie owned by Bob Reekart of Cleveland, Ohio, retrieves a duck in the qualifying land mark. Below: Abby, a black Labrador trained by Hoffman, returns with a duck at the trial.



Have Dogs, Will Travel

Kristen Hoffman gave up a successful art career to train retrievers professionally. The job is tough, the lifestyle nomadic—but, she says, “there’s nothing better than being in a truck with a bunch of retrievers, headed somewhere.” BY CLARKE C. JONES

PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHIP MITCHELL

Why would a woman who studied at the Rhode Island School of Design, and then earned a master’s from the Maryland Institute of Art, choose to drive a truck loaded with 12 to 14 retrievers up and down the East Coast most weekends? Why would someone whose sculpture has been exhibited in New York and whose artwork has included the covers of Orvis and Bass Pro catalogs choose to daily muck out dog pens long before some of us have had our first cup of coffee? Apparently, all it took was the runt of a litter of golden retriever puppies.

Kristen Hoffman was raised in Rochester, Minnesota, and she always liked the outdoors. She even dreamed of becoming a veterinarian, mainly because she loved horses. “I didn’t like dogs at all, growing up,” she says. “But when I was given a little golden retriever puppy at age 22, the one thing I knew is that dogs should be obedience trained,

and once we started classes together, I was hooked.”

In the 1970s, even as her art career was beginning to flourish, Hoffman started training her dog for obedience trials. In the 1980s, she switched to training her retriever in the Working Retriever class, then moved to amateur Hunt tests. In 1988, she entered her dog in the first-ever North American



Hunting Retriever Association field trial, held at the former Curles Neck Farm in Henrico County. In 1992, wanting a more challenging career, she left the art business altogether and turned pro in field trials. She has trained retrievers as her full-time occupation ever since.

When she decided to switch careers, Hoffman knew she had to be truly committed to the change. Here, after all, was a woman who had painted Socks the cat for owners President Bill Clinton and his wife, Hillary. No matter—by then there was no looking back. “I said goodbye to my old career, which had supplied me with a good living, by taking all my oils, canvases, paintings and easels to the field behind my home in Bumpass and having a celebratory farewell bonfire.”

There are about 175 pro field trial trainers in America, and nearly all of them are men. It is a tough job—long days, lonely drives—and the nomadic lifestyle doesn’t lend itself to personal relationships. The 57-year-old Hoffman, who is single, says the early years were rough. Unless you have a proven reputation as a trainer, getting clients is extremely difficult. “I was not very well known, and I took any dog I could get. I trained not only retrievers but also setters, vizslas ... and I would train them in obedience, hunt test, field trials—everything. It was a very frustrating time for me, but I was fortunate enough to meet Bachman Doar, who was one of the better pros in Virginia, and he had a wonderful influence on how I train retrievers. Whenever I had a training problem with a retriever and could not figure out how to solve it, Bachman had the answer.”

Hoffman’s perseverance has paid off. She’s had nine dogs make the Derby field list, 15 have qualified for the All-Age stakes, and one has become a field trial champion. Trainers like her make a comfortable living, but it is not, she says, a big-bucks profession. Asked how many dogs she’s trained over her roughly 30-year career, Hoffman is flummoxed—it’s somewhere between 200 and 1,000, she says.

At last check, the trainer had 19 retrievers—one her own and 18 who belong to clients. Many of the own-

ers see their dogs only a couple of times a year—picking them up for hunting trips or showing up at an occasional trial. Hoffman is on the road most weekends, traveling to to run the animals. She’s got clients in Texas, Maryland and Pennsylvania, and gets help only from two local “bird boys”—Rusty Stull and Brett Dillard, who assist Hoffman by shooting the guns and performing other tasks that simulate trial situations. “It is a lonely life and a

When a trainer is called to come to the line with his or her retriever, the dog has to be off leash. The trainer can tell the dog to heel, sit and mark. Once the trainer has signaled the judge to throw the birds, he or she cannot correct the dog or say a word to it until the judge gives the signal to send the dog. A trainer’s dog may be asked to mark three or four birds at distances ranging from 100 yards to 400 yards, depending on the trial. The dog is to go directly

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very competitive sport,” she says, “but the field trial people are a great group, for the most part. And there is nothing greater than being in a truck with a bunch of retrievers, headed somewhere.” In recent months, she’s motored from New Jersey to South Carolina, and she gave a training seminar in 2007 in Alaska.

Pro trainers run their retrievers almost every weekend. They do so at trials to qualify the dogs for points that lead to titles and such honors as Master Hunter (MH), Amateur Field Champion (AFC) or National Field Champion (NFC), all of which appear on pedigree papers and raise the value of a retriever as a hunting dog and breeding animal. In October, Hoffman ran her dogs at a Tidewater Retriever Club Pro Field Trial in Powhatan, Virginia. There were about 50 retrievers in the three-day trial, which goes on rain or shine.

Top, from left: Tigger approaches a downed duck; ducks already retrieved during a water mark for derbys (dogs under age 2); action at the Tidewater Retriever Club Pro Trial.

to each bird, return it to the trainer, and sit and hold the bird until the trainer takes it from the dog’s mouth. The “retrieves” a dog makes may be a land retrieve, a water retrieve or a combination of both.

All animals progress differently, but Hoffman says it can take about three months to train a “gun dog”, which, when it sees a duck fall, will go and retrieve the bird. It can take a year to train a “handling gun dog”, which will retrieve a bird it has not seen fall by reacting to hand signals or whistles from the hunter.

Retriever training has changed over the last 20 years, Hoffman says, and so have retrievers. “I believe retrievers are more intelligent and more sensitive. Training methods have improved as well.” She says that retrievers, like people, have individual personalities and respond to motivation in different ways. “Some dogs require a strong voice correction, and others may require something different.”

In Hoffman’s opinion, the best field trial dog is a black Labrador. Although you may have a great Chesapeake or golden retriever, “if you want to play the field trial game, get a black Lab—the percentages prove this out. Labs are the most tractable and best water dogs. Chesapeakes, if you get a good one, are great. Golden retrievers can be a good upland

dog and also tend to be very smart, which, although it sounds odd, may make them more difficult to train.”

There isn’t much in a dog that Hoffman hasn’t seen, but she never grows tired of working with retrievers. It’s called having a passion for what you do, and that, she says, makes the sacrifices gratifying.

There are several retriever organizations in Virginia—among them, the Tidewater Retriever Club (tidewaterretrieverclub.org), the Rappahannock River Retriever Club (rrrclub.com) and the Blue Ridge Retriever Club (blueridgeretrieverclub.com).

