



## Meet the Handler Behind the 2017 Gun Dog Champion

**F**ield trials are all about letting a dog do what comes naturally in a competitive setting. For the Pointing Breeds that means finding birds and showing off their courage, stamina, and keen desire to hunt. Since 1993, the AKC Gun Dog Championship continues to be one of the largest and most prestigious pointing all breed field trial championship in the country. This field trial is open to all dogs that qualify by earning a Field Champion (FC) title, or an Amateur Field Champion (AFC) title or placing in a major Gun Dog Stake during the qualification period. In 2013, another Gun Dog Championship was introduced called the AKC National Walking Gun Dog Championship which allows handlers to compete on foot rather than on traditional horseback. Dogs competing in this event also must be qualified in a similar manner by having earned either a FC or AFC title or a placement in a Gun Dog Stake during the qualification

period. Last year, both the Gun Dog Championship and the National Walking Gun Dog Championship were held as back to back trials at Camp Robinson near Conway, Arkansas. With its mixture of heavy forests and savannas, it was the perfect location to test world class bird dogs. Out of all the dogs competing only one dog earns the prestigious champion title from each of the two championship trials. The winner of the AKC Gun Dog Championship receives the NGDC prefix title and the winner of the National Walking Gun Dog Championship receives the NWGDC prefix title. A male, German Shorthaired Pointer, named "*NWGDC GFC FC AFC Dunfur's All In*", aka "Chip," handled by Dan Hoke, won last year's National Walking Gun Dog Championship.

The winner of the 2017 Gun Dog Championship was female, German Shorthaired Pointer, "*NGDC GFC FC AFC Flapjack's*

*Twisted Sister*”, aka “Nova.” owned by Clay Benton and handled by Jon Hann. As a testament to Nova’s abilities, she also placed second in the 2017 Walking Gun Dog Championship. According to Hann, “A lot of people believe dogs can’t do both walking and horseback trials.” But he has confidence that great dogs like Nova can do both. “The dog doesn’t care if you’re on foot or on a horse,” Hann explains.

Neither of Nova’s parents have any AKC wins in their records, which is unusual. In fact, Hann doesn’t know of any immediate an-



cestry that even competed. “She was bred to be a wild bird dog,” says Hann. But he feels that any dog that is a good bird dog can be developed into a great trial dog with the right training. It’s all about the innate ability to find wild birds. “Find that dog and you can win lots of trophies and ribbons,” he says. It starts with good genetics, then training and development to enhance those natural instincts. “I always say great gun dogs are made with a lot of shoe leather. Walk those miles with your dog to develop what they are bred to be.”

Benton agrees. “Talent seems to be bred in champion lines; however, Nova is proof that it’s not necessary to have. As long as a dog comes from good hunting lines having the right trainer makes all the difference.” And that’s where Hann comes in. Benton had noticed Hann’s training before, but Nova is

the first dog that Hann has trained for him. Benton feels that Hann embodies all the qualities he appreciates in a trainer. He says of Hann, “He understands the dogs better than anyone that I’ve talked with before, it’s like a second language to him.”



Hann grew up seeing dogs work, thanks to an uncle who was an avid bird hunter. Then at the young age of 14, he came across a gun-shy Brittany named Brandy. “I took Brandy home, fixed her gun-shy issues and we spent the next ten years hunting quail together,” he recalls. He decided he wanted to learn more, so he went to a local trainer who began sending his problem dogs home with Hann. “I would work them after school and take them back to the trainer the following week.” By the age of 18, Hann’s dog career had begun.



His early years were spent training and competing with Retrievers, but six or seven years later he started attending his first trial. Blitz, the first dog he entered in a pointing dog trial, finished her AKC Field Champion in such a short time that Hann was hooked. Now Hann owns [Perfection Kennel](#) where he and his wife, Jessica, work to help hunting dogs reach their full potential. They have an average of 35 dogs year round.

Hann is usually so busy training, that field trialing and competition take a back seat. Most of his trialing is to prepare dogs for their owners to run. He says his greatest achievement is, "helping amateurs handle, train, and compete to the national level. I love trialing and go as often as I can but truly enjoy watching the dogs and owners become a team and win together."

The secret to Hann's training success is in the training system he developed based on positive association techniques. He starts with a gun acclimation program and teaches the dogs to not just tolerate the gun, but to love it. He uses low pressure methods and builds a dog's confidence. He explains, "I created a system that makes sense to the dog and is based on a strong foundation of using the dog's natural bird desire and instinct to create a kick butt bird dog." The result is a dog that performs well and loves her job.

Hann's experience and talent certainly

worked for Nova. However, she was a challenging dog and Hann feels that most trainers would have given up on her. Benton explains that although Nova is a firecracker in the field, she isn't always the strongest. "She has required a good deal of training to get to the point she is at," he says. It took Hann a long time to build her confidence.

In the beginning, Nova had no hunting experience and was lacking faith in herself.

Hann had to teach her, "that she was going to find birds every time, that it was okay to get out of sight of her handler, and to not depend on a brace mate to hunt." With her confidence built, Nova's personality was right on target. She's a compliant dog that wants to please and at the same time is very determined with a lot of heart. She simply won't give up. Benton appreciates that drive and believes it's something many other dogs don't possess.

Last year's course put all of Nova's training to the test. The cover and terrain made things

very challenging. Dogs had to listen and stay forward. In addition, the mud off course made things difficult for scouts. But Hann says, "The best thing about the course was it was very realistic as to what wild quail habitat would be."

Nova's last find really stands out in





Hann's mind. She pinned a covey of about 30 birds by the edge of the lake in the last fifteen seconds of her brace. Hann believes that although trialing is about training and preparation,



sometimes you need the luck to go with it and luck was certainly with Nova. Hann enjoyed the entire experience and feels it was truly an honor to compete in such a venue at a wonderful trial put on by some great people. "It was so humbling to take a dog that was never bred to do this and watch her become a champion."

Both 2018 AKC Pointing Breed Gun Dog Championships (Walking and Horseback) will take place near Bloomingdale, Ohio at Mingo Sportsman Club. Each Championship will consist of a single non-retrieving series of 60-minute braces over a single course to be run on native quail and other legally hunted upland gamebirds that may be on the grounds.

The AKC Gun Dog Championship (on horseback) will begin on March 29, followed by the AKC Walking Gun Dog Championship.



Visit [www.akc.org/sports/pointing-breeds](http://www.akc.org/sports/pointing-breeds) to learn more about AKC Pointing Breed field trials where any AKC registered pointing breed 6 months or older can participate.



***Note Cover Photo: 2017 AKC Gun Dog Champion, NGDC GFC FC AFC Flapjack's Twisted Sister (aka "Nova") is pictured with her Westminster Kennel Club perpetual trophy cup complete with staghorn handles. Nova is the first Gun Dog Champion to receive this award. 2017 marked the first year this perpetual trophy began as what will be an annual tradition to recognize each year's champion. The Westminster Kennel Club began as a sportsmen's association at the turn of the 19th century, as noted by the club's logo which depicts a pointer named "Sensation" who was imported to the U.S. in 1877 to strengthen breeding stock.***

