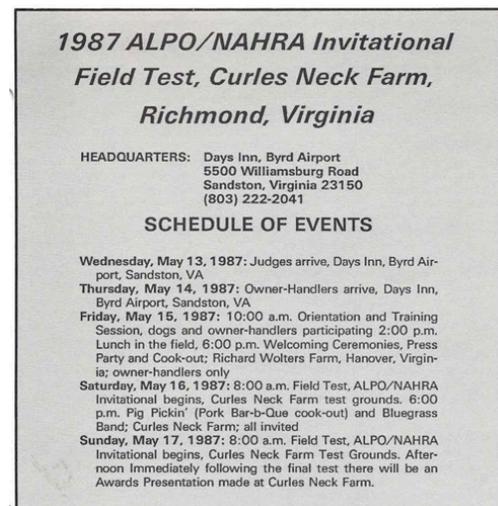


History and Purpose of the NAHRA Invitational

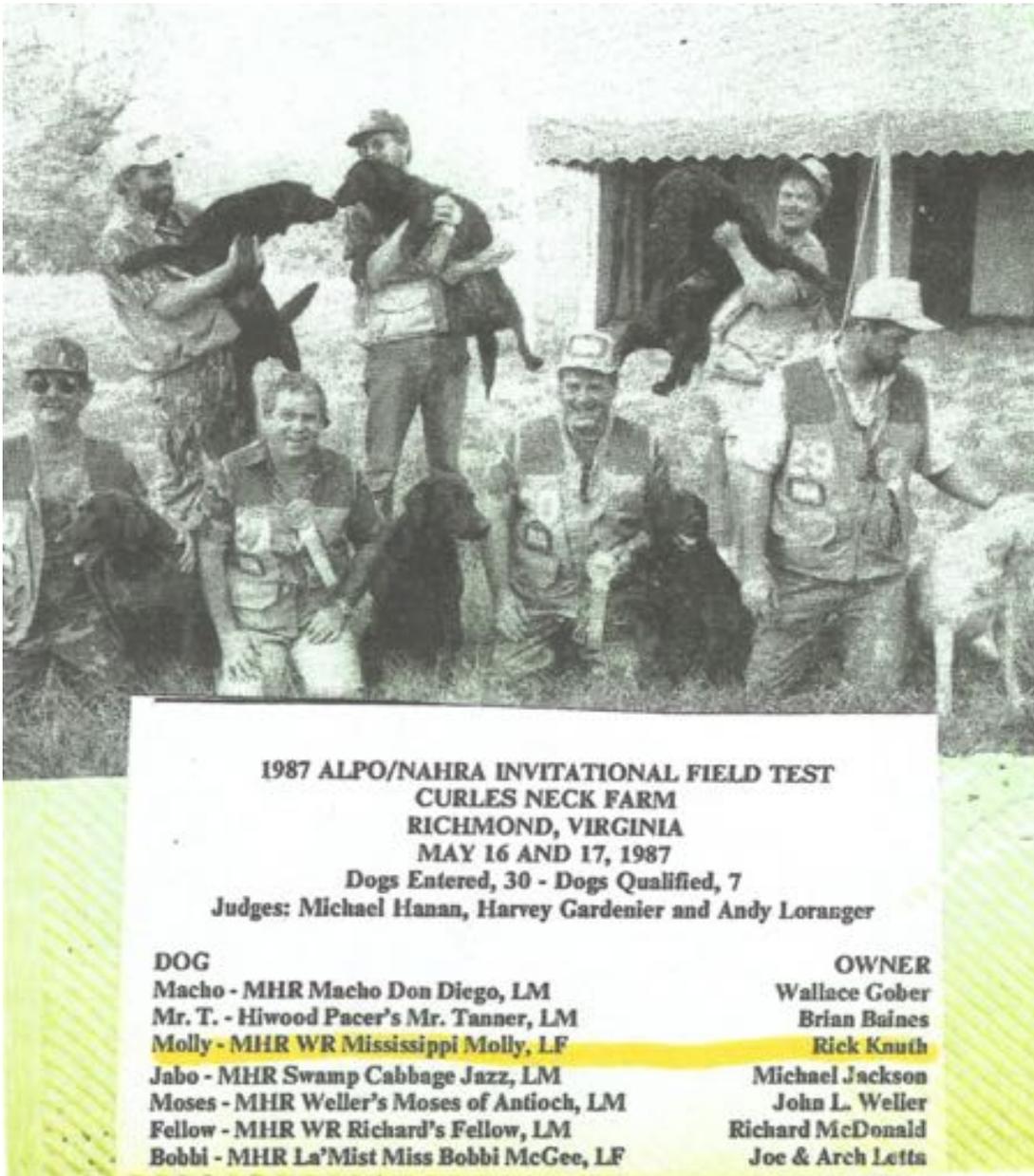
a personal recollection by Keith Stroyan

