

# COVEY RISE<sup>®</sup>

MAGAZINE





# TRAVEL BALL FOR RETRIEVERS

---

Hunting pheasant in North Dakota, the author discovers an extraordinary community of dogs and the dedicated handlers who lead by quiet discipline.

STORY BY MILES DEMOTT  
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHIP LAUGHTON



It's not the end of the earth, but you can see it from here. It is a landscape bereft of any redeeming aesthetic, and yet one of the most beautifully plumed upland birds thrives in this stark, inhospitable terrain, hidden from all but the most discerning pointers and flushers and then teasingly walking the rails and ditches of a desolate transportation infrastructure. But this is no dystopia, no tale of post-apocalyptic decimation. This is no desperate plea from a haggard humanity clawing its way back from Armageddon. This is Tuesday, in Scranton, North Dakota.

Scranton emerges from the prairie at the commercial crossroads of hither, thither, and yon. A hub for the large-scale farming operations that surround it, Scranton's business district comprises two or three blocks of weathered, vacant storefronts, a couple of bars, and a grain processing operation. There is also a small grocery store where practiced hands bake the best sweet rolls on the planet, but that's another story. Beyond the grain silos reach the suburbs, a small collection of schools and parks surrounded by the efficient residential architecture of the Great Plains. Beyond that, only windy prairie, stoic Canadians, and Santa. And lots of wild pheasant.

Just outside Scranton, adjacent to a withering staging area for the Keystone Pipeline, lies Zeke's Rooster Ranch, a humble collection of farmhouse and outbuildings, along with a sprinkling of seasonal mobile hunting lodges in various states of repair. At the center of the Ranch is a large metal building, the de facto "cafegymnasium" of the larger Zeke's campus, the gathering spot for cocktails, meals, safety briefings, college football, and late night hunting stories less anchored in truth

than in proximity to the bar. And this simple building serves as a metaphor for the community of hunters gathered there, though you'll need to bear with me as I flesh this out.

First, let's consider the building itself: an enclosed rectangular box with a large door at the front, limited windows down each side and along the back wall, and a small corner for food and water. The walls themselves are made of exposed OSB or chipboard, and the sheets retain the redline grids that help installers square up to the studs. The grids also give the walls a cage-like feel when viewed from a distance. The rest of the space is designed for lounging, whether on tired sofas or plastic picnic tables or in the "library" stocked mostly with tractor catalogs and hunting magazines. After about a week in and out of this building, it struck me that we spent our nonhunting time in the human equivalent of a kennel. The building kept us warm, dry, and safe, and it kept most of us out of trouble. So there's that.

Next, let's consider the composition of our hunting party. At the center of the endeavor is Mike Stewart of Wildrose Kennels, arguably one of the finest trainers and curators of English Labs in North America. The term "curator" is not ill-chosen or accidental, as his collection of dogs exemplifies the extraordinary art of his training program, as do the owners who have assembled at Zeke's to continue their quest toward

#### GAME TIME IN NORTH DAKOTA

Wildrose retrievers instinctively know the hunting program.

the pinnacle of that training program. They come from all around the country, traveling with their dogs to various hunting destinations across the seasons to experience and master the different types and styles of upland and waterfowl hunting, building a more capable “gentleman’s gun dog” with every stop and every hunt. Zeke’s is one of the pheasant stops on the tour, and they come here for the wild birds.

At the end of the hunt, though, the handlers and their dogs gather in the big human kennel at the center of the compound, and this is where the story goes from intriguing to incredible.

The first time I walk through the metal barn, I notice a couple of dogs lounging comfortably on their mats along the walls, tired from a long day of hunting, no doubt. They seem well behaved and accustomed to the chaos, though I find it curious that they never wander from their mats, never ease over to the appetizers when they think nobody is looking, never amble over to the other dogs for a sniff and a chat. But there are only a couple of dogs in the room, and I assume they are, well, dog tired.

As it turns out, my bunk is in a small loft at the rear of the barn, separated from the social arena by a thin sheet. The good news is I’ll get to hear all the hunting stories into the wee hours of the morning. The bad news is I’ll get to hear all the hunting stories into the wee hours of the morning. As the evening progresses I notice the number of dogs increasing, and I’m reminded of the freezing temperatures forecast overnight. Bedding dogs down in aluminum trailers is probably not the best option. It seems likely, then, that the dogs will be telling stories of their own into the wee hours of the morning.

The most remarkable part of the gathering of dogs is that it takes a while to notice that the population has grown from a couple of dogs to nearly 20. Before I know it, there are dogs almost stacked on dogs, all along the walls and all resting serenely on their mats, like somebody has mixed Valium into their kibbles and bits. I’ve been sitting in the center of what could’ve been a cacophonous metal building for several hours before it occurs to me that I haven’t heard the first bark. Not a one. The humans are making more noise than the dogs, a fact that I’m sure is not lost on the dogs. Plus, there is no puppy play, no begging for food, and no dogs underfoot. But for the rare transition from sitting to sleeping, I’d swear the dogs were stuffed.

