

Once Upon A Time....

Memories, and the birth of a national club

by Sue Van Sloun

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The Timonium two day Rare Breed All Breed Show was larger and noisier then ever. Rumor had it that there were over 2,000 dogs entered in conformation and obedience.

A bunch of us were squeezed around a table munching on the usual show junk food; hot dogs, hamburgers, chips, sodas etc. Our Tollers were all groomed and we were just killing time until our turn to be judged. Conversation was lively on the pros and cons of grooming, handling, hunting techniques, raising pups, etc. All the usual dog "chit chat". As I looked around the table at the many familiar faces my mind began to drift back to earlier times. The very first time we had gathered here and how it had all come about....

Sylvan Jason, a yellow Lab, was born on June 21, 1974. He was shy and afraid of other dogs. Someone told me about "obedience classes". What a great way to socialize him and in so doing build his self-confidence. We enrolled in an eight week course.

The instructor was from my town. He had trained and de-trained dogs during World War Two and raised and showed Great Danes and Corgis. He was highly competitive and had a thundering voice which was extremely intimidating. Jason shook from head to tail and I was so nervous I was sure I had to go to the bathroom.

There were fifteen other handlers and dogs in the class. The noise was deafening. We all stood around in a circle trying to control our uncontrollable dogs as Mr. Kirby expounded on what we might accomplish in the weeks ahead if we spent just fifteen minutes a day training our dog at home. He ended his dissertation by stating he would demonstrate where a dog should be in the heeling pattern. To my horror he came towards me and asked if he could borrow my dog. He asked the dog's name, took the leash and started towards the middle of the floor chatting with the dog all the way. Jason found the tone friendly and went with him. Then the trouble started. He gave the dog the "heel" command and yanked on the leash. Jason shot to his feet and walked a few steps. When he was commanded to "sit" with a "pull up on the leash" and a "push down with the hand on his rump" it was too much for Jason. He dropped to the ground and crept between the instructor's feet from where he could not be dislodged. In that impossible position the instructor dragged him back to me and implied, "this dog was a real loser."

Eight weeks later we graduated FIRST IN THE CLASS. I was hooked on the sport and Jason loved it also. Mr. Kirby congratulated us, but looked a bit skeptical.

He was a tough instructor who would not let us compete in the novice class until we had a First in Sub-novice. The first time out Jason and I came in Third out of a class of about forty. I was so proud of my ribbon and trophy you would have thought I had gone BIS at Westminster. Three matches later we had a First place over about forty dogs. One year later we had our CD with three consecutive scores of 195 or better.

DOG WORLD Magazine offered a "Dog World" award for any one who accomplished this feat. It was a very large and impressive plaque. I subscribed to Dog World magazine so I could see our picture and name in print. Little did I know where that subscription would lead.

An ad caught my eye "COME TO HALIFAX NOVA SCOTIA - THREE SHOWS, THREE TRIALS IN THREE DAYS." The show coincided with our three day holiday in October. Jason had his Bermuda Companion Dog Title (that's another story) so what could be more natural than the acquisition of a Canadian Title. Neil, my husband, didn't then (and still doesn't) quite understand some of my reasoning processes but he's a game guy and so it was decided that we would attend the three day Halifax Show. The year was 1978.

Jason was entered in Novice B so we would have to wait until all the "Novice A" dogs had been judged. We whiled away the time watching the Open Class.

The little red dog with the white feet and tail tip dashed out on command, picked up the dumbbell, spun around quickly and returned to her handler. What a happy worker! But what was the breed? The question was put to a nearby steward who answered. "Why, that's a Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever!"

Jason did well. As I remember he placed in the top three. After all the awards were distributed we spoke to the CKC Representative about the Toller and requested the names of breeders. She told us of the Sproul Kennel and said we would pass very close to Springhill on our way to New Brunswick.

I couldn't believe my eyes when we drove into the driveway. They all looked like the little red dog we had seen in the ring. John and Mary greeted us and we all went in for a cup of coffee. Hours later my head was spinning with all sorts of Toller history that just poured out of Mary. We left with a promise that the Sprouls would call us when they had a litter of pups.

