

The Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever

A Breed in Transition

by James B. Spencer

Babe Ruth started out as a pitcher, but switched to the outfield when it became apparent that the daily demand for his skill with a Louisville Slugger significantly exceeded that for his one-day-in-five rotation as a pitcher. Paul Hornung won the Heisman Trophy as a quarterback at Notre Dame, but had to change to a running back to become a legend for the Green Bay Packers.

Dogs, like people, must continuously adapt to the realities of today to grow — or even survive. The “good old days” are nothing more than the “todays” of another era, and the “todays” of now will become the “good old days” of a later time. We can't stay in the past, nor can we even return to it, except in reveries.

The Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever is a breed with a romantic past. You may have heard stories about the little dog that looks like a cross between a fox and a golden retriever, the dog that lures ducks within shotgun range by its reynard-like antics on shore with a stick. Like most legends, this is not entirely true, but it has given the breed a certain mystique. However, for all the romance surrounding it, the Toller has never been a popular breed, even in its native Canada. The Canadian Kennel Club (CKC) recognized the breed in 1945. Since that time only about 1500 Tollers have been registered. In the United States, where the national breed club (Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever Club — USA) has its own registry, there are only about 60 dogs enrolled today.

In spite of these small numbers, the Toller has attributes that could make it a very popular retriever in the future. First, it is small, 35 to 50 pounds and 18” to 20” at the withers, a

nice size for the reduced living quarters and lot sizes of the typical city-dwelling duck hunter. Second, it is a nice animal to have around: friendly, sensitive, frolicsome and yet docile, almost like a spaniel in temperament. Third, it has good looks similar to those of the immensely popular golden retriever.

The Toller only needs two things to achieve its potential with today and tomorrow's duck hunter: some way to be separated from the part of the tolling legend that is utter nonsense; and an opportunity to demonstrate its usefulness as a working retriever.

First, let's talk about the tolling thing. Like everyone else who has read about the breed, I have long been familiar with the legend, which goes something like this:

From the beginning of time, apparently, foxes have worked in pairs to catch fresh duck dinners. One fox lies in wait while the other lures a raft of ducks to shore with animated play — prancing, running back and forth, tossing a stick and catching it. When the ducks get close enough, the fox lying in ambush pounces on one, and viola! Dinner for two. Centuries ago hunters observed this technique and eventually they developed dogs that look like foxes in order to emulate this technique. With such a dog — so the legend goes — the hunter hides in a blind near a raft of ducks; then, tosses a stick out on shore for his dog; the little dog lures (“tolls”) the ducks right up to the water's edge by performing fox-like antics with the stick: jumping, prancing, tossing and catching it, and so on; then, when the boss shoots the ducks, the Toller retrieves them like any other retriever.

However, the legend just doesn't ring true with anyone

who has worked with retrievers very long. You see, it would be very difficult to train a dog to play with a tossed stick like that without creating a serious retrieving problem. The dog would be inclined to play the same games with the duck instead of returning to the hunter with it. Nasty, nasty bad habit. Playing with a tossed stick is to this return problem what tug-o-war is to hardmouth.

Thus, when I was given the assignment to cover the Toller for WILDFOWL, I set about finding the truth about this tolling legend. I contacted several Toller breeders and trainers, in Canada and in the United States and asked them about it. Long time Toller breeder Arline MacDonald of British Columbia told me that she had never seen a dog actually toll ducks, although she was familiar with the legend. American breeder Sylvia Van Sloun of Massachusetts had never actually seen tolling either. Canadian professional trainer Dennis Robbins, who has worked with a number of Tollers, said he has never seen it either, and that the whole thing sounds like something from a Walt Disney movie. Another long time Toller breeder, Roy Strang of British Columbia, has heard of tolling but has never seen it; however, he referred me to Avery Nickerson of Nova Scotia, who as the reputation of using his dogs for tolling ducks in the old fashioned way.

I called Avery Nickerson, who has been raising, training, and hunting Tollers in his Harbor Lights Kennel in Yarmouth county, Nova Scotia, for most of his 62 years. At first he was not anxious to talk to me because, he said, most of what has been written about the breed in the past has been hog-wash — not his exact term, but as close as I can get in a family magazine. However, after I expressed my concern about the return problem associated with teaching a dog to play with a tossed stick, he warmed up and explained what tolling really is — and always has been — in Yarmouth County, where the breed was developed long ago. The following description is my understanding of what he told me.

