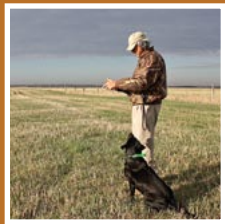


Trial & Success



It's a blustery overcast spring morning on this rolling, grass-blanketed field south of Saskatoon. But the 26 participants in the Saskatoon Retriever Club spring field trial's Open aren't thinking about the weather. They are intent on ensuring their dogs – mainly Labrador retrievers with a few golden retrievers thrown in for good measure – perform to the best of their ability. The competition is of the highest level, the name of the game here is focus.

BY BRUCE MASTERMAN

ONE OF THE HANDLERS, JIM COUCH, 57, has a proven track record of being able to focus – and not just while competing in field trials.

In fact, focus – coupled with a hard-wired drive to challenge himself to succeed – defines Couch's approach to all the important parts of his life. Whether it's raising money for major conservation projects as a member of DUC's national board, managing a potash mine, helping organize and competing in a field trial, or hunkering down in a Saskatchewan marsh waiting for ducks to fly into his decoy spread, failure is not an acceptable option for the personable, soft-spoken Couch.

"I do like to win," he says. "However, I also like to do new things, which means I have to put lots of effort into catch-up when I do something different."

On this mid-May Saturday morning, Couch is intent on keeping his five-year-old black Lab Dusty (proper name Eat My Dust II), on track for the four different field tests planned for the day. In the first test, dogs are

required to retrieve three dead ducks thrown by hidden gunners more than 100 metres away in the tall grass and willow clumps. Following Couch's direction, Dusty aces the test and qualifies to compete in the next event later that morning.

But the plan soon unravels. During the second test, a blind retrieve, Dusty bolts from the start on a straight line her master has pointed with his arm. And almost immediately, Couch realizes he's given Dusty the wrong line. She's far off course from finding the bird she's supposed to retrieve. The dog runs back and forth, while Couch attempts to direct her with piercing whistles and hand signals. Finally, Dusty finds the bird and runs back with it. But for Couch, he knows the day's competition is over for them.

"We're done," he says, disappointed.

In typical fashion though, Couch doesn't blame Dusty. He chastises himself for giving her the wrong line. He knows Dusty has great potential as a field trial competitor, but he also realizes he has lots to learn as a handler before they can start winning trophies.

Above: Jim Couch prepares to fire a dummy for his black Lab Dusty to retrieve, at his home outside of Saskatoon.

Charlene and Jim Couch pose with (left to right) Flame, Dusty and Neko.



© Bruce Masterman (2)

“

Jim’s persistent and very proactive in getting people rallied behind a cause. From Day 1 he’s wanted us to do the right thing. He’s a true-blue DUC supporter who really believes in our mission.

Henry Murkin
Director of conservation programs,
Ducks Unlimited Canada

”

“I am holding her back,” Couch says. “We will get there and we will win her a title, I know that. It just takes me to catch up to her.”

The concept of Jim Couch having to “catch up” is an interesting, and somewhat contradictory, one. He’s more accustomed to leading by example, not following.

Henry Murkin, Ducks Unlimited Canada’s (DUC) director of conservation programs, is keenly aware of that trait, after four years working together on various projects and initiatives since Couch became a DUC national director in 2004.

“Jim’s persistent and very proactive in getting people rallied behind a cause,” Murkin notes. “From Day 1 he’s wanted us to do the right thing. He’s a true-blue DUC supporter who really believes in our mission.”

The seeds of that conservation ethic were planted when Couch was growing up on a grain and cattle farm northeast of the small community of Lucky Lake, on the west side of Lake Diefenbaker in central Saskatchewan. He lived with his parents, Ruth and Dougald, and younger brother Rick. The Couch men all hunted and fished when they weren’t busy growing grain and working with their cattle. It was an arid land back then,

with an unstable water supply. The nearby Luck Lake marsh was often dry during the 1970s. Jim Couch became alarmed by the corresponding loss of wildlife habitat in the area.

“The dry years were catastrophic,” he says. “The wet years were good.”

COUCH HAS MANY FOND MEMORIES OF GROWING up, many related to hunts with his father, his cousin and brother. But perhaps the most exciting is when he went on his first goose hunt at about age 10. Having already hunted sharp-tailed grouse, Hungarian partridge and pheasants, and been involved in jump shoots for ducks, his dad invited him to come hunt for geese in a wheat stubble field one day. Just the two of them, enjoying each other’s company in a goose pit on a warm, sunny September morning. The pair set out about three dozen white-fronted goose decoys.

Several flocks flew by them, completely ignoring their decoy spread. Suddenly, about 40 geese came in low, right toward the father and son. Couch fired and his first goose hit the ground. “I remember what a great feeling it was when I went out and picked it up,” Couch recalls with a broad grin about 45 years later.

