



THE Red TORNADO

Bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, with boundless energy, the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever dives into the AKC Sporting Group this month. **BY BUD BOCCONE**

In January the AKC Special Registration Services department circulated a terse memo: “The Board of Directors of the American Kennel Club, at its January 2003 meeting, approved the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever as eligible to compete in the Sporting Group at all events held on or after July 1, 2003.”

They sure packed a lot of dog into one sentence. First, there’s the Toller as show dog. The smallest of the retrievers, he’s an eye-catching redhead—a jaunty little Jimmy Cagney with a spring in his step. But he’s also the acutely intelligent obedience dog; and the nimble red tornado of the agility course; and the loyal family pet, whose warm, soulful gaze would melt even the wariest mailman. Finally, he’s the peerless gundog of the North Atlantic—quick, rugged, relentlessly eager—for generations prized as the perfect hunting buddy.

In all, Nova Scotia’s greatest gift to America since smoked salmon. And yet, less than 30 years ago the Toller faced extinction. That the breed has come all the way from near-oblivion to AKC recognition stands testament not only to the Toller’s charm and versatility but to

the dedication of the breed’s American devotees, who work as hard for their dog as their dog works for them.

ASK NOT FOR WHOM THE DOG TOLLS. IT TOLLS FOR DUCK.

We all know what a retriever is, but what’s this tolling business?

Marlie Waterstaat, a librarian by profession, is the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever Club (USA) histo-

rian. She explains that the word *toll* is from the Middle English *tollen*, meaning to “entice” or “lure.” From it we get the word used to describe a summoning bell, as in “Ask not for whom the bell tolls. It tolls for thee.” It is safe to assume that Donne was not thinking of waterfowl when he wrote his famous lines on mortality,



ISABELLE FRANCAIS; OPPOSITE: TOP DOG PHOTOS

but for Tollers the poet’s words nonetheless ring true: The tolling of this wily retriever has been the death knell for many a duck.

Waterstaat describes how the Toller “entices” or “lures” ducks to their doom:

“The hunter is hiding behind a tree or in a blind. The

**"Keep your dog in constant motion; a red colour is best,
and a long bushy tail is of great advantage."**

—J.S. Skinner, *The Dog and the Sportsman*, 1845.



ducks are swimming out on the lake, out of gun range. You toss your ball, corn cob, bumper, whatever your dog likes to retrieve, in such a way that the ducks can see the dog working along the shore. You repeat this game of fetch until the ducks come closer. They are curious about this animated red dog appearing and disappearing into your hiding place.

“As the ducks begin moving toward you, you call the dog back. When the ducks stop, you send the dog out again. As long as the ducks are swimming forward, you don’t toss for the dog. When they stop, you start again.”

When the quarry is in close enough the hunter stands, takes aim, and, to put it delicately, the duck’s goose is cooked. “You can do this with ducks flying overhead,” says Waterstaat, who is co-owner, with husband John Hamilton, of Sylvan’s Rusty Jones, an important foundation stud and a renowned gundog. “The first time we tried tolling with our own dogs, I was just sitting on the shore, tossing a tennis ball, and a duck flew in and sat down right in front of us. We couldn’t believe it!”

But tolling is only half the job. The dog also marks the game, swims to the spot, and retrieves the prize in his buttery mouth. “A good Toller’s mouth is so soft that



KENT AND DONNA DANNEN, BELOW; TOP DOG PHOTOS

sometimes the duck just falls out at your feet,” says Waterstaat. “It’s really more a balance than a bite.”

The notion of a “decoy dog” was not born in North America; Europeans since early Renaissance times had used dogs to lure waterfowl into nets. But it was in Nova Scotia, settled by the French in 1604 and wrested away by the English a hundred years later, that the Toller was perfected. History has failed to record the name of the genius who first thought to breed a true retriever that could imitate the curious hunting technique of the fox, whose color and movements exert a

strange fascination over waterfowl—so much so that they will swim to a certain death just to get a better look.

“The breed’s creators were fishermen and farmers, and breeding wisdom was handed down orally over generations,” says Waterstaat. “There are no breeding records from the dog’s early history. Not until the early 20th century can we pick up the story. But we’re sure retriever-type dogs were the basic stock, and that farm collie was probably added to it, as well as a spaniel-type.”

