Vizslas
in Virginia

by
Darin Strickland

Cutter, owned by amateur trainer and Blandfield guide Clint Sails of Midland, Virginia

The first Vizsla I saw in the flesh was my own—an eight-week-old female puppy blissfully sleeping in the middle of my bed. "Merry Christmas," whispered my fiancé. This thoughtful little gift was obviously the result of well calculated damage control on her part, as I had just started my search for a bird dog after enjoying several hunts behind a friend's two professionally trained English Pointers. Back at his kennel, as I reveled in the pair's talents, she desperately tried to win their affection. The two indifferent old pros were content to ignore her and wait for their next hunt, not helping my cause for getting a bird dog.

If this marriage was going to include a dog, it should have certain qualities other than those needed in the field. It would need to be affectionate (like curling up to watch chick flicks), join her as a jogging buddy, and tolerate those doggie rabbit ears worn at Richmond's Monument Avenue Easter Parade.

During her research phase she found the Vizsla (pronounced VEESH la) to be highly affectionate, energetic, intelligent and family-oriented. Historically, the Vizsla was known to be a close-working upland hunter that uniformly comes in a golden russet color. The hair is short and smooth, making it less likely to hold briars and mud. In size, it averages as the second smallest pointing dog recognized by the American Kennel Club (AKC).

Long history, late to North America

The origins of the national dog of Hungary are thought to have been established 1,500 years ago by the nomadic Magyars, who used dogs to find birds ahead of falconers on horseback. Around 895 A.D. the Magyars settled in what would become modern-day Hungary. By the 12th century, Hungary had evolved into a group of feudal estates. Hunting was a favorite pastime of the ruling barons, and it is from their kennels a distinctive breed was developed to hunt both feather and fur for centuries.

In March 1944, German armies invaded and occupied Hungary for almost a year before Russian forces laid siege, leading eventually to long-term Soviet occupation. Both armies ravaged the country and reduced the Vizsla population to an estimated 50 to 100 dogs. Refugee dogs and fledgling stocks established outside the country became the breed's new foundation. Even British and American commissions became involved in smuggling Vizslas to stabilize the dog representing sovereign Hungary.

The first unregistered Vizslas arrived in America in 1950. The AKC granted an exhibition showing status, piquing interest and imports. The first registered Vizsla came to America in June 1953. The American Field stud book was opened to the Vizsla in November 1953 with 17 dogs. In November 1960, the Vizsla was officially recognized by the AKC with 500 registered dogs.

Mr. Sharkey's buddy

In 1990 Jack Sharkey, an Alexandria resident, chose a Vizsla for his retirement companion, not knowing he would eventually campaign the dog to be a National Field Champion holding conformation, agility, hunt test and obedience titles — and eventually become a Vizsla Club of America (VCA) Hall of Fame inductee. His second Vizsla also became an inductee and the first and only Quintuple Champion in the history of the AKC. Sharkey's third became a Dual Champion and Master Hunter.

In their celebrity, Sharkey and his Vizslas have been featured in multiple magazines and television programs. His

Quintuple Champion, Chartay, was inducted as a charter member of the Eukanuba Legends in Total Excellence (ELITE) program and earned Celebrity VIP Dog status on American Airlines flights.

Sharkey, at age 74, has recently chronicled his accomplishments and his training perspectives on navigating AKC titles in a well received book titled, *Winning Ways: Training Your Pointing Breed for Hunting and Competition.* Still competing, Sharkey is working with his fourth Vizsla, who has already won the VCA National Derby Classic and VCA National Gun Dog Puppy Championships. She is being actively campaigned to compete in the VCA Field Championships. A win would make her the only trifecta champion, giving Sharkey and his Vizslas another seemingly impossible first.

Even with all the success, Sharkey has never strayed far from his original intent – 90% retirement companion, 10% training and competing.

Dave Pomfret, field-trialing on the road

Dave Pomfret spends most of his weekends beating the bushes to flush birds as one of his dogs holds its point before a field-trial judge. A professional trainer based out of Orange, Pomfret has handled almost every pointing breed. On his Vizsla resume, he has personally trained and trialed seven to AKC Field Champions, including his personal dog Colonel, a two-time VCA #1 Gun Dog of the year. "Vizslas are routinely winning Field Championships against the other breeds," says Pomfret. "They are legitimate bird dogs."

Until recently, Pomfret would field-trial his way to Georgia's quail belt, guiding and training during the winter break. He now remains in Virginia managing the new upland operations at Blandfield Plantation near Tappahannock. "I've had more than a few clients look perplexed when we pull a Vizsla out of the dog box. I've had to spell *Vizsla* before a hunt, and then give out breeders' phone numbers at the end."

Looking out over his dogs, Pomfret expands on the breed's fair nature by pointing out Mason, an AKC Field Champion and the 2005 VCA National Field Champion. "He'd love to curl up and watch some TV with you. He's quite a gentleman in the house."

