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# TAILS AND TALES:

## FEATURING “DIME,” “STORM” & “NEO”

*By: Carol Ullerich*

Last October, the West Kentucky Wildlife Management Area (WKWMA) in Kevil, Kentucky, hosted 1,132 dogs, 314 handlers, officials from the American Kennel Club, and assorted dog owners and spectators at the 2024 AKC Master National Retriever Hunt Test (Master National)—the largest such event in North America. Held annually, it rotates among four US time zones showcasing hunting skills by teams of dogs and handlers. 2024 was the first time this test occurred in Western Kentucky.

The Master National usually occurs on private property, but the WKWMA is public land owned/leased by the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife Resources. Financed entirely by hunting and fishing license fees paid by sportsmen and by Federal excise taxes on hunting and fishing equipment, the WKWMA receives no funding from Kentucky’s General Fund, income tax, or sales taxes. The site covers 6,425 acres, is composed of both forest and open-field habitat, and includes many seasonal wetlands and permanent ponds.

The WKWMA annually hosts twelve regional retriever events, and has worked with the Master National (MN) Retriever Club, The Hunting Retriever Club, Inc., and the National Retriever Club to host each organization’s national event since 2022. The WKWMA is the closest outdoor recreation site for Western Kentuckians to participate in pond fishing, biking on gravel roads, and general nature-based experiences. Fields and wooded areas are managed to provide a diversity of habitats, and the WKWMA provides 25 ponds for fishing, plus retriever training and testing. Clients from Paducah’s Easter Seals Center visit often to fish at the WKWMA’s Disabled Access Fishing Pond. Hunting is permitted with an archery range, wildlife viewing areas, and the Chief Paduke Skeet Range. Primitive camping and horseback riding are allowed in designated areas.

The Master National has grown steadily since retriever trials began with fewer than 100 dogs in 1991. That number surged to 800 entries in 2017. While 2024 was not a record-setting year—that honor is held by Thomasville, Georgia, where 1,240 dogs participated in 2023—reviews for the local meet were positive with high marks for plentiful housing, proximity to shopping and a wide variety of eateries. It’s estimated the twelve-day event generated \$15-\$20 million dollars. Rural King and Shooter’s Supply offered deals to participants, including sales on dog food. One participant spent \$1,000 in a single shopping trip.



Occurring while Hurricanes Helene and Milton ravaged North Carolina and Florida, participants quickly sent money and provisions to flood victims. Local rains washed out a full day of trials, but all finished on time with ceremonies for each flight doling out bright orange ribbons, pewter plates, and medallions, followed by plenty of photos documenting victors. When all was said and done, 84 more canines joined the prestigious MN Hall of Fame—a milestone added to each dog’s pedigree.

Eighteen breeds competed, including 1,056 labs and 49 goldens. The oldest entry was 13 years; the youngest 13 months. Most dogs were just under six years; some were from Kentucky. Thirty offspring of one sire entered; five pups from each of three females entered.

On the six trial days, forty Future Farmers of America (FFA)—area high school students—arrived by school bus. They worked the tests in five-person teams across eight flights from 8:00 a.m. until 5:00 p.m. Their job—preparing “wingers” and “calling” ducks. College kids worked weekends. A \$3,000 donation was made to each school’s club for its work. Entrants praised the students’ professionalism.

I attended the trials in search of a dog with a compelling story of recovery to reflect this issue’s theme. My initial contact was with

Tim Kreher, WKWMA's manager and biologist in charge. While at Headquarters I met Mia DiBenedetto, Communications and Public Relations Director for the AKC Master National Retriever Club. Her husband, Jack Combs, chairs the AKC Hunt Test Advisory Committee and during the WKWMA meet oversaw all CallBacks—advising all participants whether they performed well enough to run another day, and if so, when and where. Mia and Jack entered a dog in the meet.

Within minutes of my arrival, I had leads for several stories; more emerged each day. Before arriving I didn't equate the canines I would meet with professional athletes. I quickly realized, just like pro football players, these dogs are highly-trained athletes who incur common injuries and career-ending ones. Unable to express their pain in words; humans speak for them.

