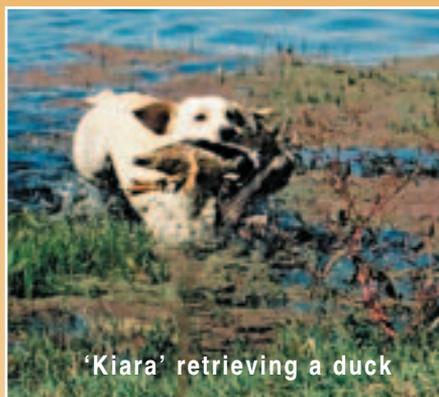


LABRADOR FIELD TRIALS 2003



The 2003 Field Trials of the Labrador Retriever Kennel Club were held on Val farms on the eastern Highveld. It was the Workers' Day long weekend, and it was a special treat to watch 33 of the best retrievers in the country going about their work. This report by Mike Holman was so informative that the Editor formally apologises that only one page was allocated. Every gun dog owner should try to attend this Field Trial next year.



'Kiara' retrieving a duck



'Tana' retrieving



'Kali' showing steadiness

The **Maiden Stake** is traditionally a fun-filled learning stake, but this year it was a challenging (and somewhat controversial) two-dog walk up with both a live and a saluted pigeon on a very tight angle, the second bird falling a good distance away over a fence in light cover on the edge of line of trees. Many dogs, full of enthusiasm and energy, lost the plot and eliminated themselves.

After a double pick-up of saluted guinea-fowl in the mealies, the dogs headed for the water and another steadiness test, with the dog sitting outside a hide, out of direct control of the handler (see photo). The guinea-fowl on return put some dogs to the test on marking ability with several dogs needing to be handled on to the bird but the majority still succeeded.

The last retrieve was set down by the river and sorted out the final placings, finishing with a 'blind' through fairly thick cover, further complicated by the added presence of grass owls flushing in front of the dogs that certainly gave authenticity to a real shooting situation.

On Friday morning, the serious business of the **Open Stake** got under way in cool misty conditions. A double of marked pigeons to start appeared relatively straightforward but distance

and longish grass cover resulted in some handling, and even more so with the second bird down in mealies over a tightly strung fence.

For the second retrieve of the day, down by the river, Senior Judge Charles Duff set a challenging triple pick-up but did not anticipate the marathon that ensued. Essentially a double (with a blind across water to be picked between two marked retrieves) the first pick-up across the river required a courageous entry down a very steep bank out of sight of the handlers. A number of dogs ran the bank looking for an easy entry point and needed handling to get across the water. This was followed by the blind across a dam, far from the handler, which provided entertainment for the gallery as several dogs started hunting on their own and some handlers uncharacteristically lost their cool!

The last pick-up proved particularly difficult. Apart from the long distance, the bird was deliberately thrown to fall into a hollow and with a gentle breeze eddying around the fall, several dogs ran past and hunted all around the hollow but struggled to find the bird.

Dogs still in the running re-convened on

Saturday morning with another triple pick-up. A live guinea-fowl was shot quite deep in mealies and another saluted on return as a diversion for a blind rabbit set on a tight angle to the diversion. With a strong pull from the diversion, the judges were quite lenient as a fair amount of handling and time was required to get the rabbit. A couple of dogs found the 'guinea' just too enticing and were eliminated.

The final retrieve was a relatively sedate affair (when compared to the five-bird pick-ups of previous years), designed more to confirm the final placings; a triple marked retrieve including a live guinea fowl, the only real challenge being the difficult river crossing to get to the fall.

Three dogs were in the running for places but it was Derek Brown's black Labrador **Trooper** who took top honours, with Judith Buchanan's Golden Retriever bitch, **Doolie** second and Gary Emerton's Lab **Maggie** 3rd.

On Saturday evening, competitors and followers were treated to the wonderful hospitality of the Val farming community and a splendid spit roast and potjie dinner at the Val Club – more food than anyone could have coped with, including the dogs! ▲