This is not a researched history of the NAHRA International Invitational Field Test, but rather a collection of my memories. NAHRA was founded in 1983 at a meeting at the exclusive Mashomack Preserve Club. The club is on the site of an old farm in Pine Plains, NY. I stayed in the restored 1700's era farmhouse at Mashomack when I judged the 93 dogs (after scratches) of the Invitational on NAHRA's 10th Anniversary in 1993.

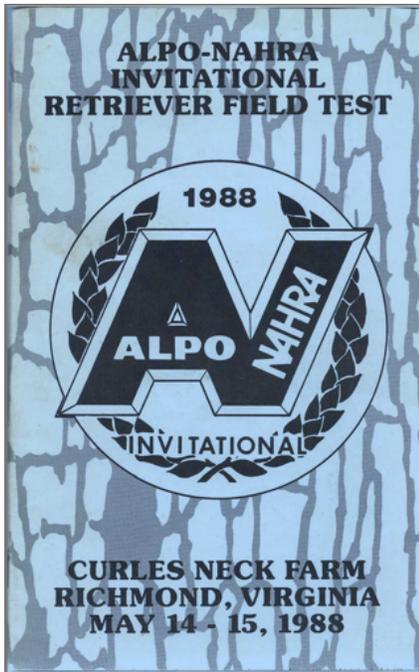
The first Invitational was held in 1987 at Curles Neck Farm in Virginia. NAHRA received sponsorship from Jim Dandy Dog Food company and invited the top 30 NAHRA point earners to the event all expenses paid! air fare, lodging, rental car, the works. I had joined NAHRA 3 years earlier, but wasn't "invited," so my wife and I went to observe. It started with a lovely reception at Richard and Olive Wolters Virginia cabin. The legendary writer, Gene Hill, was Gun Captain. Everything was first class.



There weren't clear rules for the event yet and, to my mind, the judges went overboard. I suppose they thought they were "show casing" the best hunting retrievers in the country by designing very complicated tests. The first test was a quad with a flyer and required selection of the first mark - off the flyer! The Upland test was on the side of a very steep ravine that challenged many handlers! The Trailing test, as I recall it, was a disaster. An excited Richard kept talking to TAAAR. The water test was difficult. Seven dogs qualified. Rick Knuth sent me a scan of a photo of the "Magnificent Seven" as the qualifiers were known.



By the next year the race for points to be in the top group was on. That added an element of “competition” somewhat at odds with NAHRA’s original idea of a “standard” of performance. A sad part of that for me was that my friend Paul Zelisko was the highest point dog NOT invited that year. I think he was one pass behind the last dog invited. Paul and his dogs went on to have a great career in HRC. I don’t know what’s become of him lately, but have fond memories of him at NAHRA and HRC events. I attended an HRC Grand with him in Illinois in the late 90s.



The race for points certainly had a positive impact on the overall NAHRA program keeping people entered well beyond their MHR, but some adjustment was needed. Clearer rules and different qualification criteria came forward and lasted over a decade.