I spent the better part of four days on site. It became clear the dog owners and handlers have an immense love of, and respect for, dogs. Their ultimate goal is owning, training and/or handling a dog who achieves Hall of Fame (HOF) status meaning the dog qualified to participate and successfully passed three AKC Master National events—a mark of pride and distinction. “Pass” or “fail,” there are no bad dogs!

To be clear, each of these dogs is a cherished pet. Each is also a significant investment of time, energy and money. And, each has a unique personality, awesome skills, and admiration for the hand that feeds it, as well as its own favorite treat and toy.

One fact stressed multiple times was a retriever event is not a “competition.” Unlike conformation trials where dogs place first, second and third, retrievers do not compete against one another; they strive to meet a written “standard.” To qualify to run in the Master National event, the dog must accrue six passes at AKC hunt tests that year. When a dog passes the Master National Event, it receives two qualifications for the next qualifying year (August 1 through July 31). There is an exception for Hall of Fame retrievers. Once a dog earns an MNH title, it can enter the event each year, without new passes.

The dog is certainly the star of this show, but it's far from a solo act. It's a “team” effort, combining a dog and one or more humans. Some dogs are trained and handled (worked and shown) by the owner; others are schooled by a professional trainer who may also handle the dog during the event. Dog breeders play a valuable role too—puppies with champion bloodlines are a lucrative business.

Because every dog may “pass” each Master National trial, there is much camaraderie among these trainers, handlers and owners. They readily share tips and tricks with one another and invite other dog owners to private training sessions. It's a collegial, supportive community since everyone can take home a “winner” depending entirely on the dog's performance during the test. It's also a family affair. There were plenty of families with babies and young kids.

## “DIME,” ONE OF A KIND

Overwhelmingly, most dogs were labrador or golden retrievers, but there was one singleton in the bunch—“Dime”—the only Poodle entered in the WKWMA meet, formal name, “Duxbury My Ten Cents, MH60 MNH SHU.” She began entering the annual MN in 2009, and became the first Poodle to qualify at three AKC MN Retriever Club events (2019, 2021 and 2023), earning the title Master National Hunter (MNH). In Thomasville, Georgia, in 2023, “Dime” was the first Poodle inducted into the AKC Retriever HOF—a first for her breed. Because of that win, “Dime” never has to qualify again. At the same

event, Jack Combs, Dime's handler and co-owner with Mia, earned an Amateur Team Excellent Award.

“Dime's” owners learned about the sport from friends who train labrador retrievers. “Dime” stands about 15.5” tall. She's smallish for a Standard Poodle, but elegant with a calm demeanor and lovely steel gray coat.

Surrounded by labs and goldens, I was surprised to learn Poodles were the first dogs trained as water retrievers in early 17th Century Germany. The term “poodle” comes from the word “pudel” or “pudelhund”—German for “water dog.”

The first Poodle retrievers were not the fancy sheered Poodles commonly seen today—that began during the reign of Louis XVI—when dogs were coiffed to match the style of 18th Century French nobility. It wasn't totally frivolous, a well-groomed coat is an asset to a working Poodle. The thick outer coat becomes heavy when wet so the lower half of the body is often shorn to help the dog float. Long hair is kept over its chest and head to retain warmth in cold water. “Bracelets” of hair around the ankles protect joints from rheumatism and a pompadour or topknot keeps long hair out of the dog's eyes while swimming. [A Short History of Poodle Grooming, pedigree.com.](#)

Jack and Mia invest in Poodles for a practical reason. Jack is highly allergic, but after visiting a game fair in England, they were intrigued by seeing Poodles work and began searching for a Poodle to train, locating a Colorado breeder whose dogs had champion bloodlines.

Having short curly hair rather than fur, Poodles are considered a hypoallergenic breed. They still produce dander, but shedding is minimal and while still possible, allergic reactions are less likely. [Dogster.com: Vetranch.org.](#)

“Dime” was not Jack and Mia's first Poodle. Her mother, registered name “Bibelot's Tolka Hands Up MH81,” call name “Ten,” also a champion retriever, was the first Poodle to qualify at a MN. “Ten” has a unique recovery story. She underwent cataract surgery on both eyes at age eight. She succumbed to cancer four years later. “Dime's” daughter, call name “Zehn,” also retrieves and was “Dime's” traveling companion at the WKWMA.

