

# The Early History and Purpose of Field Trialing for Continental Pointing Dogs

By Fred Overby

The first field trial in history where the results were known and recorded was conducted on a blustery morning on May 1, 1866, at Cannock Chase, a beautiful country estate near Staffordshire, England. The year before, a tentative event of similar nature was held in connection with a show known as the Islington Show at nearby Southhill. No reliable account of the Southhill event was ever published, so the field trial in Stafford the following year is commonly regarded in most historical resources as the starting point from where the great sport has grown and expanded.<sup>1</sup>

There is at least one contrary verbal account of an additional field trial in 1865, but no records exist to verify that event.<sup>2</sup> The field trial concept was invented by the British sportsmen as a selection test for breeding pointing dogs.

Today the field trial rules for Continental Pointing Dogs of the Fédération Cynologique International (FCI) and the United Kennel Club (UKC) still indicate that the underlying purpose of field trialing is to select the best representatives of the breed which hunt in a breed appropriate style.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Brown, William F. *Field Trials: History, Management and Standards*, Chicago Illinois (Revised Ed. 1987) pp. 13-14.

<sup>2</sup> Comte, Michael, Article entitled "Origins And Goal Of The Field Trials" and published at [www.braquedubourbonnais.com](http://www.braquedubourbonnais.com). See subpage: info/en/origins-goal-field. The author offers a contrary account to the effect that another field trial occurred in England in 1865 at Coutil (Bedfordshire) which also involved only Pointers and Setters running in brace. (The authoritative source of this particular account is not listed in the cited article.)

<sup>3</sup> Official Rules And Bylaws For International Field Trials And International Hunting Tests For Continental Pointers ( 2011 Revision), published by the Fédération Cynologique Internationale (FCI), Thuin, Belgium, which expressly provide:

"The purpose of international field trials and international hunting tests for continental pointers held under the patronage of the FCI is the selection of dogs which hunt efficaciously in a breed appropriate style, in order to provide an essential contribution to the selection of the genetically best transmitting dogs for the improvement of the various continental pointer breeds, and to stimulate interest in high-grade dogs."

The Official UKC Pointing Dog Rulebook (2016 Ed.) published by United Kennel Club, Kalamazoo MI., p.4, Section One, Rule I also expressly provides:

"A. The goal of the UKC Pointing Dog Field Trials in the United States and Canada is the improvement of the Continental and British pointing breeds by the recognition of the best breed representatives.

B. The structure of the UKC field trial rules is specifically devised to aid in the identification, selection and classification of dogs that hunt in a breed appropriate style effective for the traditional foot hunter."

At Staffordshire, there were separate stakes for Pointers and Setters, with a separate puppy stake then held for each of the two British pointing breeds. The entries were not large in number, but the enthusiasm for competition soon spread across the English Channel to nearby Europe. Field trials for pointing dogs were subsequently organized in Germany in 1876, Belgium in 1882 and France in 1888.<sup>4</sup> The first known field trial award classification for an Epagneul Breton held in France, as the breed's country of origin, took place in 1898, although some Bretons may have participated in earlier French field trials.<sup>5</sup> The first field trial in America was held on October 8, 1874, near Memphis, Tennessee, and attracted nine entrants from the Setter and Pointer breeds.<sup>6</sup>

When these field trials developed abroad, because of the inherent differences in the typical range and ground coverage of the British breeds (Pointers and Setters) compared to the Continental breeds (all other pointing breeds including the Epagneul Breton), the trialing format developed slightly differently for the two distinct breed classifications. In terms of ground coverage, a "wide search" (or "grand quête") was employed for the British Pointing Breeds as opposed to a "hunting search" ("quête de chasse") for the Continental Pointing Breeds. This traditional distinction is still honored today in European field trials hosted by countries which are members of the FCI, where the British breeds never run in competition against members of the Continental breeds. The two separate breed classifications running under the patronage of the FCI even have their own separate distinct sets of rules. In Europe, the autumn field trials often involve liberated game, which is shot and the retrieve is required. The spring and summer field trials are normally conducted by hunting natural game, which is not killed.<sup>7</sup>

The UKC inaugurated its field trialing system for pointing dogs and the foot hunter in 2003. Unlike other American field trialing venues which often bear no resemblance to the European field trialing format, the UKC Pointing Dog Program field trial rules and format were carefully modeled after the European model which was created and is specifically intended to aid in identifying and selecting the best dogs for breeding based on their natural hunting qualities. However, to try and make the venue more appealing to hunters and more available for

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<sup>4</sup> See footnote 2 above, supra. for authoritative citation.

<sup>5</sup> Willems, Pierre of Paris, France, 2007 Newsletter Article for the Norwegian Brittany Club entitled "The History of the Epagneul Breton" republished on Forum De L'Epagneul Breton at [www.epagneul-breton.org](http://www.epagneul-breton.org) See also the article entitled "A History Lesson- The First Recognized Epagneul Bretons" published on the Education Page of the official website for The Epagneul Breton Foundation, Inc. located at [www.epagneulbretonfoundation.org](http://www.epagneulbretonfoundation.org) Note: The field trials in France had only been instituted for a decade, when the first Epagneul Breton, a liver and white female, known as Myrrha D'Amorique secured a first place in a field trial in 1898.

<sup>6</sup> Brown, William F. *Field Trials: History Management and Standards*, Chicago, Illinois (Revised Ed. 1987) pp. 18-19

<sup>7</sup> See Footnote 2 above, supra. for citation to the authority.

participation for amateur pointing dog owners/trainers, the UKC initiated two respective classes of competition which run under the identical trialing format to the FCI. The UKC Open Class was initiated for pointing dogs at least one year of age which are fully trained and steady to wing and shot, and the UKC Gun Dog Class for pointing dogs at least six (6) months or age which are not yet fully trained and which must only be steady to the flush in order to classify for an award. The present UKC rules do not absolutely mandate, but encourage, division of dogs into the separate British and Continental Breed Classifications.<sup>8</sup> The UKC trialing venue employs the “hunting search” or “quête de chasse” for all dogs which is the more modest range of ground coverage appropriate for an upland bird hunter on foot.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Official UKC Pointing Dog Rulebook (2016 Ed.) published by United Kennel Club, Kalamazoo, MI. See pg. 4, § One, Rule III(A)

<sup>9</sup> Official UKC Pointing Dog Rulebook (2016 Ed.) published by United Kennel Club, Kalamazoo MI. See pg. 4, § One, Rule I(B); pg. 10, § Two, Rule (1)(T) requiring that the trial to represent a realistic hunting situation; pg. 38, § Seven, Rule Q for the Open Class and pg. 44, § Eight, Rule P for the Gun Dog Class.