There is also a preternatural connection between the dogs and their mats. While some rest comfortably and others sit in a state of quasi-readiness, all dogs have their eyes on their handlers. If their handler gets up from the sofa and walks to the cooler across the room to get another beer, the dog’s eyes follow with anticipation. When the handler returns to

#### **PHEASANT FIELD WORK**

Mike Stewart of Wildrose with his dogs Deke and Indian.





the sofa, the dog blinks a couple of times but maintains a sense of preparedness. Not once do I see a dog leave his mat for any reason, unless directed by his handler. On rare occasion, a dog slips a paw off the corner of his mat, eyeing his handler warily, testing the limits as a youngster should. With a subtle glance from his handler, the dog quietly slides his paw back onto the mat as if nothing had happened. It was like watching Pavlov's dog, though the training process seemed much more comprehensive.

The Wildrose Way, the training method developed by Stewart, is built around the acronym TSR, which stands for train, shoot, and retrieve. Built on strict discipline and trust between dog and handler, TSR involves a series of courses and expectations once the dog graduates from the initial Wildrose experience. As most of the trainers say, the dogs are the easy part. It's the humans who often get in the way. It is especially challenging because the Wildrose Way relies on positive instruction and repetition instead of electronic collars.

The goal is an uncommon connection between dog and handler, and that connection is almost immediately evident. When training is pursued at destinations along the Wildrose Way, an interesting side effect is remarkable community among dogs and handlers. They travel as a group, hunt as a group, eat, sleep, and drink as a group. Friendships develop

as handlers and litter mates ebb and flow across seasons and destinations. In many ways, it's like travel ball for Little Leaguers and soccer players. The sport consumes the families, and a village rises to nurture and support the young players. The fact that the villagers doing the nurturing are carrying shotguns is not the only flaw with the travel ball comparison, but for most of the handlers on this trip, their dogs are their only children. It doesn't tax the imagination, then, to assume that the discipline surrounding the nurturing and training of children would find analogous placement with their canine charges. All the unconditional love without the braces and private school tuition, as it were.

Wildrose's Mike Stewart encourages the sense of community for very important reasons, not the least of which is the support of that community in growing his business. Now that I've hunted over his dogs, I have to agree with his assertion that well-behaved Wildrose dogs in the field are his best sales force. They're more than transactional, though: Stewart sees the importance of connecting people with the outdoor world, and dogs make pretty quick work of that or leave a mess. Wildrose is selling a lifestyle, not a puppy, and they offer different ways to

#### PICTURES OF CONCENTRATION

Wildrose dogs during the owner-dog community hunting tour



engage the outdoors, from world-class hunting dogs to adventure dogs, companion dogs, and even medical dogs that learn to sense fluctuations in their handler's blood sugar. Remember that next time your dog chews your favorite shoe or looks at you with contempt when you toss a tennis ball. The Wildrose expectation is an order of magnitude higher.

The discipline instilled in a Wildrose dog is palpable, but the experience of a dozen of the same dogs in a room can be off-putting, like a canine twist on the *Stepford Wives*. Again, the dogs are behaving better than the humans, and there is no puppy play, no barking, and no sniffing. They sit on their mats around the edges of the room like junior associates in a corporate board room, waiting attentively and responding eagerly when engaged, but otherwise fading into the general decor. When invited, they

proceed to the center of the action calmly and purposefully, eyes locked on their handler, tails wagging, dogs greeting each other collegially, like old men at a high-school reunion.

In the retriever world, it's the damndest thing I've ever seen. I shared oxygen with the finest golden retriever the world has ever known for 14 years, so this sort of praise is not given lightly. The sense of community is so compelling that I want desperately to join, to commit the substantial time and resources necessary to build that bond with a Wildrose dog. Knowing my limitations, though, I ask Mike Stewart if he ever has any washouts, any pups identified early on as underachievers, a sweet spot I'm all too familiar with. "Nope," he responds without hesitation, reminding me that the dogs are easy. "The humans are the tough part."

Fearing that I would inevitably be part of the problem and not the solution, I shelve the desire to walk the Wildrose Way. The many dogs atop their mats along the wall seem to sense my resignation, shrugging their shoulders amiably like Ivy League admissions officers. Theirs is a seller's market, and demand seems always to outstrip supply. The Wildrose Way, they seem to say, is not for the faint of heart or the irresolute, as their glance moves to the window and the barren prairie beyond. When the handler is ready, they suggest with confidence, the right dog will emerge. Such existential clarity from the mouths of pups.

The exclamation point on my sense of amazement comes at the end of the hunt, a moment captured at the close of every stop along the Wildrose Way. It involves more than two dozen

dogs sitting patiently atop cold aluminum trailers, shoulder to shoulder, fallen pheasant spread before them, waiting for their picture to be taken. All the handlers are huddled behind the camera, offering encouragement and admonishment in tandem, wielding carrots and sticks with equal aplomb, like young mothers trying desperately to get the perfect holiday card picture of their two-year-olds. Only these children seem nonchalant about the entire affair, as if they finished each of their days atop a cold aluminum trailer in a light snow. Just another Tuesday, in Scranton, North Dakota. 🐾

#### WHO CALLED THIS MEETING?

A picture of patience and focus as handlers seek the implausible.

A hunter wearing a red cap and a green vest is seen from behind, aiming a blue shotgun. In the air above him, a bird is in flight. The background is a vast, rugged canyon with reddish-brown and grey rock formations under a clear blue sky. Bare tree branches are visible in the upper foreground.

# COVEY RISE<sup>®</sup>

MAGAZINE

THE BEST OF THE  
SPORTING LIFE  
**IN EVERY ISSUE**

SUBSCRIBE TODAY

**DEVOTED TO THE UPLAND LIFESTYLE**

**COVEYRISEMAGAZINE.COM | (866) 905-1235**