

A wealth of experience at Windsor

With the Retriever Championship heading to Windsor Great Park on December 1-3, **Graham Cox** profiles the impressive judging team.

In this commemorative year, the link between the International Gundog League's Retriever Championship and the year when the Great War was declared is more immediate than the passage of 100 years would suggest. In our book on this premier gundog event, *The Best of the Best: A History of the IGL Retriever Championship 1909-2011* (Pernice Press 2013), we recount a meeting held in the Kennel Club on February 12, 1914, just five months before hostilities began. It was described in the *Kennel Gazette* as "a large and representative gathering of gentlemen interested in the work of field trials". Their discussions ranged over many issues that have long since been resolved, such as whether handlers should carry guns and the appropriateness of artificial water tests. And they reflected on the connection between field trials and shooting: a connection, they agreed, which should be as close as possible.

Another sentiment that commanded unanimous assent was voiced by one of their number who, in talking of trials generally and the Championship in particular, felt they should all dedicate themselves to "the good discipline of aiming at excellence". That impulse has been a constant one, but how is this quality nurtured and sustained?

Well, as Charles Alington – three times a winner of the Championship – argued so convincingly in his influential *Field Trials and Judging* published in 1929, the responsibility rests squarely with the judges.



John Stubbs during the 2007 IGL Retriever Championship at Windsor Great Park, the year in which he retired as headkeeper there.



Keith Bedford takes a bird from FTCh Kayteens Cruise at the 2013 IGL Retriever Championship, held at Lauder in the Scottish Borders.

Alington was in no doubt that field trials had "set up a standard of education unthought of before they were instituted" and he was equally clear that, as he put it, "the extent of the good that they would continue to do depends largely on the judges". So it is obvious why judging the Championship is the pinnacle of any judging career and why the responsibility is an awesome one.

At Windsor Great Park on December 1-3, 2014, when the Championship will be held by Gracious Permission of HM The Queen and The Crown Commissioners, that responsibility will rest on the capable shoulders of John Stubbs, Ian Openshaw, Keith Bedford and Jamie Bettinson.

On familiar ground

Presenting their names in that order indicates no precedence in what has to be a team. John Stubbs and Ian Openshaw are unlikely to be paired together so that their experience can be available at either end of the line. John Stubbs, in particular, will bring to the task that special combination of having judged twice before already – at Holkham in 2004 and in 2009 at Blankney in the IGL's Centenary Championship – and knowing, quite literally, every inch of the ground: he retired as head gamekeeper here after 22 years in 2007.

Whilst at Windsor Great Park he took care of the training and working of the kennels. More than that: the post involved challenges which his previous posts, in his

native Yorkshire and at Gatcombe Park in Gloucestershire, had not presented. He had to transform himself from a rural to an urban keeper almost overnight. Public access expanded massively and he developed a significant commitment to education, particularly through open days, so that thousands of school children were introduced in practical ways to the message that conservation must mean active management. Those communication skills allied to a wealth of experience, based on his preparations when the Championship was at Windsor in 1994, 2001 and 2007, and his judging in 2004 and 2009, will be invaluable.

Extraordinary record

Ian Openshaw has judged a Retriever Championship on a royal estate before, having been a key member of the team at Sandringham in 2010. That was when David Latham, who won in 2003 with FTCh Drakeshead Deana, registered his second win with FTCh Delfleet Neon of Fendawood, who would win again at Cawdor in 2012. Ian Openshaw's familiarity with Championship Stakes in retrievers, springers and cockers is just one aspect of his having blown to smithereens any assumption of what one individual might achieve in a competitive career which, it needs to be added, is far from over.

The catalogue of achievement would fill the magazine. Because, as well as the multiple Championship wins with spaniels and the fact that an utterly amazing 100 Field Trial Champions have been made up since his first win at the age of 13, he has also made up 11 labradors and in 1990 came second in the Retriever Championship with FTCh Swinbrook Twig. The word 'glittering' seems an inadequately dim way of characterising such a record.

On debut from the east

A Fenman through and through, Keith Bedford carried a gun "as soon as I was strong enough" and



Jamie Bettinson was named the top overall individual in the Gundog International at the 2009 CLA Game Fair at Belvoir, with his FTCh Levenghyl Peacock.



Ian Openshaw captivating a packed grandstand with this young cocker at the 2011 CLA Game Fair at Blenheim.

his father bought him his first black labrador when he was 12. Chatteris to Wisbech, where he now lives, is a journey of only 12 miles so under the big skies of his fenland home is where he has worked, to great effect, a series of dogs who, between them, have qualified five times. What he emphasises, though, is the rough shooting, wildfowling and 30 to 40 days' picking-up, which together mean that anything less than total devotion to gamefinding is unacceptable. Indeed, he demolishes the lie – as do so many – that trial dogs are cosseted prima donnas.

Practical work and excellence can go together, as evidenced by Pridelines Painter, who ran at Sandringham in 1998; the bitch FTCh Pryanduke Fenmarc Quest who ran in 2007 at Windsor and again in 2008 in the Borders, dam of his yellow dog FTCh Kayteens Cruise, who qualified in 2012 and again in 2013. Keith Bedford can be relied on to bring all the right emphases to this first Championship judging appointment.

And Jamie makes four

When we turn to the young man who completes the quartet it's clear we can have every confidence in this stellar judging team. Jamie Bettinson was, jointly with his father Mark, who himself judged the Championship in 2008 and again in 2013, awarded the Keith Erlandson Memorial Trophy for Best Gundog Trainer of the Year at the Blenheim Game Fair in July.

To say he is steeped in the culture of the Championship is an understatement and, though he qualified before in 2005 and 2006 and subsequently in 2010 and 2011, 2009 was a special year for him when his dog FTCh Levenghyl Peacock took the top individual award at the CLA Game Fair and followed it with a third place in the Centenary Championship at Blankney. So John Stubbs, one of the judges then, will be his colleague at Windsor, and we can be sure that the shared culture will be a strong one. 🐾