Jack, Mia and Ten were living in Wisconsin. “Ten” was performing well, but her vision began to fail. She could not see where the birds she was to retrieve were landing. When her declining eyesight hindered





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her performance, it was decided “Ten” would undergo cataract surgery to prolong her career. The procedure was performed by a veterinarian trained as an ophthalmologist and then board certified.

The procedure for a dog is no different than for a human, but the price tag can be more than triple; the price for “Ten’s” procedure was not regulated by Medicare. The surgery was successful and extended her retrieving career, but Mia said they probably wouldn’t choose that route again. “Ten” wore a “cone” for eight weeks to prevent rubbing her eyes while on a leash the entire time. Mia admitted it was difficult managing “Ten’s” recovery. Like humans, eye drops had to be applied on a rigid schedule. “Ten” had an alternate career. Upon completing 400 therapy visits she earned the title, AKC Therapy Dog Distinguished.



Back to “Dime,” she’s not just a pretty face with a talent for retrieving. Like her mother, “Dime” moonlights as a therapy dog. Every Tuesday at 2:00 p.m., Mia drives “Dime” to Atrium Health Wake Forest Baptist Medical Center in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, to visit patients.

When I asked Mia whether “Dime’s” retriever training prepared her to make therapy visits, she initially said no, but then agreed there could be a connection because “Dime” must calmly wait “at the line” before being dispatched to retrieve birds.

Each Monday, a nurse surveys patients and makes Tuesday appointments for those requesting a visit with “Dime.” Mia knows she and “Dime” aren’t “curing” anyone, it’s an opportunity to calm patients, brighten someone’s day, and perhaps relieve anxiety or



fear. Mia said patients love patting “Dime’s” head because of her soft pompadour.

Hospital patients aren’t the only ones benefiting from “Dime’s” visits. She also attends hospital staff events to provide stress relief to doctors and nurses.

After the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing, therapy dogs were lauded as “great listeners.” Lutheran Church Charities in Addison, Illinois, dispatched five specially-trained golden retrievers to Boston, two of them traveling from an assignment in Connecticut where they had been comforting children and parents of the Sandy Hook Elementary School shooting. Beginning at six weeks of age, each golden began up to a year of training followed by a year of service before receiving its first assignment. See, “Like furry counselors,” [today.com](http://today.com).

“Dime” has been trained in basic obedience, learning to sit quietly at a patient’s bedside. She and Mia belong to the Alliance of Therapy Dogs. Hospitals often acclimate service animals working in their facilities to wheelchair traffic and train them to ignore noisy falling bedpans. Chatting with other participants in the MN trials, I learned several owners have pups who are also therapy dogs.

Jack occasionally accompanies Mia and “Dime” during hospital visits. He’s seen “Dime” transform children and adults with her mere presence. In his words, “Seeing ‘Dime’ in the hospital comforting a child or an adult who doesn’t feel well, and the smile the dog brings, is phenomenal.”

## “STORM,” SHE NEVER GIVES UP

Soon after arriving at Flight C, I met Jim and Judy Windham of Leonard, Texas—part of a large contingent of owners, handlers, and trainers from Texas. A former Marine, Jim, now seventy-nine, has been running dogs twenty years or more. The couple will celebrate 58 years of wedded bliss this January. Jim didn’t recall ever spending their anniversary at a retriever event, but they’ve celebrated plenty of birthdays with dogs at hunt tests.

As a boy in Orange, Texas, Jim hunted squirrels with terriers born under the steps of his family home. His favorite dog, “Speedy,” was a “natural.” Knowing squirrels fancied pecans and pine nuts, Speedy simply followed the squirrels to those trees, leaving the rest of the job for Jim to finish.



Jim’s fascination with retrievers began when he hired an Oklahoma dog trainer to take customers bird hunting on a cold, blustery day. The trainer’s registered dog was named “Sahara’s Casino Ante Up,” call name, “Ante Up.” During the arranged hunt, “Ante Up” retrieved every bird, impressing Jim—but collecting birds wasn’t her only skill.