Whatever its exact components, the Toller is a nifty bit of genetic carpentry. The compact size, red coat with white markings, luxuriously feathered tail, and quick movements all fairly scream “I’m a fox!” to gullible ducks, while the



BREED STANDARD FOR THE Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever

GENERAL APPEARANCE:

The Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever (Toller) was developed in the early 19th century to toll, lure, and retrieve waterfowl. The playful action of the Toller retrieving a stick or ball along the shoreline arouses the curiosity of the ducks offshore. They are lured within gunshot range, and the dog is sent out to retrieve the dead or wounded birds.

This medium sized, powerful, compact, balanced dog is the smallest of the retrievers. The Toller’s attitude and bearing suggest strength with a high degree of agility. He is alert, deter-

mined, and quick, with a keen desire to work and please.

Many Tollers have a slightly sad or worried expression when they are not working. The moment the slightest indication is given that retrieving is required, they set themselves for springy action with an expression of intense concentration and excitement. The heavily feathered tail is held high in constant motion while working.

The Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever Club (USA) feels strongly that all Tollers should have these innate abilities, and encourages all Tollers to prove them by passing an approved Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever Club (USA) field test.

classic head, sturdy construction, and boundless prey drive are pure retriever.

Although Nova Scotia was the undisputed capital of duck tolling, the practice was not exclusively Canadian. Waterstaat cites American sporting journals of the mid-1800s containing detailed references to “tolling” (the second “L” would be added sometime after the Civil War). America’s tolling mecca was Chesapeake Bay, with some 19th-century breed historians maintaining that tolling was actually invented there. Whether this is so or merely the boast of patriotic American sportsmen, it is certain that by the turn of the 20th century tolling was a way of life for hunters up and down the Atlantic coast, as far south as the Carolinas.