During those early years, NAHRA's program and standard solidified and the Invitational played a role in keeping one standard across North America. If dogs came to the Invitational with lots of "points" but couldn't do the work there, the region they came from adjusted. The NAHRA Board of Directors were tireless in traveling around to give judging clinics. There were other things we did on a local level to help, too. For example, we always tried to have a judge at our local

events from out of our Region. That helped level the program across the continent. I was lucky to have judged from Alberta to Georgia, Oklahoma to Alaska and learn what those judges were thinking about implementing the Rule Book. Brad Lindberg taught me in Pennsylvania how well trails could work in the woods with only forest floor litter. During this time, the Invitational got clear rules that amounted to: uphold the NAHRA Standard. The tests were supposed to be at the top of the Standard, but done with the best help, birds, grounds, etc. They were not supposed to vastly exceed the Standard.

I ran the 1991 Invitational in LaCrosse, Wisconsin with my second dog and picked up all the birds, but went out on points with a sloppy water blind at the end. The blind had a flyer diversion launched remotely from a Sure Flyte box launcher and Vico WANTED it. What I remember most about that Invitational was a wonderful time, including almost fainting in the heat on the way down a hill to the first test - a walk-up triple... Richard Wolters was one of



the judges and we played a prank on him a on the last test by sending a dog to the line that really hadn't been called back. He was scrambling through his book to find the dog when he realized he had been had. I forget his comment as I walked up with the dog in a white handler's jacket and my pants tucked up like his "kickers"... It was great fun, and the dogs who got ribbons earned them.

I visited several Invitationals for a day or so when my work wouldn't let me take a whole week. I remember Jerry Day donating his wingers at one. They were an HRC invention new to NAHRA at the time. Earlier, my neighbor welded us some home made ones for the club. I showed them off at other clubs in the Region. Things may have gone too far in that department. Have you seen the new 8 banded Slinger?

Another time at a Virginia Invitational I arranged to have the handler's from Quebec announced on the loudspeaker in French. The first handler was surprised, but it was NAHRA's way to emphasize that North America includes Canada - even French speaking Canada ;-). One of my most memorable judging assignments was at a Field Test in Alberta. My wife and I drove to the test on a wonderful trip that included the Calgary Stampede.

I've missed many Invitationals, including the one in 2008 when severe flooding in Iowa City destroyed the neighborhood of one of my constant training companions, Terry Hora. Terry's



GMHR Iowa River Gabby lived right on the banks of the river until then. We were throwing sand bags while they were throwing ducks at Kelly Farms, but the river topped the 4 foot wall by several feet. Too bad for Gabby and Terry (shown in my photo when she got her WR), she was a good dog and would have enjoyed the Invitational. The truth is, however, that Gabby's speciality was goose hunting. I ran the eCollar on one of her early hunts, but for the next decade she was just amazing. She loved her Mutt Hut and stayed there until sent. One Spring Snow Goose hunt in South Dakota she was sent on an 800 yard blind. I know

the distance because the fences in South Dakota are placed at very regular distances. When she got out near the bird, Burl told Terry to cast her left. She went, but no bird. Burl's punishment was that he had to slog through all that mud to go help find the bird. Before he got all the way,

he pointed right. Gabby took the cast and was back way before Burl. I don't think 800 yard blinds belong in any of the games, but it can happen. Once in a lifetime.

My wife and I briefly visited the 2006 Invitational in Colorado at one of the most beautiful locations imaginable. We didn't stay long because it was just a stop on our 40th Wedding Anniversary trip. We had many wonderful vacations in Colorado and love the scenery. That beautiful location stands out as a goal for every Invitational to emulate.

