



A New Beginning

Sunday morning, April 1, 2012, was dark and cloudy; the weather report had been wrong... again. Mark Westerlund's first NAVHDA training day, which was to take place at Camanche Hills Hunting Preserve in Ione, California, had been postponed from Saturday, March 31, to Sunday, April 1, because Sunday was supposed to be a clear, sunny day... right!

As I headed out on highway 580 from San Ramon, California to Ione, the rain started to softly fall on my windshield; it was not bad, just a light mist. But the farther I drove from home, the harder the rain fell. By the time I reached the small town of Lockeford, California, about 10 miles from Camanche Hills, the rhythm of my windshield wipers sounded like the beating of a bass drum at a rock-and-roll concert.

I sat there, driving in the dark rain on the back roads of Highway 88, thinking to myself, "What the heck am I doing this for?" You see, I didn't even have a dog... yet. This journey had





started on December 17, 2011. That's when a piece of my heart was lost forever. My walking, hunting, running partner and best friend for 15 years had passed away. I've missed Shiloh, my Brittany, every day since he has been gone. I miss his energetic spirit, his unyielding love and his warm, soft eyes. He loved me so very much that, for him, just a small pet on the neck meant the world, and now it means the world to me, because I wish I had given him a thousand more.

But life goes on, and, although Shiloh will never be replaced, it was time for a new beginning. My wife, June, my sons and I had picked out the newest member of our family, Duchess Gracie DeCota, Cota for short. A Wirehaired Pointing Griffon, she arrived on April 6, two days after my birthday. We welcomed her with open arms and all our love. I'll be sure to give her thousands of pets on the neck, not to replace the ones I didn't get to give to Shiloh, but in honor and remembrance of

how he taught me about unyielding and undying love.

My friend and longtime hunting partner, Bruce Collett, had lost his English Pointer, Bado, about two years ago. After Bado's death, Bruce and I drove to Montana to pick up his new pup, a Wirehaired Pointing Griffon, Gus. Shiloh had officially passed the hunting torch over to Gus last year. Watching the old dog teach the youngster new skills will be a life-long memory for me. I was so impressed at how well Gus caught on at only a year old, that I decided when Shiloh was gone, I would also get a WPG.

When Shiloh was young, I ran him in NASTRA field trials, but that was a long time and many birds ago. It had been a while since I had trained a pup. After doing some research, I learned that the WPGs are more of a versatile hunting dog than the dogs I'd had in the past. While doing my research, I had spoken to Mark Westerlund, the main contact for the

Sacramento area NAVHDA. Mark was very helpful over the phone, explaining to me the differences in the NAVHDA test and the NASTRA field trials. I liked what I heard and passed on the information to Bruce.

Mark had told us that he was going to conduct his first ever NAVHDA training day at Camanche Hills. Bruce decided to take Gus to the training day and to have Mark assess the possibility of training Gus for the upcoming UT test. I decided to meet Bruce there to see how Mark trained and to learn as much as possible about the NAVHDA hunt tests. I'm not always the sharpest pencil in the box, but I'm sure glad I was smart enough to consider doing this. What an awesome experience!

As I pulled into the parking lot at Camanche Hills, the rain slowed to a slight mist. "Not bad," I thought; I can handle this. Things were looking up. Camanche Hills is set in a beautiful scenic location in the rolling hills above Lake Camanche. The bird cover is thick, and there are small ponds throughout the area – perfect!

We all sat in the clubhouse and had a tasty breakfast while we talked dogs, hunting and training. It seems to me that sometimes you can learn more from a person over a cup of coffee, or a bite to eat, than by reading a book for hours, or even going to structured classes. This morning's talk proved to be the case once again. Mark spoke about his training techniques and about dog personalities. I soaked it all in. This was good stuff!

By the time we had finished eating, the rain had stopped and the sun was shining brightly. Okay, so I was wrong, and the weatherman was right. I guess I need to have more faith. We all drove out to a small pond and a flat hunting area where everyone let out their dogs. What a sight; it was just awesome! There were Pudelpointers, Wirehaired Pointing Griffons, German Shorthair Pointers, and even a rare French Pointer, sometimes known as a Braque Francais. I had driven to heaven.

Mark and Ken Reynolds (who trains dogs with Mark) planted birds and worked the dogs on searching, pointing and steadiness. As they worked with each dog, they shared their teaching techniques and shed light on the hunt tests as well as what judges might look for in a dog. It was unbelievable how helpful and open they were about training and preparing for the test. I thought to myself, "If this is how everyone is in NAVHDA, I've found myself a home."

After the field work, we headed over to the pond for some water work. Michael and Renée, the owners of Lily, the French Pointer, had told Mark that their dog didn't seem to like water. They were

having a challenge getting her to go in and retrieve. Mark just said, "No problem, I'll show you how to work with her so she'll go right in."

Mark grabbed a chukar and started playing with Lily, getting her quite excited. Then he tossed the bird just a few feet into the water. Lily slowly approached the water's edge. She was tentative in placing her front paw just a few inches into the water. She stretched her neck out, so she would not have to go too far into the water, and grabbed the bird. Mark loaded on the praise and started playing with Lily and the chukar, again getting Lily all fired up. Out went the bird, a few feet farther this time. Lily slowly and cautiously went out and grabbed it. The praise was heaved on again, and now Lily was really excited. Again Mark threw the bird into the water, this time almost 10 feet out. You could see the look on Lily's face; "Boy, I want that bird, but I'm not too sure about this." More praise and out she went; back she came with the bird in her mouth and everyone started clapping. We had all been quietly pulling for her and shared in her success. I'm telling you with no exaggeration that within 15 minutes, Mark had Lily going 20 feet out into the water and retrieving with confidence. Impressive, to say the least!

Speaking about impressive, I met Stan Kauffman, a gentleman from Sparks Nevada. Stan is 85 years young, and he was out there working with his WPG, Smoky. What a great sight! I can only hope and pray that at 85, I'll still be able to work a pup... good for you, Stan!

I was born on the island of Maui, so when I saw a beautiful, sleek, black German Shorthair named Maui, I just had to meet her. And what a joy it was; she warmed my heart. I could see why her owner, H.T. Radke, loves her so much; she's a doll.

At the end of the day, we all said our goodbyes and headed in different directions. I drove down the dirt road, the mud splashing up from my tires, the truck bouncing in and out of potholes. I couldn't help but feel that something special had happened. I couldn't put a finger on it until I was about halfway home. Then I realized that all those dogs and their kind owners had helped me heal. My heart had been warmed and somewhat mended by these kind folks. I could now move forward, always with the love in my heart for Shiloh, but knowing that I was truly ready to start a new venture with Cota.

Thanks to Mark and to everyone for a great day and a truly wonderful experience. And thank you, NAVHDA, for providing us with the vehicle to not only start our young pups in the right direction, but also for giving us the opportunity to learn and grow with them.