

# Robert Ecker:

## USCSDA and NBHA Handler of the Year

By Lisa Price

**H**e's too small," people said. "Nice running dog, but he just doesn't quite have what it takes. Concentrate on some of your other young dogs that show a little more potential."

Pennsylvania trainer Robert Ecker of Midnight Kennels listened, but didn't take the advice. "Taz [an English setter] had zero puppy placements, one third-place in a derby, and as a first-year shooting dog had one placement," Ecker said. "He was going on four, and he had no success to speak of – but I felt he had what it takes and just needed time to mature."

In a nutshell, Taz and his owner, Phil Gould of Bloomsburg, New Jersey are examples of the types of combinations – good dogs and owners - that have led to Ecker's successes. In 2010, Ecker earned the distinction of being named the pro handler of the year for both the U.S. Complete Shooting Dog Association and the National Bird Hunters Association.

"I told Phil that I saw something in Taz, and he stood behind me and trusted me," Ecker said. "I want to win – and I feel I can see what a dog can be in the future, and know if I can win with a dog."

Taz went on to win eight championships.

Ecker, who is 42, had been trialing his own dogs for many years before becoming a part-time pro trainer in 1994, while hanging onto his full-time job as a small appliance repairman. He went full time as a pro in 1997. In 1998, he won the Northeastern Woodcock Championship with Ecker's Midnight Light. It was a busy year as he also got married to his wife Kimberly and moved to the country. The Eckers soon had a son, Michael, who is now 10. His kennel name is based on the name of his first setter, which was nearly completely white. When he asked his mother for her ideas on names for the dog, she jokingly said, "How about Midnight?"

In his early years, Ecker immersed himself in trials to learn all he could. "Whenever I went to a trial, I would walk or ride every brace so I could learn from the handlers," he said. "Names that come to mind are Dave Hughes [Pennsylvania], Scott Chaffee [Michigan], and Jim Tande [Minnesota]. In recent years I've enjoyed running with pros like Tony Bingham, Travis Gelhaus, and Gary Malzone. Even though we're professionals and competing, the camaraderie is great."

The pro handler awards he won this year are the result of numerous wins and





*Robert Ecker and Taz in a recent workout.*



placements, beginning in November 2009 when he was runner-up at the U.S. Complete Northeast Regional Championships, held at Flaherty Field Trial Grounds in Connecticut. Ecker was runner-up with Elhew's Signature, a pointer owned by Pedraq Kazic of Long Island. A week later, competing in the National Bird Hunter Northeast Regional Championship at South Carolina's Cooper Black State Park, Ecker won with Foxfire, a female pointer owned by Doug Harris of Vestal, New York.

After the holiday season, Ecker was back on the road to Cooper Black to run in the U.S. Complete National Championship, where he won the Southeast Regional with a setter named Merritt's Pearl, owned by Terry Merritt. More competitions and wins clicked by in short order:

- The U.S. Open Classic, which was part of the U.S. Complete National Amateur Championship in Wilmington, North Carolina. Ecker won with Slim Jim, a pointer owned by Doug Harris, and took

runner-up with Mask of Zorro, a setter owned by Paul Grogger of Vase Creek, Arizona.

- The National Bird Hunter Southeast Regional at Cooper Black - Ecker took runner-up with Foxfire.

- National Bird Hunter National Championship at Cooper Black - Ecker won with Merritt's Pearl and took runner-up with Merritt's Bruno.

- U.S. Complete Bob Lee Classic, Virginia - Ecker won with Porter Meadow Elroy, a pointer owned by Jim Bush of Connecticut, and took runner-up with Elhew Signature. The event also included the U.S. Complete Futurity, where Ecker took runner-up with Richfield Tootsie, a pointer owned by Jim Frost of Edinboro, Pennsylvania.

- National Bird Hunter North Central Regional Championship at Percy Priest Field Trial grounds outside Nashville, Tennessee - Ecker won with Honky Tonk Gigilo, owned by John Everett of South Carolina.

- National Bird Hunter Futurity - Ecker won with



*Robert and owner Terry Merritt with Champion Merritt's Pearl after her victory at the U.S. Complete National Open Championship*



*Robert touching up Grouse Woods Reese during a workout.*

Cas Tiny, a pointer owned by Jim Castagna of Connecticut, and took runner-up with the pointer Grouse Woods Erin's Duke, a pointer owned by Jack Brobsts of Bangor, Pennsylvania.

– U.S. Complete Great Lakes Regional at Ionia, Michigan – Ecker won with Elhew Signature bringing the dog his fifth title while still only three.

– Empire Championship, New York – Ecker won the runner up title with Elhew Signature.

According to Ecker the National Bird Hunter National Championship at Cooper Black was the most physically demanding of the trials. “There were 27 entries, and I had 14, and in the first series everybody runs for one hour – I ran 14 dogs in two days,” Ecker explained. “The judges call back six dogs for the final day, when the braces are two hours each.”

“It was warm, up into the 80s, in the sand hills,” he said. “The first day I walked 14 hours, and I had three dogs [winner Merritt's Pearl, runner-up Merritt's Bruno and Class Act Liz, owned by Rich Warters of Pinehurst, North Carolina] make the finals – so I had one in each brace.”

He stated that one of his most gratifying experiences was the runner-up placement in the U.S. Complete Futurity, with Richfield Tootsie. “I won

my first championship as a pro with one of Jim Frost's dogs, a pointer female named Sky High Libby. He's one of those great owners who was with me early, was out of the sport for a little while, but recently came back – so it felt great to win for him again.”

“It took me a couple years of going south to learn the grounds and what I needed to do to be successful,” he said. “I also learned that it takes the dogs a minimum of three weeks to acclimate to the terrain and scenting conditions, learn where to find birds – it takes time.”

And time is one of those things Ecker values, “It takes a long time to learn enough to become successful and I had many good pros and handlers help me over the years – Ralph Fitzmorris, from New England, and a few Pennsylvania people, Pete DeAngeles, Tom Ginger, and Roger Boser,” Ecker said. “It takes years for a pro to get going and get established, and I've been fortunate to have many clients who stood behind me – Larry Craig, Doug Harris, Carlton Neal, Jim Millett, Troy Terlizzi. I have a deep string of dogs right now and I'm already looking forward to the fall trials. My advice is that it takes time to win – when you don't, don't give up.”