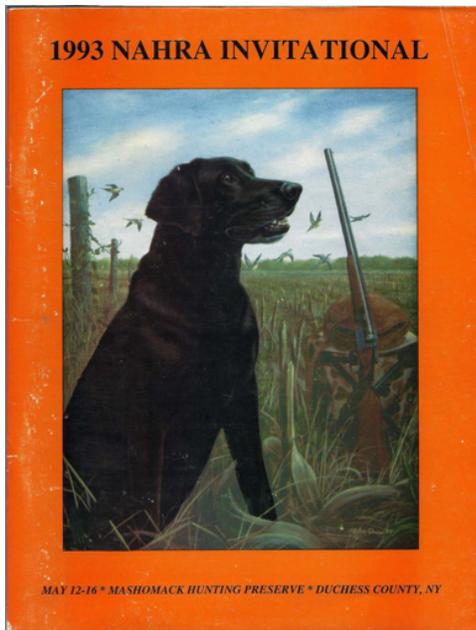
One disappointment for me at the '91 Invitational was the cliques that formed around some of the training groups in attendance. I thought that one of the main purposes of the Invitational was to bring folks from across North America together to



celebrate the program with dogs that represented the standard at its highest level. But many folks were nervous, worried about ribbons, plotting strategies, and didn't want to talk to an "outsider." I was sorry I didn't get a chance to know more of the handlers.

This brings me to one of the reasons I wrote this article: the question, "What is the purpose of a "National" hunt test?" Some of my good friends in the Field Trial game are annoyed at the very idea. They work incredibly hard to qualify for the National Amateur or National Open field trials and the tests at those events are unbelievably difficult. A flat 800 yard blind in the South Dakota mud would be easy for those dogs. But I remember why hunt tests got started in 1983.

The resources and skills needed for today's competitive field trials are beyond the grasp of most hunters; they already were in 1983. I also believe that training methods have progressed enormously since 1983. Those training methods have been generously shared by the top pros with hunters like me training their own dogs, especially with the various DVDs and publications like the Retriever Journal. For 15 years I helped at the Des Moines field trial, 120 miles from home. One of the true pleasures of visiting them was talking with Bill Eckett. Bill was an "A list" pro who won the National, but he was also generous with his time, for example, by putting on free clinics at the Mid Iowa club to help hunt testers.



I'll tell you who could give a really informed answer to my question: Alan Pleasant. Alan ran the '93 Invitational that I judged. We were having a lot of trouble with one of the tests and I distinctly remember Alan acting like a perfect Southern Gentleman through the difficulties. In 2018 Alan won the National with "Google," so he's been the distance. From what I'm told, Alan is still a perfect Southern Gentleman and his numerous field trial accomplishments speak for themselves. I was really sorry to see him and Charlie Journey leave NAHRA in the late 90's when NAHRA was having organizational problems. Both of them have had good careers in different games. I only recently learned how original Charlie's book, "Finished Dog" is. It would be a treat to train with either of them.



Photo of the Qualifiers at the 1993 Invitational from Brad Lindberg

Over the years, I've known many people who started in NAHRA and got bit by the competition bug. Many of them have distinguished themselves in the field trial game. If you want competition, Field Trials have it! I suppose I'm a little like my old Iowa farmer neighbors: independent. I really enjoy training my dogs myself. I'm anxious to learn more about how from the great trainers, but I have no desire to let them train my dogs. Me maybe, not my dogs. They have dogs enough of their own. I still like to run some hunt tests, though I have not had a lot of opportunities the last few years because of my wife's illness. The tests "proof" my training and

keep me “honest.” I enjoy them and the people there to run their dogs. I want my dog to do her best, not beat anyone else. Overcoming the excitement or the different



environment is a challenge for dogs who train alone most of the time. For me that’s enough and I go home and train the rest of the week on my property and dream about the next hunting season.

Somehow the idea of

“winning” a National Hunt Test ribbon doesn’t seem right to me.