April 24, 1979 Sproul's Celtic Charm and Sproul's Lady MacCarron were born. Mary contacted us and it was arranged that we would drive up around the Fourth of July to pick up our new pup.

This was to be a very special time in the Maritimes. The Queen Mother of Great Britain was coming for a visit. Wonderful sounding places like Pugwash and Antigonish were going to have oxen-pulls and country fairs. We would pick up our pup and go and see the sights.

July 4th, 1979 Sproul's Celtic Charm (Ginger) nestled in my arms as we sat atop Citadel Hill in Halifax and watched the Queen Mother present the colors. This little ball of fluff would grow up to be one of the best hunting dogs we had ever owned.

Sadly, one winter, Ginger and another lab of ours acquired a penchant for the poison placed in the covered poly houses for the winter, to keep the mice from debarking the plants. By the time we discovered what was happening it was too late. The vet could not save them and Ginger died in my arms.

About a year or so later we acquired another bitch from the Sprouls. Amy, (Sylvan's Foxii Nana) was named after the heather plants we grew. We also brought home Carrie, Sproul's Lady MacCarron and Dancer, Sproul's D.F. Maxwell, (also a heather). The last two we co-owned.

The trips to Nova Scotia were numerous. Neil and John would discuss fishing, lobstering, and the world in general. Mary and I would show dogs and talk dogs.

I had never handled a dog in conformation and soon realized there was much more to this than met the eye, so I decided to attend a handling class. Thursday night was for conformation at my club so off to class I went. You guessed it!! Thundering Mr. Kirby was the teacher.

He brought the whole class to a screeching halt by yelling "Oh no, what have I done to deserve this?" Everyone turned to look. If he thought my dogs and I were klutzes in obedience we defied description in conformation. Amy was my socializer and Dancer hated class and tried to walk around backwards. I did not enjoy this aspect of the sport and found everyone to be rather stuffy and humorless. We received a little respect when Carrie took a Group Third under an AKC judge at the Apple Valley Rare Breed Show. Of course, when they heard we received a big Red Apple they all rolled their eyes and mumbled "what is this world coming to?"

I joined the Canadian Toller Club. Whenever a letter written by an American would appear in Toller Talk, the club magazine, I'd drop them a line. Jane Ryan in Missouri and Laura Grossman in California were two people who sent letters to the editor.

Jane Ryan had purchased a Toller from the Sprouls, "Doc Halliday", and a bitch from Harbourlights kennel, "Mic-Mac-Marnie". The dogs were mated and in December of 1980 a young male was born who was to become the foundation stud of Sylvan Kennel. His name was Chalk Bluffs Redwood Jack.

Part 2 ~ The Toller word spreads

In 1980 Barbara Charais of Phillips, Wisconsin had a letter published in "Bark Back" of Toller Talk, the Canadian magazine, requesting American Toller owners contact her with the idea of starting a Club in the U.S.A. I did better than that - I went to visit her.

It just so happened that my husband and I would be at a convention in Minnesota in July. After the convention, Neil, who hails from that State, wanted to spend some time with his family. He very kindly said that I might fly to Wisconsin and drive with Barbara to Regina, Saskatchewan for a dog show.

Jim and Linda Barnes opened their house to us and introduced us to all the Toller owners in the area. These were the people who had started the National Club, and this was the couple who owned the FIRST BEST IN SHOW Toller - Sproul's Highland Playboy - Mork!

This well rounded Toller had a CD (not an easy task, as he was never still) and was one of the fastest dogs on the fly-ball team. A team which ranked as one of the top three in Canada.

Barbara had entered her Toller, "Cedar" (Sproul's Kinsman's Cedar Fox). I knew little about showing and went into the depths of depression when Cedar was awarded a second. Barbara was not upset and merely said, "Tomorrow is another day. In this game you never say never." How right she was, the next day Cedar was awarded the points and became a Champion. It was a lesson I never forgot.

Before our trip was over we stopped to visit Rena Capp of the Jalna Kennels, in Brandon, Manitoba, and Wileen Moore, Sundrummer Kennels. I could kick myself for not having taken more pictures of these earlier dogs who appear in so many of our pedigrees.

