

Top-Honor Shed Dogs

The North American Shed Hunting Dog Association's annual championship is proof antlers are here to stay in the bird-dog world.

BY TONY J. PETERSON

Less than a decade ago it was truly rare to hear of a shed-antler hunting dog. The wave, which was just starting to build then, was nothing more than a few folks who had combined their love of bird dogs with their love of deer and antlers. Count dog-training expert Tom Dokken as one of the people who decided to start teaching his dogs how to find cast bone.

Dokken is familiar to just about anyone who knows something about bird dogs so it is no surprise that he was struck with the inspiration to start training his dogs to find antlers. It didn't hurt, of course, that Dokken

is a passionate bowhunter as well. According to him it all started about a decade ago.

"I've always shed hunted because even though I love bird hunting, I also love to

bowhunt deer, so I decided I'd train a dog to help me out," he recalls. "It didn't take long before I realized that there were a lot of other people out there who were interested in adding this trick to their bird dog's repertoire. That's when we started adding shed-antler training into our training program at our kennel."

It also didn't take Dokken long to realize that while the market





shed dogs, there weren't really any good training tools available. Already well-versed in creating products to fill dog-training gaps—his popular series of DeadFowl retrieving dummies immediately comes to mind—he started working on some tools and eventually developed a comprehensive line of must-haves for the amateur shed-dog trainer. He also produced a DVD and a training manual to allow people to closely follow his program.

Other professional dog trainers started marketing themselves as shed-dog trainers as well, and soon enough it became common to see pictures of Labs trotting through the snow with antlers clenched in their teeth. That wider-spread awareness turned into something else entirely when Dokken decided to form the North American Shed Hunting Dog Association (NASHDA).

■ TITLE TIME The organization has evolved since its inception in 2010, but it all started with a single cham-

pionship event. After hosting the event for the original 12 competitors, Dokken realized that there was plenty of room to grow.

“With its original success, we knew that we could put on events so that people could bring their shed dogs and compete to earn titles. We ended up creating the Junior, Senior, and Master levels,” he says.

“Each event involves delivering six antlers to hand. For beginners, the Junior level involves the dog finding and delivering those six antlers to hand in under 15 minutes. Handlers must have their dogs compete in, and complete, six of those events to earn their Junior title.

“After that, it's on to the Senior level, where they'll work to find six antlers again. This time, however, we make the course more difficult. Dogs need to ferret out antlers that are in thick brush and cover, and they must pick up and retrieve an antler from the water.”

This next-level qualifier is an excellent way to test how good a dog



really is because it involves both eyesight and nose work, which are the cornerstones of any good shed dog. To earn their Senior title, they once again need to earn six passes.

Once completed, handlers can turn their attention to the Master events, which as Dokken explains, are more difficult yet. “With the Master course,

we are placing antlers in thick brush and in the water, as well. But we also add something else, an elk antler of reasonable size. Each dog needs to not only pick up the elk shed, but bring it to hand. If they can complete six of these Master courses, they earn the title.”

To compete in the NASHDA World



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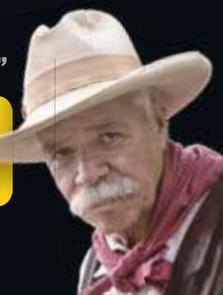
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Championship in April, dogs must compete at least one test to qualify. If they do, they'll compete against over 100 other shed dogs in the three categories, Junior, Amateur, and Open.

The Junior category is open to any dog that is two years old or younger, which is different than the regular hunt-test Junior level (dogs of any age can compete in those). The Championship also has an Amateur category, for amateur handlers (the dog can be trained professionally for this category, however). Lastly, the Open category is for all amateur and professionally trained dogs.

To figure out who is the top dog in each category, Dokken explained the scoring criteria: "Dogs are run on a series of tests and they receive points for every antler found and for every antler retrieved. Also, any of the 15 minutes they've not used up while finding the six antlers is credited to their score. In other words, the more antlers they find and retrieve—and the quicker they do it—the better their score."

■ AND THE WINNER IS... The 2016 NASHDA World Championship, held at Dokken's Oak Ridge Kennel in Northfield, Minnesota, hosted competitors from the East Coast, Nevada, Texas, Mississippi and all throughout the Midwest. The winner of the Amateur and Open events this year, Parker Uhlman, comes from a state not typically associated with shed dogs—New Hampshire.

Uhlman, who was running a two-year old American Lab named Pemi this year, is no stranger to the NASHDA World Championship, having won in 2013 with another dog, DeeDee. When asked how his younger champion had come to be, Uhlman broke down his training and shed-hunting regimen by saying, "I work my dogs year 'round. I've got courses set up here and then I work them all fall. I also have a friend who trains my dogs once they are six months old, so they grow up looking for antlers."