Running a dog against a “standard” is what I thought all the hunt

test programs were designed for. I’ve never been successful at business, but the HRC Grand certainly is! Maybe the point is to make money. Frank Plewa did a great job on some Invitationals that kept NAHRA afloat a while back. If the Invitational is a celebration of The Standard that helps keep the program going, I’m in. The 2021 Invitational will be in Des Moines and if I live through COVID-19 and my wife’s situation is resolved, I’ll help or maybe enter. My dear departed Tess was test dog at the first Invitational in Des Moines. I helped at the second.

After judging 93 dogs at an Invitational, I can’t imagine running 900 in a Master National. That just doesn’t sound like fun, but I’ll admit it is an amazing accomplishment. I’ve visited several Grands and the ones in Iowa were especially well organized but too BIG for my taste.

I particularly don’t understand what motivates people to have a pro run their dog at a national hunt test, but that seems to be a big part of the enormous scale of the Grands and Master Nationals. I understand why someone who doesn’t have a training property right at his house would put his dog with a pro for hunt test training. Another old NAHRA friend, Derek Randel, runs Retriever Academy in Oklahoma. You can rent a room there and train on his grounds. That might make a nice break from Iowa winter next year. For me, once the training was done and it was hunting season or time for the big test, I would want to run my own dog. Maybe that’s just the independent farmer in me. I don’t object to other folks doing it and from



Presented by:
Midnight Sun Gun Dog Association
Palmer, Alaska

July 11-13, 2019

what I read, the Grands especially take specialized training.

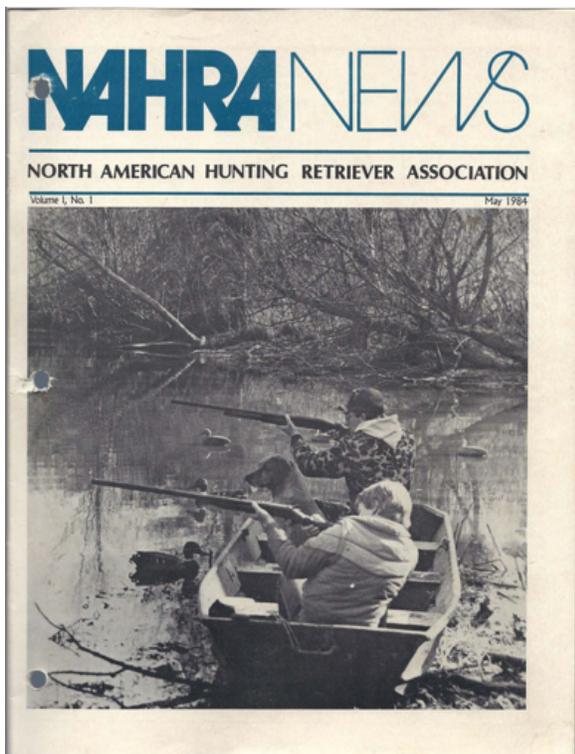
HRC and AKC Hunt tests have evolved slightly differently than the original: The North American Hunting Retriever Association. I've run all the venues and enjoyed them (I've had HRCHs and an MH). Our club that I helped found in 1987 has run them all, but I still like NAHRA best (with 15 MHRs). Well, that's not true. I like real hunting best, but off season I prefer NAHRA.

I hope NAHRA's new variation on the Invitational is a success in bringing more handlers to the event. If you haven't tried NAHRA, come see for yourselves. Add a trail and upland test to your HRCH and MH skills, test them at two local events, and join the celebration. A national event could be the ideal way to compare, ironing out local wrinkles to give a clear picture of The Standard at its best. My guess is that almost all NAHRA handlers will welcome you with open arms, especially if you have some hunting stories (entertaining exaggerations! ;-)). Most of them will be rooting for your dog to succeed, even giving you tips after they run. That won't diminish their dog's work; it's not a competition dog against dog.

Give it a try; see if you and your dog can qualify in the original.



NAHRA INVITATIONAL 2018
EASTERN SHORE RETRIEVER CLUB
ONANCOCK, VIRGINIA



Except as noted above, the graphics in this article are from the NAHRA website.