Versatile hunters and people dogs

While most Vizsla owners are not

Hunting with Vizsla champion Mason, Charles Macfarlane of Richmond prepares for a covey rise at Blandfield Plantation. (Photo by Guy Crittenden)

Boone on point while training in Remington, VA; owners Patrick and Michelle Dowd of Warrenton (Photo by Bob Estes)

trying to achieve the lofty heights of Sharkey and Pomfret, many are active in field trials, hunt tests and show rings. Others compete in agility and obedience, and a few dogs have even been put into service as search-and-rescue and Seeing Eye dogs. Most, however, are family pets pulling double duty as hunting and jogging partners.

Bird dog trainer and Crozier resident Rick Smith, who holds training seminars across the country, says, "We're seeing a lot more of them. They're good dogs. However, they're like the Brittanies [of which Smith has been a longtime breeder while winning multiple national titles]. They attract the type of person who is looking for a pet and a hunting dog. A lot of dogs are overindulged in the house, then expect to be indulged in the field." Known as "Velcro Vizslas" to many, they are most happy when with their people. Vizslas generally don't make good kennel-run dogs. They need an active and constructive lifestyle, responding well to positive and soft-touch training methods. Behavioral issues can arise in overindulged, untrained or underexercised dogs.

There are two area clubs active in serving Vizla enthusiasts: The Conestoga Vizsla Club, the mid-Atlantic's largest, holds field trials, hunt tests, and show venues in addition to fun and training days; and The Old Dominion Vizsla Club, whose primary focus is hosting field trials, including the recently awarded 2009 VCA Nationals, set to be held at Fred Leggett's Cloverdale Farm in Sutherlin, Virginia.

To learn more about Vizslas, groups or people mentioned in this article please see the following web sites:

Vizsla Club of America (AKC affiliated): clubs.akc.org/vizsla/

National Vizsla Association (American Field affiliated): thenva.org

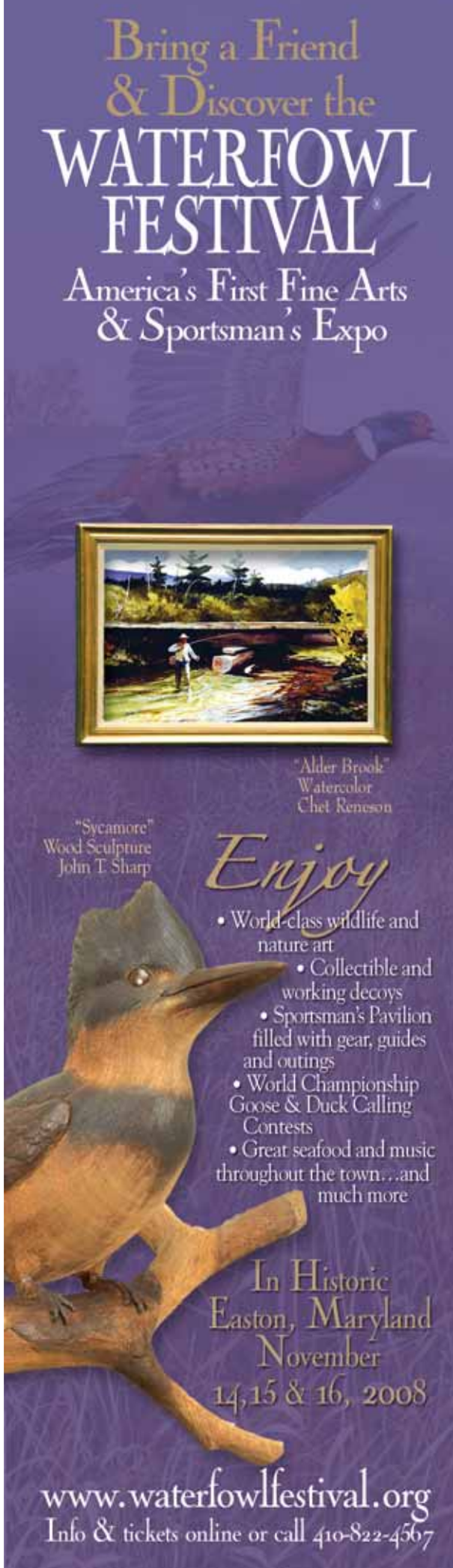
The Old Dominion Vizsla Club: odvc.org

The Conestoga Vizsla Club: cvcweb.org

Blandfield Plantation: www.blandfieldplantation.com

Jack Sharkey
(book): jackjsharkey.com
(dogs): rapidanvizslas.com

Rick Smith: www.huntsmith.com

Photo contributor Bob Estes unexpectedly passed away earlier this year. He loved his Vizslas at home and afield. He was a true Virginia sportsman. He will be missed.

Darin Strickland is an avid upland hunter and the assistant upland manager and guide at Blandfield Plantation. He owns two Vizslas and resides in Richmond. You may contact him at ads3hans@gmail.