Before you assume that Uhlman's dogs spend all of their time seeking

out deer antlers, remember where he lives. This is where the story of Pemi gets interesting, because the days she spends from January on to spring are often spent in search of moose antlers.

"We don't have a lot of shed dogs out here, not like in the Midwest anyway. Part of the reason for that

is because we look for moose antlers," Uhlman reports. "Last year we found 49 moose antlers and Pemi found most of them. Every day that we can get out there, we are covering as many miles as possible and it's amazing, but my dogs are pulling antlers out of two or three feet of snow."



Uhlman, who traveled to Minnesota with his three-year-old daughter and his wife in tow, ended up watching Pemi compete in four courses, two of which she won, and two of which she ended up in second place. Her fastest time for bringing six antlers back to hand was 2:15, which is by all accounts, incredible.

While Uhlman runs Labs to locate shed antlers and compete in NASHDA events, there are plenty of other breeds represented as well. In fact, pretty much any dog with a retrieving desire can be taught to find and bring back antlers, but it's also no surprise that breeds like the Lab makes up a good cross-section of the shed dogs. They are working dogs with good noses and insatiable retrieving desires, which makes them a natural fit for this task.

A HUNT FOR EVERYONE When you start thinking about hunt tests involving shed dogs, it starts to seem like a serious endeavor. And it certainly can be; however, there is also an all-inclusive feel to the events as well as the Championship that can't be ignored. It's this family-friendly environment that makes the world of sporting dogs, and more specifically, antler dogs, so appealing.

Case in point is the fact that each year at the World Championship, they hand out a trophy to the highest scoring youth handler. This encourages youngsters to work with dogs and compete. As of the last few years, this category has been dominated by a young man from Missouri named Sam McSpadden, who at 14 years old has already spent much of his time working with antler dogs.

I caught up to Sam and his father, Mike, and asked them what it was that brought them to the NASHDA events and shed dogs in general and Mike said, "We are both passionate bowhunters, so we shed hunt every year. We just thought it would be cool to optimize our efforts with a dog. Even though I used to run coonhounds I've never really been into bird dogs, but Sam and I thought it would be a good idea to pick up a Lab pup."

They did just that in 2011, and



Shed dog events are real family affairs. Shown with judge Hunter Demo are Jason Rezin (kneeling) of Tomah, Wisconsin, and daughters Livia and Jaylin and their 8-year-old Labrador, Rannie.

after devouring as much information as they could find on training antler dogs, they worked that first puppy into a shed-hunting machine. The father-son duo ran their first event in 2012, and by 2015 Sam was handling two dogs in the Championship.

Mike was quick to point out that he doesn't co-handle the dogs and he allows Sam to run the events on

his own. During one particular qualifier in Indiana, Mike recalled how he was set to run one of his females, Annie, in a trial but something came up.

"I fully intended to handle during that event, but then I saw one of the tires on my truck was flat," he recalls. "They were calling for Annie, so I told Sam to handle her. After he did,



Although shed dog events are dominated by Labs and other sporting breeds, any dog is eligible to enter. This is Newman, a 2-1/2-year-old Boston terrier-Chihuahua mix owned by Kaydi Grunhovd.

Sam and the judge pulled up next to my truck in a UTV. The judge said something that I'll never forget, 'Sir, that was the best handler-to-dog work that I saw all day. They were an absolute team out there.'"

The pride in McSpadden's voice as he recounted the conversation was clear, as it should have been. The father-son team now handles three dogs, and is fully ensconced in the world of shed dogs. In fact, before totally wrapping up our conversation I asked Sam what he planned to do with his life.

His response was simple. "I'd like to branch out and train dogs, train them to be obedient, train them to do everything," he said. After chatting with him, I have no doubt that he'll achieve that goal, and that he and his father are not done filling up their trophy room with NASHDA brass.

CONCLUSION While shed-antler dogs are still a relatively new category when it comes to sporting

dogs, they are coming on fast. There is no better evidence of this than the number of folks who line up each year at Deer Shows and other events to run their dogs through qualifiers...

and of course, the sheer volume of competitors who make their way to Northfield, Minnesota each April to see if their dog has what it takes to bring home a trophy. *



WANT TO GIVE IT A TRY?

It may seem daunting to think about adding shed hunting to your bird dog's resume, but it's not. It does help to have the right information and the right tools. For these, there is no better place to look than www.sheddogtrainer.com. Here you'll find all of the resources you need along with plenty of information on how to get involved with NASHDA.



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