

## A Golden Gets First

In the Spring of 1982, current Brazosport Retriever Club member, Harris Greenwood, drove down to Mercedes Hitchcock's Belvedere Kennel in the Brazos River Bottoms outside DeWalt, Texas to pick up a little yellow fluffy fuzzball of a duck down puppy dog he named Sheba. Starting on that day (which was "Mr. Wolter's Mystical Seven Weeks" of age) Harris and Sheba, trained James Lamb Free's magical 10 minutes a day (every day and sometimes twice a day) over the next 3 1/2 years. While almost all of Sheba's formal training was in the front and side yards of Harris' downtown Houston subdivision of River Oaks, Sheba got plenty of informal training as Harris hunted Sheba on ducks, geese, dove and quail all over Texas starting at 4 months of age.

Having run Sheba in puppy trials, derby and qualifying without much success Harris took Mercedes' suggestion and in 1985 switched Sheba over to the new AKC "Retriever Hunting Tests". Starting at the top (Master Hunter) Harris and Sheba ran the few hunt tests available near their Houston home for about a year. Proving that a "city dog" could do the "country" Master Hunt test work, Sheba earned four Master ribbons in the first four tests she ran; daily city workouts through azaleas, angle backs across streets, up curbs, over hedges, past lawnmowers, through shrubs, right past mailmen, joggers, yardmen, meter readers and neighbors had prepared Sheba just fine for the rigors of hunt test work.

It took six ribbons to qualify for the coveted Master Hunter title in those days, and Sheba was two ribbons away from the "Master Hunter" title in the summer of 1986 with a chance to be the first Master Hunter of all time, the first Master Hunter in Texas and the first Golden Retriever Master Hunter in the world.

In July of 1986, Harris entered Sheba in the Austin Retriever Club hunt test outside Giddings, Texas where she was one of only five dogs out of the 25 to pass the Master Hunter test, bringing Sheba one "passing" ribbon short of the six needed for the title. There were a number of other dogs in Texas and the U.S. that also had five ribbons, and it was virtually impossible to know who would be the first to get their sixth ribbon and the title.

Looking through the AKC magazine *"The Hunter's Whistle"* Harris found a hunt test at the Rice Creek Retriever Club outside Little Falls, Minnesota scheduled for September 6<sup>th</sup> and a second test scheduled the next day outside Lincoln, Nebraska on the 7<sup>th</sup>. Harris entered Sheba in both tests a 600 mile plane ride apart figuring Sheba should get her Master title at the first event in Minnesota, but would still have a back-up plan in Nebraska the next day. About this time, Harris learned that a Labrador had become the first Master Hunter outside Texas (first Master Hunter of all), but the first Master Hunter in Texas and the first Golden Retriever Master Hunter in the world were still up for grabs.

Harris and Sheba flew to Minneapolis, Minnesota on Friday September the fifth, 1986, spent the night in Little Falls and rose bright and early the next morning for the test. It was a crisp, cool day in Minnesota and Sheba was treated to happy bumpers in the vacant lot across from the motel to warm up before driving to the test grounds fifteen minutes away.

The first series was a "walk up" where Sheba was put on "sit/stay" as Harris and the judges left Sheba behind to "sneak" walk 30 yards up a slope to "jump shoot" a duck on the other side of a slough in high brush with the judges shouting "you got em" and "good shot"-- attempting to make Sheba break. Sheba was steady as a "pet rock" on this long distance "stay", and passed this breaking test/blind retrieve with flying colors.

The second series put Sheba in the first boat she had ever worked out of. Harris and Sheba rowed out to the middle of the lake where they signaled to the Judges to begin a triple watermark including a live flyer 60-120 yards out. Sheba jumped out of the boat and (with hand on top of the head) back in, as if she

had been doing boat work for years and nailed all three marks. Over a fourth of the dogs went out on this series.

The third series included a "chorus line" walk-up with six hunters and dogs on the line marching side by side through a field with multiple "flyers" thrown and shot over the heads of the dogs in what the judges called a "Mexican Dove Hunt". The fourth series included multiple marks and blinds over and through a goose spread with diversion flyers on the return, which the judges called a Texas Rag Spread Goose Hunt". Some of the diversion bird flyers in the "goose hunt" fell almost on top of the dogs, clearly a "switching" test while the "dove hunt" walkup with simultaneous multiple flyers was a breaking test zoo. Over half the remaining dogs couldn't resist, a "switch" or a "break" as Sheba held on to be one of only six of the original 36 called back for the fifth series.

The fifth series was a long "blind" where dogs were required to swim through 8-ft. tall cattails/reeds and out of sight (Harris missed the test dog showing where the two-foot wide slot in the reeds was shown). But, Sheba held her line and barreled on through the reeds "sight unseen" until she magically reappeared out of the cattails/reeds about 200 yards from the line and only 15 feet to the left of the blind. One sit whistle and a Bob Wills two step to the right and the "little lady" from Texas had the bird, and was on her way to the next series.

