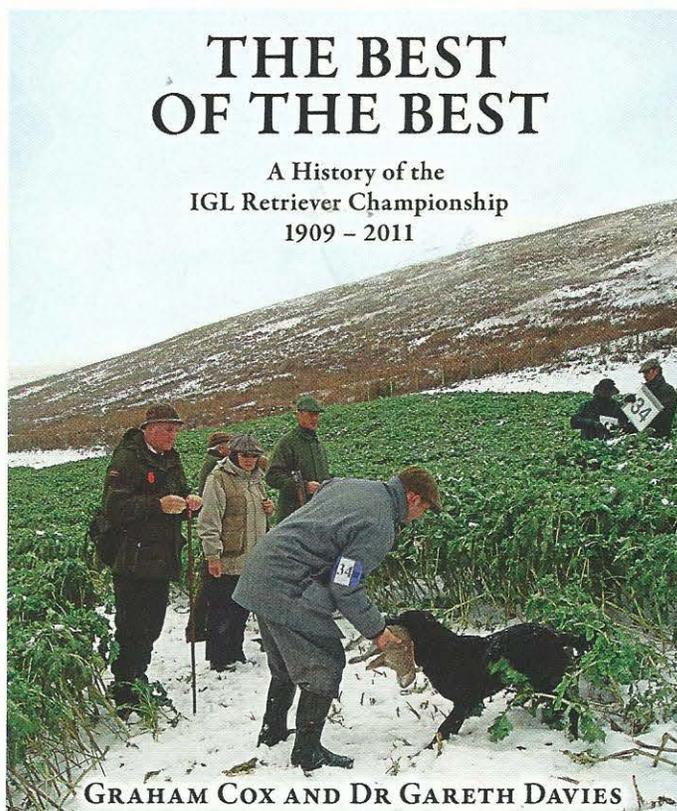


# Peerless champions

Two dogs have won the IGL Retriever Championship three times and **Graham Cox** marvels at their dominance.

**O**f the countless exploits recorded in my new book on the history of the IGL Retriever Championship, none are more fascinating than those of FTCh Balmuto Jock and FTCh Breeze of Drakeshead. Each won the premier stake three times, the only dogs to do so, and although separated by 58 years, their crowning achievements are linked by injuries to their feet.

Mrs Quintin Dick, later Lorna Countess Howe, bought FTCh Balmuto Jock from David Black, his breeder, after he had gained Certificates of Merit with him in the Gamekeepers' National Association Stakes of 1923 and 1924. The dog, which he considered the most intelligent he had trained, went on in her hands to run in six successive championships, taking an award in each. Two equal thirds were followed in 1926 by his first win – in Dumfriesshire on the Kinmount Estate. In 1927 at Woolverstone Park, Ipswich, he alone took third place in a stake won by FTCh Beningbrough Tanco. His second and third wins came at Idsworth in Hampshire and Muncaster in Cumberland, where the judges included Capt W. S. Medicott.



The front cover of Graham Cox's and Dr Gareth Davies' new book tracing the history and stories surrounding the Retriever Championship.

## A relentless winner

What Lorna Countess Howe's dogs did time and again was to win. Successively secretary, treasurer and chairman of the Labrador Retriever Club, she first made an impact in the Championship with second and third places in 1921 and 1922, with

Dual Champion Banchory Sunspeck. The first woman to judge a field trial, she exemplified an era when dual-purpose ideals could be more than an aspiration. She won Best in Show at Crufts in both 1932 and 1933 with Ch Bramshaw Bob and again in 1937 with Ch Cheveralls Ben of Banchory.

Nor was Sunspeck her only dual champion: all her dogs were required to show their worth in the field and, in the period up to 1939, members of her Banchory Kennel won 57 firsts, 45 seconds, 24 thirds, 13 reserves and 34 certificates of merit.

## Stepping in acid

When her great favourite, Dual Champion Banchory Bolo died, FTCh Balmuto Jock – John as he was always called – became her constant companion. If she went to London, he went too. And it was on one of these trips in July that he must have walked in acid. The result was devastating: the outer skin on all four feet came off, leaving the paws raw.

