



# THE DUDE ABIDES



**M**y introduction to NAVHDA goes back almost 10 years ago. Our family had just tragically lost our first Weimaraner, JC, when a friend of mine, recently back from the Weimaraner Nationals, raved about a young dog named Diesel, owned by Anne Tyson. In later life, Diesel rose to fame as the only dog in AKC history of any breed to become a Quintuple Champion. I began my research and found out that Anne was a partner with Judi Voris, who began the breeding program known as Regen Weimaraners in the State of Washington. I loved the fact that Regen dogs were bred for field as well as for conformation and were true “versatile dogs”. I was fortunate to get on a list for a puppy, and on June 30, 2004, the “Moon” litter was born. I flew out eight weeks later to pick up my little girl (CH Regen’s Moon Over Miami VCD2 RE OAP, MX MXJ XF JH NRD VX3, NAVHDA NA, Prize III, aka “Mia”). Soon thereafter a whole new world of dog sports opened up for us, including the field. Mia’s father was an AKC Field Champion, and I was curious to explore the world of field and hunt training. As a city slicker lawyer from Miami, this would prove to be a challenging adventure. I had never held, much less dizzied, a quail in my life. As luck would have it, I became acquainted with a gentleman who had been training bird dogs for many years. His name was David Kresphane, and he agreed to evaluate Mia. I will never forget the day when he tested her for birdiness, and I saw firsthand Mia scent and point a planted bird. After she was successfully exposed to gun fire, Dave looked at me with his dry Maine demeanor and simply said, “She will do.”

About this time, I was introduced to NAVHDA. My breeder had mentioned the organization as a font of invaluable training information and friendly people. I discovered that the Florida

Palmetto Chapter trained one weekend a month in Lake Wales, which was about three-and-a-half hours north of Miami. With Dave located in Jupiter (two-and-a-half hours north), I soon learned that if I wanted to pursue hunting and field work, I would need to travel! Once informed that NAVHDA had a testing program, I signed up for the Natural Ability test.

For someone with book smarts, I was sure dumb when it came to NAVHDA. Our first test was certainly memorable. Never having read the rules, I naively thought the NA tested raw, untrained natural ability. The judges seemed surprised when I told them that Mia had never been in the field, and that her lone exposure was a single planted bird in Dave’s backyard. Undaunted, they encouraged me to “take Mia out and introduce her to her instinct!” The judges helped us get downwind of a bird, and Mia did the rest. We did not prize in that NA, as we had never tracked and predictably flunked that portion. Mia was still quite young, so I was able to re-test her. This gave me the ability to attend regular training sessions (and a weekend judge’s seminar) and meet other NAVHDA members. Looking back, I must have stuck out with my chrome-wheeled Armada and yuppie sensibility. If there were laughs, they were good-natured and not at my expense. I tried to fit in, but my comments usually raised an eyebrow or two. Being around so many women in the sport of agility, I was used to raising my voice to a higher pitch. On top of that, I had come up with a crazy hunt command for Mia. One day I was walking out to the field in Lake Wales with Mia accompanied by a NAVHDA member who was assisting me. As we walked, I exhorted Mia to “find the birdies.” My mentor placed a hand on my shoulder and gently said to me, “Joe, I do not believe you will want to use that expression in your NA

testing.” Soon thereafter, this metro-sexual began to learn the lingo, and, before long, my dog was “fetching” and “kenneling up.” Of course, there were still lessons to learn. One day, quite proud of myself, I exclaimed that I had just purchased a pair of nice field khakis, but that I was perturbed by how wrinkled they became. The gentleman who took in this comment kindly did not respond.

Although Mia went on to earn an NA Prize III and her AKC Junior Hunter, it became apparent that she would not easily tolerate traditional field training correction. Reluctantly, I shifted her focus to agility, tracking, conformation, obedience, and Frisbee, where she proved to be an accomplished and versatile dog, just as my breeder had predicted. Still, I always wondered what could have been had we been able to develop Mia’s field potential. As Mia aged she began to show stress in certain obedience and agility situations. I knew it was for the best that she gracefully retire from competition. About this time last year, I approached my breeder with a list of requirements, not the least of which was that I needed a bold dog that could stand up to my quirks—a demanding Type A personality but anxiety prone in the ring. I knew I had mightily contributed to Mia’s stress and, much as I was determined to “work on myself”, “enjoy the journey”, and so on, I knew I would also need a confident dog that could make up for my deficiencies.