To use a toller effectively, the hunter must first build blinds around the lake in places near where ducks tend to raft up. Ideally, each blind should be near a shore where the water is deep right up to the bank, and free of any type of cover, for ducks will approach more readily through deep, open water. At each blind he should beat a path through the cover from the blind to the bank; this path will be used by the dog in tolling. On any given hunting day, the hunter scouts to find the area the ducks are using. He sneaks into the appropriate blind with his dog. Then, he tosses a stick down the path onto the bank and sends his dog to retrieve it — a retrieving dummy can be used if the hunter objects to having his dog retrieve sticks. **THE DOG MAKES A NORMAL RETRIEVE — NO PLAYING WITH THE STICK ON THE RETURN, JUST A NORMAL RETRIEVE.** That is very important. Just a normal, business-like retrieve. However, the Toller breed has been developed to have a frolicsome, merry style; so he exhibits a lot of animation as he retrieves the stick. This seems to attract the ducks. They will normally start swimming towards the bank where they see the lively dog.

If the ducks continue approaching the bank, the hunter just waits until they are within range. However, if they seem reluctant, or if they stop coming, he tosses the stick again for his dog. And so on. Avery said that it seldom takes more than four or five retrieves to bring the birds into range. As you can see, he uses his dog like some hunters use their calls — only when the ducks are hesitant, never when they are coming in nicely.

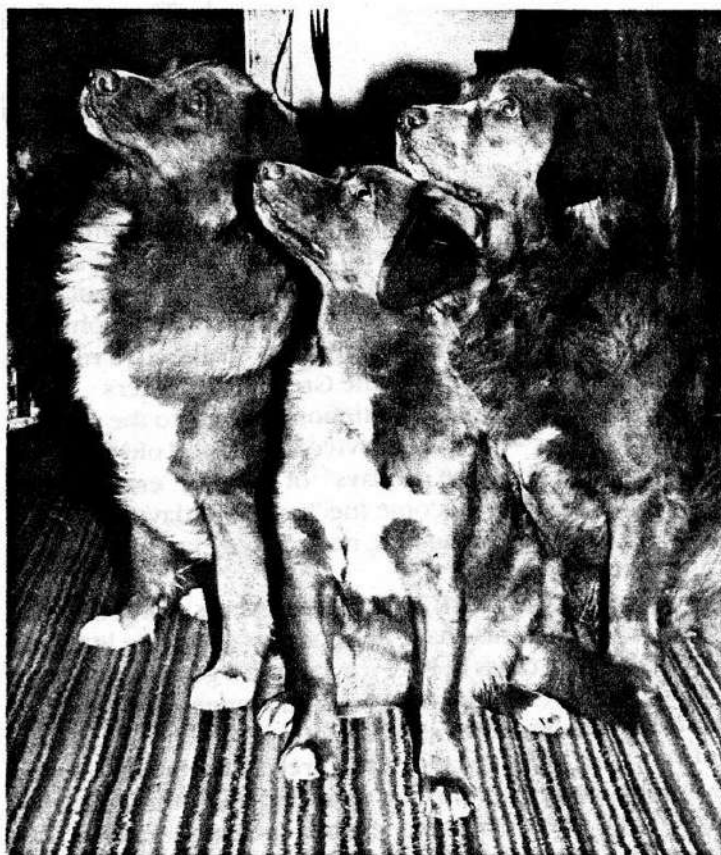
Clearly, such a process would not interfere with a retriev-

er's normal training. As a matter of fact, it is just part of that training, for all the dog is doing is retrieving a stick or dummy. No antics or playing with it, as has been written so often.

Avery told me that the breed was developed right there in Yarmouth county, probably back in the 19th century. It was bred to look like a fox because the idea for tolling came from the way foxes lure ducks to shore. A white tip to the tail is especially prized because of its higher visibility against the dark background. Is this fox-like appearance necessary for success? Who knows. Could a Labrador, or a Chessie, or a golden be used as a tolling dog? Again, who knows? Maybe it would work with any breed, but it apparently works with a dog that looks like a fox, so why experiment?

Tolling sounds like a wonderful way to hunt ducks. No decoys to lug around. No calls to freeze up or otherwise go sour at the wrong time. You don't even have to get up early, for you can't do much good until the birds are rafted up somewhere in the middle. You don't have to shiver in the blind long, for either they come in or they don't, and they make up their minds very early in the routine. If they refuse, you go somewhere else and try with a different raft.