The sixth series was a "fly away" "quartering" test, followed by a blind. Sheba had never done a "fly away" in competition before but ran it to perfection. After the pheasant flush, there was a long blind with a tracking test ("nose" really was a trait they used to judge retrievers on) which she executed flawlessly. Harris smiles when he tells the story and says he's given Sheba lots of practice on the "fly aways" by having birds he shoots fly a long way before they fall (or land unharmed).

Harris was elated after the sixth series and thought the Master title was his as there were only four dogs left, and all elements of a Master Hunt test were behind them. At this point in the test there was dissension among the judges and club officials as the dogs had been tested on all required elements at least twice and it was beginning to look like the judges weren't going to be happy till all the dogs had failed and they had one blonde Texas scalp on their Minnesota belt...but judges are the judges and another series was called and set up -- the final venue.

The final series began with a "walk-up" with the dogs quartering down hill from the outer rim of a small, natural amphitheater valley. As the "line" was reached, a live chucker flushed to the right and was shot on the dogs' side of a small but high-banked creek (which looked like the "Little Big Horn" to a pale-faced retriever from Texas). A second chucker flyer was shot to the left across the creek angled back over a deep and treacherous swamp with many fallen trees, limbs and assorted vegetation. Sheba marked the first bird and had her eye on the second when they called for the "dog". Sheba launched herself into the creek with one of her patented "skyrocket water entries" and dragged herself up the steep bank and disappeared into the cane. After an eternity (probably only 5 minutes) she returned to the edge of the cane but did not have the bird. Sheba had never come back without a bird, so Harris was still confident but asked the judges if he could "handle her" before sending her "back" into the swamp where she disappeared again. After another eternity, Sheba returned again and again had no bird, but with her tongue hanging down to her toenails. Fearing that he might literally kill her if he sent her back into the swamp again, and realizing that he had missed his airplane to Nebraska (the quest to be first had seemingly ended) Harris reluctantly called Sheba in. But while she was returning Harris started thinking... Sheba had never failed to bring a bird back before and Sheba had the strongest nose and biggest heart Harris had ever seen. So, Harris demanded to see the bird that had eluded his Sheba Queen. At that point, the judges, Harris, bird boys, gunners, handlers and spectators all ventured into that swamp but could not find the bird, so the quest was still on as Sheba was given a rerun.

After the remaining three dogs had run and the sun had already set, it was Sheba's time to rerun. Same scenario as before. Sheba quarters down the hill to the line. First bird is shot to the right. Then the second bird is thrown/flyes to the left across the creek back in the swamp before exploding like a down

pillow before helicoptering down in a feather shower till it caught and stuck in the top of a small bush like tree. The judges, faces gnarled, turned their backs muttering something like "Oh Geez!" as they called for "dog".

Sheba nailed the first bird and then launched herself into the creek where she scampered up the bank and into the swamp where Harris thought she would surely fail. There was no way to scent or retrieve the bird out of the top of that shrub like tree. All the hopes and dreams of being the "First" drained, it was too late to get to Lincoln, Nebraska and the "Back Up Test"... it was just their fate!

While all his shattered dreams flashed before Harris' eyes, Sheba was out of sight but not out of sound. You could hear her thrashing around as she struggled toward "the fall".

"Why didn't the judges call a "no bird?" "Why did the bird have to fall in the top of the tree?" "Why did they not finish after the last series?" "How do you handle a dog up a tree? "Could he charter a plane to Nebraska?" A thousand thoughts crossed Harris's mind, but his concentration was broken when he saw the tree begin to wiggle. The more it wiggled, the more hog rooting noises came from the grunting dog. Then the tree began to bend -- lower and lower until up through the cane came the white-face and foreshoulders of the first Master Hunter from Texas and the first Golden Retriever Master Hunter in the World to claim her fat chucker prize!

Meanwhile, back in Little Falls, word had spread of retriever history and a small yellow dog from Texas as nearly half the town of five hundred had come down to that fateful swamp to watch the conclusion of the Master Hunter test. When the white-faced Sheba could be seen in top of that shrub like/tree, the crowd went wild, clapping, cheering and hollering as the judges sighed with relief and the club officials showed a keyboard full of pearly white teeth.

Back at the Rice Creek Retriever Club House, (after a quick shampoo) they put Sheba on her throne of a chair, wrapped the Master Hunter title ribbon around her neck, and put a Rice Creek Retriever Club hat on "Mr. Harris" as the club secretary took pictures with a flash that sprinkled stars on Miss Sheba the Queen while outside the Northern lights of Miss Boreales did her thing.

What a day! What a dog!