The spring litter was born May 14, 2013. Eight weeks later, I flew to Washington to pick up my boy. I had given a lot of thought to his name and knew I wanted something low-key that would take the pressure off both of us. I remembered a Coen brothers’ flick I had seen years back, “The Big Lebowski,” starring Jeff Bridges. His character had style, confidence, and an easy demeanor. In short, he was stress free. A dog with these attributes would certainly be the tonic to my hyper anxiety. Thus, Regen’s Springtime Abides, aka the “Dude,” came into my life.

It was not long after we arrived home that I began to review the three days I had spent with Anne. We had taken our eight-week-old pups to their first park and had even started off their tracking careers. Anne was aware I wanted to do agility, but also knew I had promised myself that I would follow my dog’s talent and instinct over any preplanned agenda. Of course, being the over-achiever that I am, it was not hard for Anne to offer an innocent comment that would spur my curiosity and ego. As Dude larked in the park with his siblings, discovering new smells and textures, he often separated from the pack and explored. Anne looked at me during one of these moments and suggested that I might think of field trialing Dude. Well, of course, that is all it took to get my motor running.

Within a few months, I introduced Dude to birds, and soon thereafter, we made the trek north to work with Dave again. Dave seemed very excited with Dude, no small compliment as he had worked with and trained English pointers and had competed in the very competitive AFT venues. When pressed, he admitted that he had not expected Dude to demonstrate such good field potential. The respect factor seemed to carry forward to our first field trials despite the fact that a local breeder, Susan Wallace (Silberkinder Weims), had enjoyed success with her Weimaraners. I knew Dude came from good lineage—his father, Quinn, and famous grandfather, Diesel, had both been AKC Field Champions, and his mother, Clover, came from a breeder in Montana (PM Weimaraners) with many NAVHDA

prized dogs to her credit, and who actually hunted with her Weimaraners every season. Still, I felt our breed had something to prove.

It was not long before Dude started to understand the “game,” and by his second puppy stake, he had found his way to fourth place. Each time we placed (and there were many more), I took the time to ask the judges what they saw and how we could improve. To a person, they all strongly encouraged me to continue. It finally came together at a Vizsla club-sponsored field trial where Dude bested ten other dogs to win an all-breed Open Puppy stake and his first two AKC Field Championship points. About this time, I decided that Dude would be a great candidate for NAVHDA training and decided to rejoin the local Palmetto Chapter. Some of the folks I had met eight years earlier with Mia were still around, like Pat Saunders and Jay Rudy. Others, like the personable Chapter Secretary, Jo Ann Rogala, were new to me. All, including members that I had never known before, were nice to a fault, just as I had remembered from years back. Soon I was attending monthly training sessions with a goal of having Dude ready for his NA test.

This time I was determined to train right. The tracking portion had always been the most difficult and I wanted to learn new training techniques. I had been simultaneously AKC tracking with Dude and I could see that he was getting confused with the human and bird scent. One NAVHDA member had a great suggestion—that I tie a very long rope to the dead pheasant and then walk to the end of the rope to a right, 90 degree angle, to where I started until I reached the end. From there, he instructed me to walk a radius around to directly in front of the starting point (with the rope taut). When I reached the apogee, I was then to pull the bird toward me. This technique worked perfectly. Later, I was assisted with a live bird and learned the trick of



JOE AND DUDE WITH THE JUDGES AT THE ALL-BREED OPEN PUPPY STAKE.

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tying an empty plastic bottle to the bird's leg so you could use the bird for further training.

With the field trial success behind me, and with much better training this time for tracking, I was starting to get cautiously confident. But there was one remaining portion that was becoming unnerving, and I was worried I would unconsciously pass this stress along to Dude. For whatever reason, Dude did not take to the water as easily as had Mia. The more he hesitated, the more I worried he would balk. In order to get him over it, I placed him in an "Adventure Camp" where the dogs were given play activities while their owners toiled at work. Due to liability issues, the dogs were fitted with flotation vests with long check cords attached for further safety. One day, while training in the field, I told Dave I was frustrated with Dude's water work. He suggested we head off to a nearby pond to work on swimming. Well, all I can say is Dave is a "no nonsense" trainer who once proposed to me that I put a quail at the end of the agility weave poles to speed Mia's path! When Dave observed that Dude did not want to enter the water to retrieve the bumper, he cocked his head (as only Dave can do) and asked how I had been training Dude. When I mentioned "Adventure Camp," he almost blew a gasket. His exact response was "Weims do not need those damn water wings to swim!" In a jiffy, he had a quail in his hand and lofted it out into the pond. It took a few quail, but within minutes Dude was swimming out to the middle of the pond and retrieving the bird to hand. Dude would never again attend "Adventure Camp."