The trouble is that there aren't too many places where tolling will work. Obviously, the river jump shooter has no use for it; nor has the guy who hunts small ponds. Even on big water there are problems. For example, if there are a number of hunters scattered around the lake banging away at decoying or passing ducks, the raft will be too nervous to swim into the tolling dog. In other words, you need big water, rafted ducks, plus peace and quiet — a rare combination on most American lakes anymore.



Three Tollers showing variations in white markings that is typical of the breed. The flashy white gives greater visibility and animation to their tolling.



A Toller showing quite a bit of white. This is acceptable in the breed — unlike other retriever breeds — because of its unique job of tolling ducks.

Therein lies the problem for the breed named the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever. Even if a hunter happens to understand what tolling really is, he is unlikely to be able to benefit from this specialized skill. Thus, many hunters have disregarded the breed. However, the Toller can do a lot more than fetch sticks on shore, so for now let's forget about tolling and concentrate on what the Toller has to offer today's wildfowl hunter.

Physically, the breed was designed for today. It is small compared to the six recognized retriever breeds, which means it requires less space and less food. The Toller is also unusually hale and hardy, perhaps a result of his Canadian origin. Whatever the reason, he requires little medical attention. All of this economy is nice for the average American duck hunter, who lives in town on a small plot and supports about 1.2 families (the .2 from previous nestings).

Tollers have the true retriever double coat, the outer coat for water-proofing, the inner for insulation. The outer coat is similar to, but functionally superior to that of the golden retriever. It has the same color range (with attractive white points), but it is much shorter, much less apt to pick up burrs, and much more water repellent. The Toller is highly tolerant of cold water, as would be expected of a dog developed in Nova Scotia.

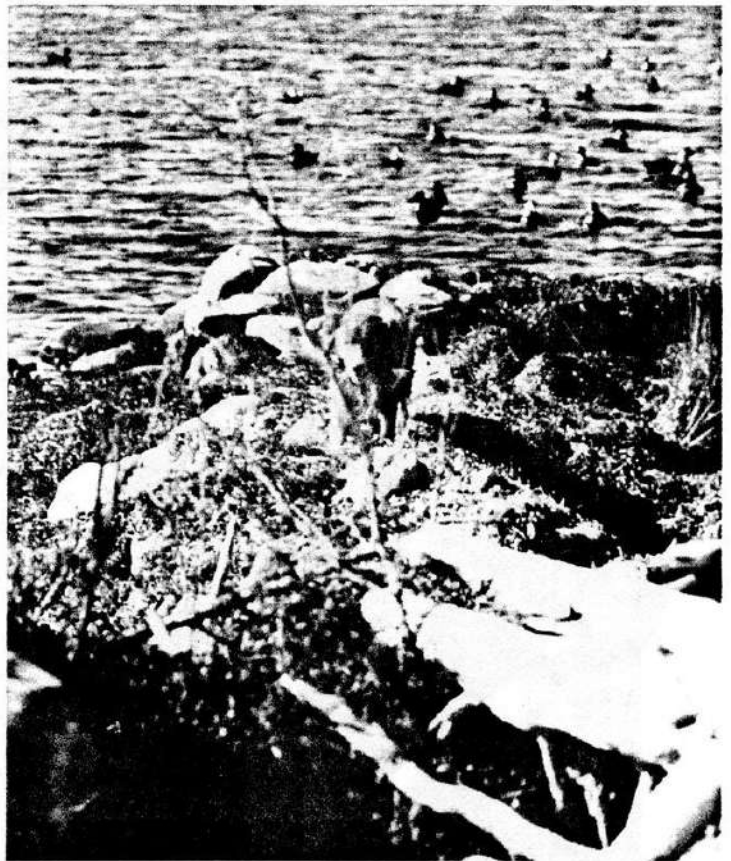
The Toller temperament is difficult to describe. They are soft and sensitive. They are stubborn as Missouri mules. They are merry and frolicsome. They are quiet and docile. They love people. They are naturally obedient, but they resist any excess of discipline. This endlessly contradictory disposition can only be understood in its historic context.