Growing up, Couch remembers his father teaching him the need to conserve the land, and the importance of sharing it with wildlife, including ducks. “My dad always said that if you have ducks in fall, you probably had a good summer on the farm,” he says. “Both need water and that makes the synergy real for both.” His father also used to talk about DUC and the habitat work it has done since 1938. At 87, Couch’s father continues to hunt and both parents are fully supportive of DUC.

Couch’s initial contact with DUC came in the 1970s when he helped spearhead a landowners’ group promoting the \$100 million Luck Lake irrigation project, a pressurized pipeline system linked with Lake Diefenbaker. It led to the development of the Luck Lake Heritage Marsh, a DUC-managed project that’s an important staging area for snow and white-fronted geese. DUC put about \$5 million into the project. More than 200 species of migratory birds and 35 butterfly species have been observed at the marsh, which covers 6,000 acres of wetlands and 800 upland acres.

The experience prompted Couch to become a DUC supporter. “Ducks Unlimited is one of the few organizations that can demonstrate a significant efficiency of use when it comes to dollars earned and what is spent in protecting habitat,” he says. “The volunteer base works very hard at that and they all need to be very proud of that accomplishment.”

In 1994, then-DUC Saskatchewan director Ron Hicks talked him into joining the committee organizing

Saskatoon’s annual spring fundraising banquet. “It’s been a wild ride ever since,” Couch says.

By that time, Couch was a married father of two and was busy working as manager of group services in the corporate office of Potash Corporation of Saskatchewan Inc. (PotashCorp). In 2002, he was promoted to general superintendent at Patience Lake Division and is now general manager of that division, overseeing about 80 employees at the mine, about 25 kilometres east of Saskatoon. Couch has been with the company since 1973.

In whatever spare time he could manage, Couch worked hard for the Saskatoon DUC committee. He convinced the group to look at major projects, and solicit funding from corporations. “I challenged them to consider what we could offer a corporation in lieu of a sign on a stick,” he says. “We are still a long ways from where we should be. We are adjusting and the people are starting to think in a larger way about bigger major gifts.”

He recently negotiated a \$250,000 US major gift with PotashCorp. It’s been levered to \$1 million with matching grants in Canada and the U.S.

BY 2000, COUCH WAS CHAIR OF THE SASKatoon committee. Under his leadership, DUC tackled two major projects. For the 306-hectare Indi Lake project south of Saskatoon, Couch helped raise \$100,000 in corporate and individual

“**Growing up, Couch remembers his father teaching him the need to conserve the land, and the importance of sharing it with wildlife, including ducks.**”



Above: Jim Couch exercises his three playful Labs beside a Saskatchewan slough.



Above: Couch steadies Lab Dusty during one of the retrieve events on opening morning.

“I have a great passion for DUC so I hope I’m successful on getting volunteers to think outside the box. I do this at work, in my personal life and with any organization I belong to.”

sponsorships of \$10,000 or more each. Couch and his wife Charlene also contributed \$10,000. He was also involved in fundraising for Chappell Marsh in Saskatoon, for which about \$200,000 has been raised to develop an interpretive area for the public and school students.

“Jim was one of our pioneer volunteers who started DUC thinking big,” says Perry McCormick, DUC’s national manager of events. “Jim is constantly pushing us to think out of the box.” The organization, says McCormick, is testing a strategy developed by Couch that is designed to enhance DUC’s current revenue streams. The test will be completed in about a year.

“I have a great passion for DUC so I hope I’m successful on getting volunteers to think outside the box,” Couch says. “I do this at work, in my personal life and with any organization I belong to.”

After serving as both zone and district chairs, Couch was invited by then DUC president Jack Messer to join the national board in 2004. In a rare move, Messer asked Couch to lead the Saskatchewan volunteers as their provincial chair. Usually, a volunteer would move into the provincial chair position and then become a national director. But Couch made history by becoming the first national director to become a provincial chair while sitting on the board. He has chaired the Conservation Programs committee since last September.

For the lifelong hunter and conservationist, it’s a perfect fit. He works quietly, usually behind the scenes, guided by a solemn sense of purpose and without even a hint of brashness or ego. When Couch became involved in the dog trial scene about four years ago, it added yet another dimension to his shared passion. DUC’s habitat work has benefited greatly.

“Jim is heavily involved in dog competitions and has used his business and relationship-building skills to marry his passion for retrieving dogs and raising money for wetlands conservation,” McCormick notes. “Jim has also used his business contacts to support those initiatives that are close to him, which usually means a dog or a duck.”

