

# GMHR-I HPK's Hi-Brass Toby



As I write this, Toby is rapidly approaching his 13<sup>th</sup> birthday. As a performance dog he is a shell of his former self. Few people remember what a dynamic hunter Toby was in his prime, or the courage, resilience, heart and athleticism the he displayed effortlessly and regularly. I WILL NEVER FORGET.

Toby deserves credit for turning me into a dog trainer, the existence of Hi-Brass Labs, and the creation of numerous hunting lab enthusiasts. He was my first true performance retriever. I acquired Toby to be a grouse hunting dog for my friends and I who at the time would hunt countless hours in the Pennsylvania woods for a few meager shot opportunities. I thought we needed a dog to help us find birds and after much consideration I decided to get a pointing lab. It wouldn't take long for Toby to convert me from a hunter with a dog to a "dog man" who hunts.

Before Toby even arrived on the scene I began reading books and articles on hunting retrievers. One of the first was Richard Wolters' Water Dog. While this may not be the prototypical training guide for retrievers, it gave me an appreciation of what these fine animals are capable of achieving, and created my insatiable appetite to develop the skills of my dogs.

Toby was quite the perfect dog for a neophyte entering the realm of retriever training and hunt test games. He absolutely loved to train. He had the heart of a lion. He had not an ounce of quit in him. He was tough and smart and wanted to make it all work for me. Somehow he managed to sift off all my training mistakes, endure 3x a day training sessions, absorb all my corrections fair or not, and work his way to a NAHRA Grand Master Hunting Retriever title.

When Riley arrived on the scene Toby continued to train hard. He wanted to do everything the puppy was doing to learn to be a real retriever. Toby went through all the training with Riley from simple obedience through transition. At 10 years old Toby would still run Double-T with enthusiasm.

While Toby managed his way to respectable achievement in the hunt test game, he was always first and foremost a hunter. In the pheasant field in his prime he had no peers. He cut his teeth on released

birds on Pennsylvania gamelands but wild birds from Kansas to South Dakota were no match for him. Whether he was hunting for my solo gun or hunting for 4, 5 or 6 guns day after day, Toby loved his work and excelled. Over his career Toby flushed and retrieved several hundred wild pheasants, hundreds of more released pheasants, ruffed grouse, woodcock, sharptails, chukars, ducks and geese.

Toby has meant so much more to me than just a hunting dog. He has been my teammate, my partner, my companion and my best friend. When everything else in my life seemed to be falling apart, he was one thing I could count on. He followed me from Ohio to Oklahoma to Pennsylvania to New York. Along the way we ran field tests and hunted from Virginia to South Dakota. I don't have enough words to describe what Toby has meant to me. I'm lucky and happy to still have him with me as of this writing. He still has the heart and the drive for training and hunting but the years are quickly catching up to him, and so his time afield is limited. Regardless, he will always be at my side, my loyal companion, my best buddy.

I have watched Toby gracefully pass the torch on to "his brother" and step out of the limelight. It's sad to see him as a shell of his former self but I take comfort in knowing that that he gave his all for me, and me for him. We never know when the last retrieve will come, but I have a fond memory of our South Dakota hunt when Toby was 11 years old. By this time his hips were already severely arthritic, and his leg muscles beginning to lose their tone. Riley was entering his prime and showing that he was an extraordinary performer. Toby flushed the first rooster pheasant of trip which I summarily whiffed on. I wondered to myself if I might have missed my last chance to give Toby a wild pheasant to retrieve. During the long days of this hunting trip, most of the work went to Riley, with Toby seeing intermittent light duty. On the afternoon of our last day hunting, I brought Toby out of the truck, and left Riley to take a well earned rest. On that hunt in South Dakota CRP, Toby flushed an old cunning rooster into the air not 20 yards directly in front of me. As the bird rocketed out away from us I swung my Benelli SBE on him and slapped the trigger. In a fraction of a second a cloud of feathers exploded 40 yards in front of us. Toby had his prize and made the retrieve unassisted.