The Toller is a "natural" dog. It was developed in Nova Scotia by ordinary but dedicated hunters intent on bagging waterfowl. The breed was not developed by the English gentry with their gamekeepers, nor by their wealthy American mimics with professional trainers. What these dogs do, they do naturally, just as they come from their dam's womb, not because some pro has spent twelve months a year for several years forcing them to do it.

They are natural retrievers. Every part of their job demands this. Tolling — the retrieving of a tossed stick — is a part of this natural retrieving instinct. Ditto for fetching ducks. Even the breed's tolerance of cold weather and water is part of their breeding.

They are naturally obedient, too. The Nova Scotia duck hunters didn't have the time or inclination to take their dogs through extensive obedience drills just to get them under control. That had to be bred in, and it was. They are not roamers; they are sensitive to the everyday requirements of their owners, whether in the duck blind or around the house. Easy to live with. Easy to hunt with.

On the other hand, they had to have an attractive way of retrieving for their tolling to be effective. Thus, they were bred to be merry and frolicsome in their movements. Not wild and difficult to control like some retrievers, but just animated in everything they do. There is no other breed that can remain quiet for so long and then show so much pizzazz when sent on a retrieve. That is what the Nova Scotia duck hunters needed, and over the years they selectively bred until they got it.



A Toller actually tolling ducks — no, those aren't decoys! Notice the dog is making a normal retrieve, not playing with the stick on shore as has been claimed so often.

Photos by Arline MacDonald

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In all of this, the characteristics that were needed were bred in, not grafted on with training. If you use a Toller the way he was intended to be used, you can almost take him out of the original wrapping and hunt him. As I said, he is a natural dog.

However, if you try to impose a different level of control on him, you will be dealing with a Missouri mule. He knows instinctively what he should be doing, and to hell with any idiot that says otherwise! In this he is not unlike another natural breed, the Chesapeake Bay Retriever. Breeds that were developed to do certain things naturally can be stubborn when their nature is opposed or redirected by a trainer — especially a trainer used to working with the breeds developed for trainability, like the Labrador and Golden Retrievers.

The Toller is a hunter's dog, rather than a trainer's dog. It minds naturally; it retrieves naturally; it hits the water naturally. It will probably never take those long straight lines to blind retrieves that are so impressive in the Open stake at field trails; it probably won't allow the handler to select the sequence of marked retrieves; it will resist whistle and arm signals that contradict its instincts. However, it will do all the things most of us need a duck dog to do with little training. It will sit by the blind quietly; it will mark the falls; it will retrieve them in whatever sequence seems natural; and it will accept handling (whistle and arm signals) when all else fails.

The new hunting retriever tests are far better suited to the Toller's talents than are field trails. However, at this time Tollers can only be run in one of the three forms of hunting tests — those sponsored by the North American Hunting Retriever Association (NAHRA). The breed is not recognized by either the American Kennel Club or the United Kennel Club, so Tollers are not allowed in the tests sponsored by these two registries. While this is certainly a tem-

porary problem, it does limit the opportunities for Toller exposure in hunting circles.

These hunting tests require upland game hunting, with the dog hunting before and to the gun — true quartering is not really required, just decent hunting and flushing. The Toller has always done this, again almost without training, for the Nova Scotia duck hunters usually hunt grouse and other upland game birds, too.

If you are in the market for a general purpose hunting dog, one that will hunt ducks and upland game birds with little training, and one that fits very comfortably into the modern American home, you might consider the Toller. He is a dog in transition. He has been very successful on a relatively small scale with his tolling technique; he could be on the verge of much greater success as the modern city-dweller's utility hunting buddy. Babe Ruth benefited from such an adaptation; so did Paul Hornung; and so did another fellow you may have heard of, Ronald Reagan.

More information is available from the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever Club (USA), whose secretary is: Marile Waterstraat; 63 Blue Ridge Road; Penfield, NY 14526. In Canada information is available from either: Avery Nickerson (Harbor Lights Kennel; Yarmouth, Nova Scotia); or Allison and Roy Strang (2456 141st Street; Surrey, B.C. V4A 4K2.)

(Jim Spencer's book, "Retriever Training Tests", may be ordered from WILDFOWL magazine's "Duck Hunter's Bookshelf". Autographed copies may be ordered from: Jim Spencer, Dept. W, 923 Valleyview Lane, Wichita, KS 67212, for \$16.95 for 4th class or \$18.95 for 1st class mail.)