John Hamilton and Marile Waterstraat of Penfield, NY, had laid old Mack, their All-American to rest. The time had come to seriously search for another dog. The house was too quiet. Marile was a librarian at a local school and had purchased a book called The American Dog Book by Kurt Unkelbach. On the cover were five or six red dogs with white markings. Her first thought was Goldens. Even though she was a novice she realized that couldn't be right. When she checked the jacket it identified the dogs on the cover as "Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retrievers." "A WHAT?" (Editor Note: This may be the first recorded instance of that now famous line.) She took the book home to show John because she knew he would love telling people he owned a Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever and Marile knew it would fit her bill as the ideal hunting dog for John.

From that point on, John and Marile browsed through every dog magazine in the Wegmans supermarket rack weekly. After two years of mauling the magazines, "JACKPOT" there was a Toller ad from Sylvan Kennel. After a couple of letters, a few phone calls, and a quick trip to Massachusetts, it was decided that two Tollers would go to upstate New York, a hunting male and a pet female.

Albany, NY. sounded like a good half-way mark, only four hours away for each. February 26, 1983 we three met for lunch. Millions of questions were asked and answered. We never stopped talking, that seems to be a Toller owner trait. After lunch, "Rusty", Sylvan's Rusty Jones, and "Misty", Sproul's Misty Morn, went from one wagon to another to start a new, and what would prove to be an exciting, life with John and Marile.

Rusty and Misty were entered in Obedience classes. I told Marile that NEON (New England Obedience News) issued Obedience Certificates to "All-Americans" who qualified in three matches with scores of 170 or better. It gave us a little incentive to work our dogs and go to matches since we were not eligible for AKC Trials and we had no club which might issue certificates.

In the Fall of 1983 I called John and Marile and told them there was a large Rare Breed Show and Obedience Trial in Timonium, MD. There would be well over 500 dogs. I thought we should go. Marile bought a book on "How to handle your dog", a show lead and collar, and headed for the back yard with Rusty.

I'm sure the neighbors, as they peered from behind their curtains, questioned this girl's sanity. Almost every afternoon with book and dog she would appear. She had a routine that consisted of running in a square, walking and running in a triangle and walking up and back a short distance in a straight line. Each time she would stop, the dog would stop and stand, and she would look down at the dog standing, give it a tidbit, pat it on the head and start the routine again. The real clincher came when she would stand the dog, go to its right side and pick up each leg and put it carefully back down. Having done that, she would then hold up his tail with one hand and his collar with the other, and proudly pose with the dog as though to impress some invisible person. On some occasions she would move to the front of the dog and peer into its mouth.

Six days before the show Marile broke her foot.

Stubborn, and determined like the Toller, the next morning Marile dragged her cast to the closet and pulled out John's good brown suit. "John", she said, "take this to the cleaners and tonight when you come home, give your shoes a brush and pick out a tie because Saturday you're going to show a dog."

Part 3 ~ The club is whelped

The date was Friday October 25, 1983. Time to leave for Timonium, MD and the Dog Show.

John, Marile (with foot in cast), Rusty, and Misty piled into the car for the long trip, and at the same time Neil, my friend Sue Doherty and myself loaded the camper and filled the van with crates. We would camp at the sight with Zonker (on loan from the Ullricks), Amy, Carrie, Angel, Bunkey, and Jamy, Karen's litter mates.

Down in Maryland Rochelle Yuspa washed and groomed Karen in preparation for tomorrow's show.

Rochelle, while raising three children, had bred, raced and shown Siberian Huskies. Now the children were grown and off to do their thing and Rochelle had an apartment and a full time job.

She loved her cats but really missed having a dog. One day while browsing through "DOG WORLD" magazine she saw a picture of a Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever from Laura Grossman's Cinnstar Kennel. There was also an ad from Sylvan Kennel in Massachusetts. She called and inquired about the possibilities of a female. September of '83 Neil drove to Baltimore, MD. with Sylvan's Golden Charmer (Karen). He promised Rochelle we would all be back for this Show in October.