The day finally arrived for our NA test. I was already apprehensive about the swim portion. The week before, I had my last opportunity to test Dude in the pond at the training site. I found a suitable area free of lily pads and threw a bumper. Dude swam and collected the bumper without hesitation. I then repeated one more time for good measure. Again, it was a success. Well, imagine my surprise the day of the testing when I was told that the entire pond was now covered with lily pads. I chided myself for not trying to train in the pads the week before. I was sure the pads would prove a fatal distraction, and I fretted that this portion of the test (which I considered by far the easiest) could be our downfall. About this time Jo Ann heard my muttering and suggested that I chill out—not an easy task for someone whose friends had often reminded him that he, not his dog, needed to ingest the "Rescue Remedy."

Well, I did not have long to marinate in my anxiety, as we were the second dog scheduled for the morning. I had not bothered to read the rules (more on that later), and was surprised when three judges walked out to the field and one nice lady introduced herself to me as the "handler's judge." Well, no doubt I needed some "handling," but I wisely kept that bit of insight to myself. When they told me to release my dog, Dude exploded out into the field. I was so proud of his confidence and ability to quickly work the field. Within a very short time, he was on point. For the next 15 minutes he proceeded to find and point bird after bird. A few times he got behind me, but with one shot of my whistle he came about. Once, while he was chasing a flushed quail, the judge asked me to call him back. I was not sure he would break from the hunt, but he stopped almost in his tracks and sped directly back to me. At one juncture, he was at least 100-120 yards ahead on point. This was no ordinary point. This was text book leg up and high tail. I was so enamored that I could not help myself and exclaimed. "Man, that is impressive!" I quickly realized that sounded totally self-serving and sheepishly looked at the judge

as if to say "My bad, I was not trying to brown nose you, really!" Right at the point my big head was about to explode with pride the unexpected happened, and I heard one judge say, "That dog is limping. Handler, call him back!"

Indeed, Dude had slowed completely down and could be observed to favor one of his legs. When he approached me, I examined him for thorns or anything else that could explain the injury, but found nothing. I took the opportunity to water him, but he was never the same, and basically trotted ten yards ahead of me. Having neglected to read the rules, I was unsure what this meant. We were probably 16 minutes into our 20 minute run. We continued to walk forward slowly as the judges behind us convened. Within a few seconds, I heard the senior judge call out, "We have seen enough, you are excused." I was uncertain if we had passed or not at that point. Dude had done some superlative work, but I did not know if he would be penalized for not finishing the entire hunt portion of the test. When I got back to the crate, I examined him with the help of a friend and we discovered that he had broken off a nail at the quick. Ouch! Since I did not know if this would be a lingering injury that could keep us out of the tracking portion, I decided to keep him hydrated and calm and just hope for the best when our names were called.

We did not have long to wait for the tracking portion. When our turn was called, we strolled confidently to the area where the judges had congregated. Dude was pulling on the lead, and I took that as a sign that his prey motor would overcome any pain from the toe injury. When we arrived at the start, the judges motioned to where the pheasant had been released. I looked down, expecting to see a veritable pile of flight feathers (as we were accustomed to in training). To my surprise, there was a very small bed of feathers which threw me off for a second. Undaunted, I tried to direct Dude to the feathers to make sure his focus was on the task at hand. For whatever reason, I could not get him to dip his nose. Still I was not too worried as he was looking directly ahead, and I remembered my training tips to make sure that my dog was prepared to cast out in front. I held his collar, took a few steps in the direction of the indicated track and released him with a forward motion of my arm. To use the parlance of bowling, I threw a "gutter ball" as, to my utter surprise and consternation, he immediately angled left and off the track the judges had directed the pheasant had taken. Well, there was nothing I could do at this point. The handler judge encouraged me to look straight ahead. For some reason, I was calm and confident. I told the judge that if Dude ever worked back to the path in front of me I was sure he would catch the scent and track accordingly. The suspense lasted a minute or two, but seemed like an eternity. When Dude finally got out in front of me, his head swiveled, and he was off to the races with nose to the ground in classic tracking mode. He soon arrived to an area about 30 yards ahead of me and explored a thick palmetto bush. The judges all exclaimed, "That is where the pheasant went!" Pleased, but puzzled as the distance was so near to us (and Dude acted as if he was on the bird), I asked whether the bird was hiding in the bush. The judges responded with a quick "no" and I was met with our next "surprise."