COUCH’S INVOLVEMENT IN FIELD TRIALS ACTUALLY started because of a guinea pig or, more correctly, the death of one. When son Michael’s little pet died several years ago, Jim and Charlene decided to get him a Lab pup. The Couchs’ had moved to an acreage south of Saskatoon by then so they thought they had the space for a dog. Soon an enthusiastic male black Lab named Trail Runners Neko MJ (Neko for short) came into their lives. It quickly became apparent that they needed even more room for a dog. So, they moved to another acreage south of Saskatoon.

While training Neko for hunting, Couch met many

people who participated in both field trials and hunt tests, a type of field trial in which dogs are tested in realistic hunting situations. He became involved with the Saskatoon Retriever Club and is now active as a competitor, judge and director.

“I really respect the amount of work he does for the club,” says Patrick Fitzpatrick, 76, a competitor from Winnipeg. A few years ago, the Saskatoon club hosted the national retriever trials. That’s when Fitzpatrick got to know Jim Couch. “I could tell somebody was doing a lot of work because it was so well organized,” Fitzpatrick says. “It was Jim.”

Shortly after joining the club, Couch acquired his young female Lab, Dusty. Dusty is a top competitor in both hunt tests and field trials in Canada and the U.S. She spends the winters competing in rural Georgia, where Jim and Charlene are building a winter home.

Two years ago, a third Lab moved into the Couch household. Flame (otherwise known as Wyldfire’s Flames Are Roaring) is a female chocolate Lab described by Couch as high-spirited, difficult to handle and a challenge to control. Flame has been adopted as a project for Charlene, who competes with her in hunt tests. Both Jim and Charlene are involved in daily exercising, feeding and care of all three dogs.

THE COUPLE CLEARLY LOVES THE WORLD OF field trials and hunt tests, as much as for the friends they meet as for the dogs. “This is our life,” says Charlene. “We wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Their shared passion is evident at the Saskatoon club’s spring field trials on the May long weekend. They rise before dawn both days of the competition. While Charlene cooks breakfast and packs lunches, Jim is outside gathering equipment and giving the dogs a run, one at a time. Before Jim drives away with Dusty, Charlene comes out to the yard and wishes them both well. “You work hard today and run like the wind,” she coaxes Dusty, secure in a kennel in the back of Jim’s sport utility vehicle. She later drives out to cheer them on and to help organize a potluck supper.

In the hour-long drive to the Retriever Club’s grounds, Couch casually points out flushing sharp-tailed grouse and sloughs, lakes and dugouts alive with waterfowl. It’s clear that he is in his element. A few kilometres from his destination, Couch pulls over to exercise Dusty by having her retrieve a blaze-orange plastic dummy fired by a shell-powered launcher. She performs flawlessly, holding like a 51-pound four-legged statue until Couch gives the order releasing her for the retrieve. When she returns with the dummy, Dusty waits until Couch asks for it back. He praises Dusty for her good work, and watches proudly as she jumps

back into her kennel. Couch feels optimistic as they resume their journey.

Four hours later, though, Dusty and Couch have been eliminated after the second round. He's disappointed, naturally, but realizes he still has some lessons to learn as a handler. Couch refuses to let it get him down. He stays the rest of the day to support the other competitors, including his close friends Sue and Garry Taylor, who are competing with a menagerie of black and yellow Labs. Couch regularly trains, competes and hunts with both Sue, a veterinarian, and Garry, a retired electrician.

Sue, 51, is a veteran retriever trainer with 22 years experience. She met Jim and Charlene four years ago when he joined the Saskatoon Retriever Club and started learning to train Labs. She was immediately impressed with his eagerness to learn, and how he became actively involved in the club leadership, not just staying on the sidelines.

IT WAS IN THE FIELD, DURING THOSE MANY EARLY morning waterfowl hunts, that Sue was exposed to Couch as hunter and conservationist.

"He's a very good hunter in terms of knowing waterfowl habits and identification," Sue says. "We always kid Jim because he's this big DUC guy but he's really just one of us."

There's a standing joking routine in the blind when the several dozen decoys are all set out, the hunters are ready, the ducks are flying – but it's not quite legal shooting time. "Isn't it time yet?" Sue will anxiously ask Couch repeatedly, even though she knows it isn't. "Jim will say 'another three minutes.' It's always another three minutes."

Couch's intensity in the blind carries over into field trial competition.

"It's related to his competitive nature," Sue Taylor points out. "He really wants to win and have his dog do as well as it possibly can."

Couch acknowledges his competitive streak. He notes it comes through whether he's helping organize major dog trials to raise money and recognition for the Retriever Club, or trying to build funding for DUC projects.

"Yes, I'm competitive when it comes to raising funds," he says. "I lead by example and I need to be successful to show people it can be done."

Jim Couch has made it his life mission to show people what needs to be done – and how to do it. Adapting that approach to ensure consistent success in field dog trials is his latest challenge. ✨