The trainer told “Ante Up” to sit while Jim

placed birds around the property. “Ante Up” was then told to retrieve the birds, some of which required swimming across frigid water. After retrieving all the birds, “Ante Up” returned to the trainer and patiently sat at his feet, shivering in the cold, water dripping from her soaked coat. Not until the trainer said, “Shake,” did she shake her body to remove the water. At that point, Jim announced, “I gotta have one.”



Judy and Jim Windham with Storm

With delight, the trainer said, “Ante Up” is expecting; one of her pups, “Signature’s Lady Outlaw Jessie,” a female yellow lab, became Jim’s first event pup. When “Jessie” was about a year old, it was discovered she had bad hips and was not good breeding stock. She was still a strong retriever, achieving titles of HRCH (Hunting Retriever Champion), AKC Master, and two MN Plates. The third MN plate—necessary for induction into the MN Hall of Fame—eluded her. Jim says, “Jessie was a better dog than I was a handler.”

The Windhams acquired Jessie’s little sister, “J and J’s Lily Pearl,” call name “Pearl,” breeding her to “Downtown Cooter Brown.” She bore “Ollie,” (named for Lt. Col. Oliver North), “Bear,” (the male black lab Judy wanted for whom no better name was suited), “Pink,” and “Red,” the last two named for the color of ribbon assigned to each at birth to distinguish it from littermates. The plan was to keep a single pup from each litter. That plan failed from the start.

“Pearl” tore her Achilles Tendon after winning a master title, but her pups collected more than 20 MN plates. Jim explained, “we kept so many puppies because we couldn’t let them go,” and then confided, “it’s easier to become a Secret Service Agent than get a puppy from my wife.” All their pups were born in a guest bedroom.

Jim, an amateur handler of his own dogs, has earned accolades too. In 2022 he was named Handler of the Year—an award voted on by all AKC handlers—5,000 or more—across the nation. It was a total surprise when Charles Pugh, a good friend and fellow Texan, announced the winner to a small group of friends at a dog test. Because Pugh said the winner’s entire name, it took Jim awhile to realize *it was him*.

When I asked why he thought he received the honor, he said he didn’t think he did anything special, just volunteered and pitched in like everyone else. On reflection, he said he’s had years of experience, tries to get along with everyone, and opens his training facility to others—never turning anyone down, but not always inviting all to return.

He did recall Jack Morris, a professional handler, leaving a test site one night while Jim was still working. When Morris returned at 7:00 a.m. the next morning, Jim was in the same spot doing the same task. It might have given the impression Jim had spent the night, but he had in fact gone home and returned especially early the next day.



Jim ran six dogs in one meet – Storm is second from right.

I was introduced to the Windhams because of their female black lab, “River’s Run Wild Black Cloud MH,” call name “Storm”—sometimes called Stormy. She overcame total paralysis to retrieve again.

December 2015, Storm’s career began at Piney Woods Retriever Club in Pearland, Texas. She entered a Derby field trial<sup>1</sup> for dogs under the age of two. She did not pass; overly excited, she left the line early causing a fail. She would go on to participate in sixteen tests around Texas through early 2017. Her first travel test was in Colorado in May of 2017. Again, she did not pass. But she did find success in Minnesota a month later, passing her first MN test.

Tragedy struck at age four, July 30, 2021, during a training session at home. While retrieving a bird, Storm made one “yelp” and was immediately paralyzed. Jim ran into the field, collected her, and headed straight to Blue Pearl Pet Hospital in Lewisville, Texas, a special emergency vet clinic. An embolism had entered Storm’s spine causing paralysis. The surgeon, Dr. Ben Williams, said it was not an injury and surgery would not help. The only option—long, drawn-out therapy which began in two to three days’ time.

Jim built a sling to carry Storm to the bathroom. Judy and Jim “moved” Storm’s legs for her; for six to eight weeks, Storm could not control her hips and legs. In time, Jim exerted more pressure on Storm’s back. In two to three months, she had regained some movement. With daily exercise, she began walking slowly. After six weeks, she was taking daily walks. Eventually, she could walk a straight line.

Storm tackled the barn next. Jim and Judy walked her up and down steps. They worked with a woman from California using harnesses and modifying the same blue, red and yellow elastic bands people use to build strength to rehab Storm. Ten weeks later, the vet said, “try her on her own.” Jim and Judy continued therapy a few more weeks—Jim was especially nervous. Things finally clicked. Storm still has difficulty—she’s much slower to sit than most dogs—but she gets there.

