Remembering a Legend

Up the Creek

by Ken M. Blomberg

Remembering Duffey

"Now I have more years to look back upon than there are to look forward to, but because of gun dogs and the men and women who hunt with them, I can still relish the present and have faith in the future. Training and hunting with good dogs will keep me in touch with those who share a passion for the good things in life."

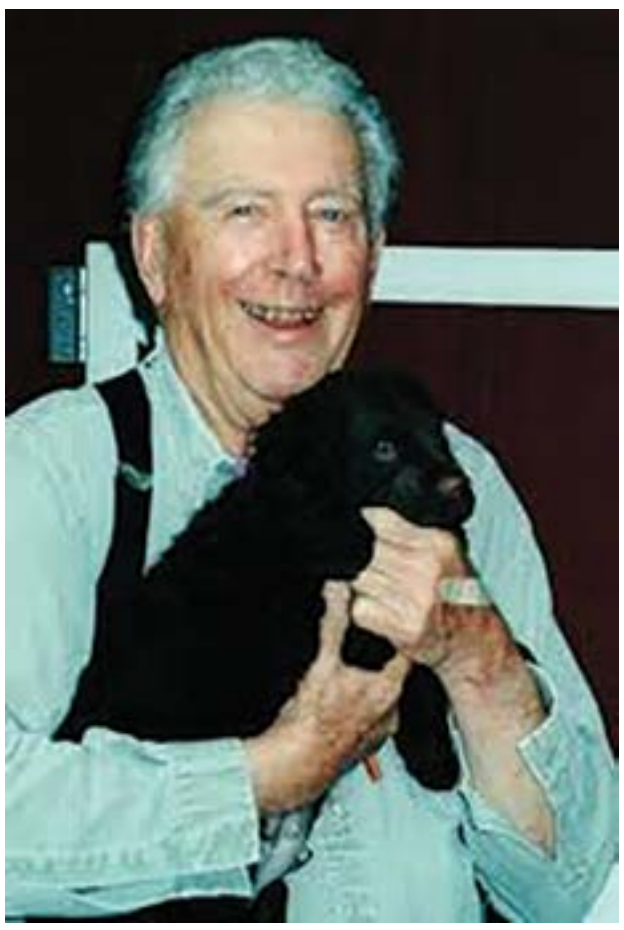
—David Michael Duffey, Hunting Dog Know-How, 1983.

Forty-some springs ago, two friends and I loaded up our bird dogs and headed east to J&H Game Farm near Shiocton. It was there we competed against sixty other handlers and their dogs in a two-day National Shoot to Retrieve Association (NSTRA) field trial. Trucks, cars and dog trailers overflowed the gravel parking lot. Many dogs were staked out in the grass, some walked by the sides of their owners on leashes, while still others barked in protest from dog crates back in scattered vehicles.

Organizers and judges stood by the clubhouse, taking in registrations and entry fees. We watched from the sidelines, taking it all in. For us, this was the big time—the Olympics of gun dog field trials. And while this was one of scores of field trials held across the state every spring and fall and one of many we participated in and organized ourselves since, it is one that stands out prominently in my memory bank. You see, I was about to meet one of my childhood heroes in person that day.

In a cloud of dust over the gravel driveway, he suddenly appeared. His mid size pickup was pulling a large eight-hole dog trailer. A crowd of well-wishers gathered around his rig as he unloaded dogs. With a hearty belly laugh, he introduced what he called his son's attempt at a miniature German wirehaired pointer—when, in fact, it was his family's Irish terrier, Finnegan.

David Michael Duffey was his name. He was an outdoor writer, professional dog trainer, field trial judge and reporter. In reality, I had been introduced to him as a youngster on the pages of Milwaukee Journal newspaper as their outdoor writer and on the pages of Outdoor Life magazine, for which he wrote a monthly gun dog column and periodic feature articles. As it turned out, I would watch his career flourish over the years. Now described as the "Dean of Outdoor Writers," he authored nine books on hunting dogs and wrote numerous articles and columns for newspapers and sporting magazines, including the Appleton Post-Crescent, Green Bay Press-Gazette, the American Field, Peterson's Hunting, Wing & Shot, Wildfowl and a "Question and Answers" column for Gun Dog magazine. Later in life, he contributed to this publication, Bird Dog & Retriever News. He became recognized as one of the nation's leading experts on hunting dogs.



When my friends and I checked the running order that day posted on the clubhouse wall, much to my surprise, I saw my name and my dog's next to the names of Duffey and his dog. Handlers and their dogs were run in braces, and as fate would have it, I had won the lottery.

Even after all these years, I remember that thirty-minute run like it was yesterday. We shook hands, and the judges ordered us to release our dogs. His dog, an English pointer named Joe, was off like a streak—my German shorthair Kane was more reserved. Thirty minutes later, Team Duffey had racked up many more points than Team Blomberg. I didn't care. I had rubbed elbows with the best. I had met my childhood hero up close and in person. And much to my delight, six months later, he mentioned us—"the other handler and his boot-licking shorthair"—in a national magazine called Wing & Shot. I didn't mind his characterization. At least he remembered to mention us. And for the record, my Kane went on to win the 1990 Wisconsin Woodcock Championship.

While I only ran into Senior Duffey a few more times over the years, I did happen to strike up a friendship with his son Mike. We both were involved with an organization, the North American Versatile Hunting Dog Association (NAVHDA), and he helped me and several others organize a local chapter. The two of us journeyed to Peoria, Illinois, where we spent a weekend at a NAVHDA judge handler's clinic. Later, he helped our club train hundreds of folks and judged trials locally at the state-owned Mead Wildlife Area dog training area. He was his father's son, that's for sure—an occasional writer and a gun dog expert in his own right. On our Peoria trip, Mike shared with me a few insights about his famous father. "Yes, it is true, he's one hell of a writer. But truth be told, I'm a better dog trainer."

David Michael Duffey passed away on January 26, 2014, at age eighty- six. A celebration of his life was held at T-Dubs Irish Pub in Waupaca on February 8, 2014. Military honors were given. I was honored to attend and visit with Mike and his family. To have known Mr. Duffey—in person, in competition and through his words so skillfully applied to paper over the years—was an honor indeed.

Except for Mike, I knew no one in the packed pub. Mike took the stage and paid tribute to this exceptional man in front of the crowd. A few close family and friends followed suit. When Mike failed to get anyone else to come forward and say a few words about his father, I stood up and said this, "I'll bet nobody here recognizes me. I know Mike and have admired his father as a writer and dog man for years. I wonder if you really realize how famous he was in his world of gun dogs and outdoor writing? In that setting, this man was a rock star." I then proceeded to tell the field trial story at Shiocton and how the man was a personal inspiration to me. While my other childhood friends idolized baseball and football greats, I admired outdoor writers and dog trainers.

David Michael Duffey was, and still is, one of my favorite heroes.

Dave was an incredible human being and a nice, Fun Guy! I truly miss him! Dennis G