I had not really focused on the terrain ahead of me until this moment. What I saw was concerning, to say the least. After the palmetto bush, the light terrain gave way completely to white sugar sand for at least another 30-40 yards before disappearing into a thick wooded area. Well, I had not thought to track my dog on sand, and I could see his frustration mount. He whirled about the palmetto bush and looked out into the sand but took no steps



forward. This went on for a while, and I could hear the judges behind me discuss whether Dude, until that point, had been hunting or tracking. My early confidence now evaporated. I prepared for Dude to be called off, not knowing if we had done enough in this portion of the test to qualify. Within seconds, my fears were confirmed as the judges said, "Call your dog back." Thankfully, before I could utter the words, Dude decided he had enough of the "palmetto dance" and took a few strides forward into the sand. All of us watched intently. Then, with head down, Dude barreled over the track and disappeared into the woods. Within seconds, the senior judge shouted, "He is on point, I can see him!" Moments later, Dude busted out of the thicket with the live pheasant in his mouth. I could not have been prouder of my boy. He showboated for a few seconds, but then dutifully came back to my whistle call. I felt on top of the world. Now if we could only get through the dreaded water work, we would hopefully be on our way to a qualification!

We all broke for lunch and I was left to fret over the challenge of the lily pads. Jo Ann had enough of me at this point and told me to buck up and believe in my dog. I realized she was right, and my nervousness would only make matters worse. I was convinced that I needed to come up with a game plan to center my focus. I remembered our training and reminded myself to get Dude into high drive mode with the bumper before I released him into the water. Lunch finished, and we were shortly called to complete the last portion of the test. I purposely avoided looking at the water. I picked out his favorite orange bumper and commenced a game of tug and keep away. Only when I could see that he was in high drive mode did I approach the water and toss the bumper. There was a brief moment of truth as Dude approached the shore . . . would he push through the pads and swim, or would he falter? To my disappointment, he began to run the shore. At that moment, I instinctively knew the next 15 seconds would determine if we would have a qualifying score or would fail. Either I trusted my dog and our training, or I did not. Without hesitation, I called out to the judges to confirm if I could reach for another bumper. I then grabbed a bumper and re-engaged Dude in a spirited tug-of-war. As soon as he released the bumper, I cast it out into the pond. Dude rewarded my confidence and dutifully entered the water and paddled to the bumper and swam back to shore. Ahh, the sweet smell of success—we were home free! But no, as Dude came to shore the judges told me I had not deposited the bumper far enough into the pond to clearly demonstrate that Dude was swimming, not simply using his long legs to bound across the shallows. This produced a delicate challenge. I needed

to toss the bumper farther but if I became overzealous I would jeopardize my dog's confidence. The bumper had to land into the "goldilocks zone," not too close so as to disallow the throw, and not too far so as to make him doubt his resolve.

This dialogue in my head only took a scant few seconds as I did not want to waste the precious momentum we had gathered until that point. I followed the same routine as before and flung the bumper farther into the pond. Just as I had hoped, Dude ventured into the water without hesitation, and this time it was clear for all to see that he was swimming to his objective. The craziness with his first entry into the water must have confused me, as I was prepared to celebrate as Dude came to shore, when I heard the judges call out that they needed another successful swim in order to conclude. Of course, I reminded myself, the rules called for two demonstrations of swimming prowess! Convinced that if I hesitated Dude might "react," I once again revved him up. However, before I could initiate my toss, the judges, for good measure, directed me to throw the bumper ten yards to the left of my previous throw. They had determined that the shore line dropped off precipitously and Dude would be forced to "swim" almost from the moment he entered the water. Well, Dude was having nothing to do with nay-sayers and doubters at this point and crashed into the lily pads and churned towards his precious bumper. Now, I thought to myself, that is a bird dog! When Dude emerged from the water, I let out a whoop and began to party with him.

Now we were officially done with our NA test, and my 10-month-old Weimaraner and I were left to await the judges' decision. As in past tests at this chapter, the results were revealed right before a tasty barbeque put on by club members after the test had concluded. We awaited the evaluation results with the crowd of handlers all anxious to see how their team had performed that day. I was more than a bit nervous when they called out Dude's name. At this point I was still not 100 percent certain about the requirements of the hunt portion of the test. Finally they started to read off the evaluation card. Everything after that was a bit of a blur. I do recall them saying four a lot and then at the end—the best announcement I could hope to hear—The Dude had earned a Prize I and a maximum score of 112 points! I was exuberant. We, as a team, had come through, and I could not wait to call my breeder to give her the great news. Walking back to my vehicle, I thought about all of the dogs that had preceded Dude, and the lessons they had taught me. Dude was now teaching me a new life lesson. I gazed down at him before he crated up, and he looked up to me as if to say, "Pops, step back, take a cool breeze and enjoy the journey. The Dude abides!"