After nine months, the vet said Storm’s brain must find a way to tell her hips to work. Water therapy helped. A “good swimmer, Storm swam a lot—and being in water was an easier rehab regimen—it’s just that her rear wobbles a bit.” According to Jim, “Storm doesn’t stop; she’s never stopped. Retrieving is a game for her.” The vet still keeps tabs on Storm.

Since being out of commission a full year, and overcoming paralysis, she’s failed three tests, but she’s also earned one MN plate and two MN Amateur plates. She will try for Hall of Fame status again and may succeed in Spring 2025. That test will be close to home in Giddings, Texas. Storm’s odds of entering the HOF improved in December 2024 when she achieved her 50th and 51st passes.

Judy told me Storm was in love with Jim from the start. According to Judy, when it’s time to relax, Storm jumps in Jim’s recliner and scoots to one edge. Jim then sits on the other side and Storm rests her nose on Jim’s cheek.

Now ten, Storm ran in the WKWMA trials; she did not receive a Callback for the last day of trials; her blind retrieve was judged “to be off.” Jim suspects Storm has arthritis in her hip. While the lifespan of an event lab depends on many factors, it is usually between ten and fourteen years.

Jim has a deep kennel. He brought “Otis,” a four-year-old male black lab named for Otis Redding to the WKWMA, and “Walt,” an eleven-year-old golden named for USMC General Lewis William “Lew” Walt, Assistant Marine Commandant Infantry Platoon Commander. “Walt” has plenty of hardware—he holds six MN plates and is in both the MN and MN Amateur Halls of Fame. The Windham’s youngest golden is named “Huey,” in honor of the US Marine Corp’s favorite bird—a utility helicopter that carried injured soldiers off the battlefield. The military theme is obvious. Jim was a 1st Lt., Infantry Platoon Commander. Stationed at Camp Pendleton, he provided security for President Richard Nixon while at the Western White House in San Clemente, California.

After a string of black labs, I asked what prompted the switch to goldens. Jim’s quick response, “Judy wanted them.” To Jim, retrievers are pure fun, but he admits breeding rights and titles are nice. He strives for his dogs to succeed—to him, the titles show each dog’s work ethic, ability, eagerness, and devotion.

I asked Jim to name three things he’s learned from training dogs. First, patience. You can’t rush them and, if you skip a step, you’ll lose time backtracking and not get the desired result. Two, dogs give 100% every time they go out. Don’t let them overdo—whether it’s overeating or overexerting in cold/hot weather, they’re still dogs—think for them. Judy says train a dog like you’re training a five-year-old—practice repetition. Three, what seems intuitive to you may not be so obvious to the dog. You might need to find a different way to teach a dog a new goal. Be creative.

The Windhams have traveled from Maine to Oregon for AKC events. Jim described a “good dog” as “one who looks you in the eye—they’ve got to do it for you.” He also said littermates don’t usually perform well, but Jim had three that were super performers.

Some participants in this year’s trials came to Western Kentucky a month early to train. Jim and Judy arrived at Kentucky Lake more than two weeks before trials started. Jim admitted, “dogs keep me young!”

I’ve shared two stories of crippling conditions that could have shortened a dog’s career or life. Because retrieving is a team sport, dogs aren’t always the ones needing help; dogs are caregivers too, stimulating human healing. That’s the focus of this third vignette.

<sup>1</sup> Unlike AKC hunt tests where dogs receive a pass or fail for each run, an AKC field trial is a competition awarding ribbons to first, second, third and fourth place winners.

## “NEO” AND “TIP”

Jace Tramontin, 57, lives in Hibbing, Minnesota. He worked in technology for public schools before retiring with 28 years of service. His wife, Denise, worked in ophthalmology. The couple has two adult sons.

Jace and Denise launched their retriever journey in 2002. Their first dog, a male black lab named “JT’s Tip Trouble” call name “Tip,” was purchased at a banquet auction. During the bidding, Jace went to the bar where he soon realized he was bidding against Denise, so he stopped. Denise won the auction by \$300.