In California, Laura Grossman and her Toller, Cinnstar's American Widgeon were on stand-by for the very long flight East. Laura had bred, raised and shown Shelties in conformation and obedience for a number of years. She had purchased her first Toller, Westerlea's Cinnstar Eric from Alison and Roy Strang of British Columbia, Canada.

Saturday morning, October 26th, we struggled to ringside with Tollers going in every direction. Neil kept a tight rein on Zonker, (Sylvan's Duke Wellington) a big powerful dog and barely leash trained, whose only desire was to do everything fast, faster, fastest, and to constantly "fetch". As we approached the ring, Neil informed me that I would never be able to handle this dog.

Rochelle had not handled a dog in years, had gained a little weight, and had a bad knee. John looked the part in his brown suit, shiny shoes and dapper tie but didn't have a clue as to what was going on. Yours truly was not much better than John. As for Sue Doherty, she had never been to a dog show in her life, didn't own a dog though she had volunteered to help train one of my dogs at class, but was game to help in any way. Marile sat in a chair with her foot up and was well underway with a "stress" headache.

We were trying to decide how four people could show eight dogs when a happy, laughing voice said, "Could you use a hand"?

Yes, yes, yes! Virginia Doyle, breeder, owner, handler of Golden Retrievers had shown earlier and had returned to ringside to watch the balance of the judging. She never stopped laughing and even the Judge had a smile as she helped us through the routine.

Monica Gladesenski, a friend of Rochelle's and a breeder, owner, handler of GS Pointers had also returned to watch the judging and lent a hand. She was young and strong and offered to take Zonker. Neil breathed a sigh of relief.

I'm sure to the casual observer we looked somewhat like a "Three Stooges" production. John, Sue and I went in and out of the ring when told. We were very pleased if we were given a ribbon even though we weren't always sure what it was for!! When the smoke cleared and the laughter died down Zonker had gone Best of Breed, and Master Jamy MacDuff of Sylvan (Jamy) Best Puppy.

When the show was over and the dogs fed, we all went to Rochelle's apartment for pizza and a cool refreshing drink. Humor ran high as we recalled the wins, the losses, the handling of the dogs (or better said, "how the dogs handled us"). We agreed it had been fun, perhaps we should do this every year!!!

What about starting a club? The ideas grew and flew about, but finally, common sense prevailed and we had to admit there were not enough of us at this time. However, it was decided that this would be an annual event.

The year zoomed by and before we knew it, it was time to depart for Timonium again.

John and Marile drove from Rochester, NY. Laura flew from California. Sue D. (yes, she was still game), Neil and myself drove from MA. Larry and Janice Booth from Annapolis, MD also were there,

Saturday October 27, 1984 a day to remember.

The Show didn't start until noon so a General Meeting was called outside in the sun. In attendance were Lou and Frona Heil, (friends of Rochelle), Virginia Boyle and Monica Gladischewski (our faithful handlers), John, Marile, Laura, Rochelle, Larry and Janice Booth, Neil and myself. Pictures were taken and a general discussion pursued in which it was decided we might consider starting a club.

The meeting was halted because some of us had to dash off to obedience and others had to start grooming dogs.

Sylvan's Rusty Jones took the Breed. While waiting for Group to start the meeting was reconvened. Marile said, "Let's start a Club!" We said, "Why not, what do we have to lose?" All agreed. An organizational meeting was called and after a short discussion it was decided that the club would be called "NOVA SCOTIA DUCK TOLLING RETRIEVER CLUB USA".

Appointed to office on the spot were:

President - Sue Van Sloun (because she talked the most)

Corresponding Secretary - Marile Waterstraat (because she was a librarian and could read and write well and corresponded with little children)

Recording Secretary - Rochelle Yuspa (only had to take notes once a year and was inclined to procrastination).

Treasurer - John Hamilton (because men are usually heads of banks).

West Coast Rep (and a good many States in between) Laura Grossman (because she lived the farthest away).

An hour later Rusty Jones, Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever went BEST IN SHOW.

Club created ... Sails set ... the Toller had landed in America!!!