In her own words: "I made him a set of boots... but of course he could do no work. By mid-September I left his boots off but still had to exercise him on very soft ground, except when I put his boots on again, when of course he could do no galloping. His hind feet healed first and we gradually got his front feet healed and hardened by soaking them in salt and water... To get him fit and hard I used to send him up and down the stairs on the soft carpet to retrieve a tennis ball, and so was able to run him in an October trial."

He won that Southern Counties Association stake and did not run again until the Championship in Cumberland in November. That he prevailed in a field of 15, thus winning for the third time, was so exceptional that it never looked likely to be bested. The fact he scaled that height on the back of a torrid few months is nothing short of stunning.

FTCh Balmuto Jock's was the crowning achievement of the first (1909-1938) of the three periods that Gareth Davies and I identify for the analysis we present in *The Best of the Best*.

### A modern miracle

Our third period, from 1984 to today, includes one towering achievement with its roots in that year made famous by George Orwell. The 1984 Championship was held at Stratfield Saye and it saw Nigel Rowson expunge the memory of successive near misses by taking the Glen Kidston Challenge Trophy with FTCh Palgrave Nettle. John Halstead ran his three-year-old dog FTCh Breeze of Drakeshead and opened an account that would become stellar with a Diploma of Merit.

In torrential conditions the following year at Welbeck, his game finding was assured. The final walk-up, with rain falling, saw him catch the eye with the fluid effortlessness of his work and he underlined an increasingly commanding performance with an easy collection of a long hen in front. Shortly after he eyewiped Stan Harvey's FTCh Palgrave Quest and there was little doubt about the result.

Conditions were no less demanding in 1986 at Arniston in Scotland, where he secured his second win. On the morning of the second day, high on a bleak and wet Halburn, a hen shot on the right changed the course of the trial. Sent from the left with no chance to mark it, John Drury's dog could make nothing of it and, in the



**FTCh Breeze of Drakeshead is the only dog to have won the IGL Retriever Championship three years in a row.**



**HM the Queen played a small part in FTCh Breeze of Drakeshead's third IGL victory in a row at Sandringham in 1987.**

rain, the champion, despite heavy bandaging on a back foot, seized the chance. Hitting the fall more positively, Breeze took the hint of a line, returning again and again to the area – now losing it, now picking it up again – before moving further to the left. Working upwind in the gale he had to constantly turn and check.

But eventually there was a strong scent and the bird, tightly tucked

in, was picked 90 yards from the fall. Faultless work at the Rosebery Reservoir, where other challenges were pegged back, secured another emphatic victory.

### Royal triumph

The following year at Sandringham, his left forepaw was heavily bandaged with his participation in doubt right up to the wire. He'd

injured it somehow at Scone in Scotland, but the vet could find nothing. Then months later the foot swelled up again and just before that 1987 Championship, his constant chewing had created a major problem. Careful dressing made it possible, as John Halstead said, for him to "fly out on retrieves and limp in between". After his historic and unprecedented third successive win, he couldn't put his foot to ground, and the mystery ailment was only finally resolved by the vet removing the web from the foot.

Evidence of the injury added more drama to an extraordinary result, as he demonstrated the uncanny natural game finding that made major challenges look almost trivial. His retrieve of a partridge, which might have been left for the picker-up had HM the Queen not marked it down, was a definitive moment in a Championship where his brilliant marking and persistent hunting had been evident throughout.

### Amazing feats, but not identical...

Two dogs, separated by 58 years, have taken the Glen Kidston Challenge trophy three times each. And more than that – and by extraordinary coincidence – each had to work to the best of their exceptional abilities despite carrying injuries that might so easily have impeded their pace and compromised their style. So, across the years, FTCh Balmuto Jock and FTCh Breeze of Drakeshead are linked strongly. But history did not simply recur in one vital sense: FTCh Breeze of Drakeshead is the only dog to have won the Championship three years in succession. He is unique. 🦋

*The Best of the Best: A History of the IGL Retriever Championship 1909-2011 (£60) is published by Pernice Press and can be ordered online from [pernicepress.com](http://pernicepress.com)*