Once home, Denise began training Tip, then handling the dog, eventually becoming a judge. Denise was passionate about retrieving and devoted to the Master National—as a participant and as a worker. Tip qualified for the Master National in 2008, becoming the couple’s first Master National Hall of Fame dog in 2012. He passed away 3 months later.

This led them to acquire a second male black lab, now going on twelve years of age, named “JT’s Double Trouble Alter Ego MNH6 MAH6 QA2,” call name “Neo.” He became their second dog to enter the Master National Hall of Fame in 2021. He’s now passed the Master National six times; 2016, 2019, 2021, 2022, 2023 and the 2024 WKWMA trials.

In 2008, their home club, Minnesota Iron Range Retriever Club, was to host the Master National. In 2007, Jace and Denise went to Richmond, Virginia, to observe and learn the ropes. While there, they met national folks and learned expectations for their time in the spotlight.

Denise helped found a retriever club; Jace served as president of a local club and served as a national officer—including Master National Retriever Club President in 2016. The two always attended national retriever events together—traveling coast-to-coast and touching all fifty states—the epitome of helpmates.

Jace explained, “Dogs were our vacation, sightseeing as we drove. We traveled in a Dodge Caravan, just us and two dogs. The dogs were quiet. My wife slept through most of the US.”

In 2015 or 2016, Jace bought a truck from the estate of a friend who passed away from a heart event while standing “at the line with his

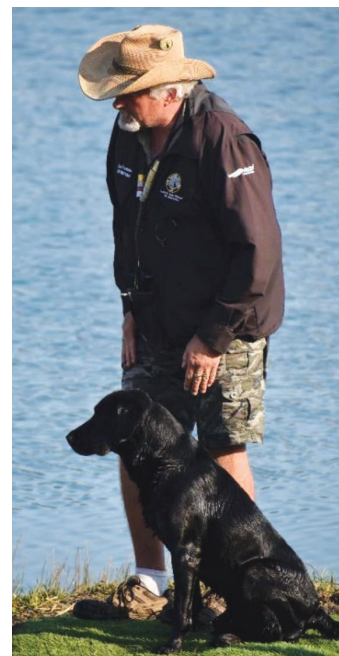


Jace and late wife, Denise

dog” during a hunt test. Death can come to anyone at any time.

Fast forward to 2022. Neo participated in the Master National in Oregon with Denise and Jace in tow. Neo passed the trials, and the trio returned home.

The next morning, October 11, 2022, Denise headed to town for a medical appointment. From inside the house, Jace heard a crash. He reached the collision at the end of their driveway before first responders arrived. Jace entered through the car’s passenger side and removed Denise’s foot from the pedal of her Honda Fit to turn off the car. Denise was dead.



The accident presented multiple realizations for Jace. Because he was on scene and saw the aftermath, there were no unanswered questions, no “what ifs.” Then, “I can’t change it; I can’t hide from it. The other driver survived; she was a younger driver taking her little sister to school. The other family wanted to reach out immediately. I wasn’t ready.”

Ten weeks later, on December 27, 2022, Jace’s mom died after a three-year bout with lung cancer. Jace found his mom in her home while doing a post-Christmas welfare check. Ironically, during his mom’s illness, Jace and Denise discussed what they would do if one of them died.

Nine months to a year later, Jace talked with the other family. “It was time, I was ready. Neither girl had needed care just after the collision, they were in a larger Jeep. It was good to meet and talk with them to bring closure to an unfortunate situation.”

As Jace and I continued chatting, he spoke of the power of dogs and retrievers in particular. “Dogs get you into the sport; the people keep you in the sport. It’s a fun activity; it’s camaraderie. I enjoyed hearing descriptions of my wife’s life from those she encountered working retriever events. They were kind and easy to talk to. Some things even surprised me.”

“Our next big event would have been the 2023 Master Amateur in Texas. Neo had qualified to run. Neo and I competed five to six months after Denise’s death. I told myself, ‘I’ve got to continue. It brought me closer to Denise.’”

Neo is clearly a very good dog, having passed the Master Amateur Invitational six times making him one of only three dogs in the nation to accomplish this feat.

*I went in search of one dog with a story; I found several. Recovery comes in all shapes and sizes—occasionally while holding a leash attached to a four-legged companion with a wet nose. Attending the Master National was a privilege and an opportunity I won’t forget. ♡*