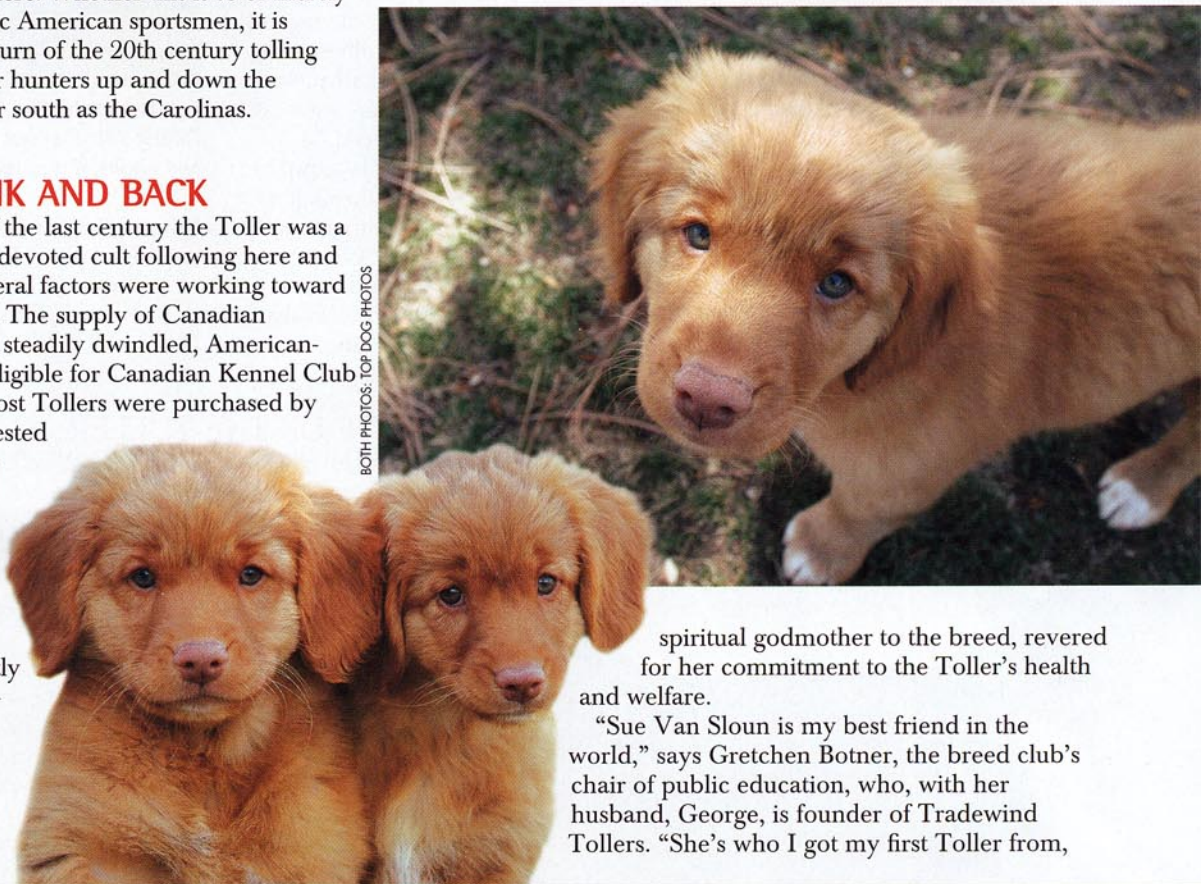
TO THE BRINK AND BACK

Through most of the last century the Toller was a dog with a fiercely devoted cult following here and in Canada, but several factors were working toward the breed’s demise. The supply of Canadian breeding stock had steadily dwindled, American-bred dogs were ineligible for Canadian Kennel Club registration, and most Tollers were purchased by hunters more interested in working the dog than breeding it. A wake-up call for the American fancy came in 1973, when it was reported that the Toller was “presently in danger of extinction as a pure breed.”

At such moments, either a breed dies out or

someone stands up and refuses to let it happen. Sue Van Sloun, of West Point, Massachusetts, stood up.

A one-time AKC Labrador Retriever exhibitor, Van Sloun acquired her first Canadian-bred Tollers in 1978 and never looked back. She is founder and past president of the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever Club (USA), and her Sylvan kennel name graces many important American pedigrees, such as the aforesaid Rusty Jones, among many others. She remains today a mentor’s mentor, a sort of



BOTH PHOTOS: TOP DOG PHOTOS

spiritual godmother to the breed, revered for her commitment to the Toller’s health and welfare.

“Sue Van Sloun is my best friend in the world,” says Gretchen Botner, the breed club’s chair of public education, who, with her husband, George, is founder of Tradewind Tollers. “She’s who I got my first Toller from,

SIZE, PROPORTION AND SUBSTANCE:

Size: Height at the withers—males, 18–21 inches. The ideal is 19 inches. Females, 17–20 inches. The ideal is 18 inches. **Bone:** is medium. Weight is in proportion to height and bone of the dog. The dog’s length should be slightly longer than height, in a ratio of 10 to 9, but should not give the impression of a long back.

HEAD: Skull: The head is clean-cut and slightly wedge shaped. The broad skull is only slightly rounded, giving the appearance of being flat when the ears are alert. The occiput is not prominent. The cheeks are flat. The length of the skull from the occiput to the stop is slightly longer than the length of the muzzle from the stop to the tip of the nose. The head must be in proportion to body size. **Expression:** The expres-

sion is alert, friendly, and intelligent. Many Tollers have a slightly sad expression until they go to work, when their aspect changes to intense concentration and desire. **Eyes:** The eyes are set well apart, slightly oblique and almond in shape. Eye color blends with the coat or is darker. Eye rims must be self-colored or black, matching the nose and lips. **Faults:** large, round eyes. Eye rims and/or eyes not of prescribed color. **Ears:** The high set ears are triangular in shape with rounded tips, set well back on the skull, framing the face, with the base held slightly erect. Ear length should reach approximately to the inside corners of the eyes. Ears should be carried in a drop fashion. Ears are short-coated, and well feathered only on the back of the fold. **Stop:** The stop is moderate. **Muzzle:** The muzzle tapers in a clean line from stop to nose, with

the lower jaw not overly prominent. The jaws are strong enough to carry a sizeable bird, and softness in the mouth is essential. The underline of the muzzle is strong and clean. **Fault:** dish face. **Nose:** The nose is fairly broad with the nostrils well open, tapering at the tip. The color should blend with that of the coat, or be black. **Fault:** bright pinknose. **Disqualification:** butterfly nose. **Lips and flews:** Lips fit fairly tightly, forming a gentle curve in profile, with no heaviness in the flews. **Bite:** The correct bite is tight scissors. Full dentition is required. **Disqualifications:** Undershot bite. Wry mouth. Overshot by more than 1/8 inch.

NECK, BACKLINE, BODY: **Neck:** The neck is strongly muscled and well set on, of medium length, with no indica-

and she's been my mentor over the years."

Waterstaat, a founding member of the club, recalls: "Sue was one of the first people I knew who had a personal computer. She created a database. Whenever somebody expressed a strong interest in Tollers, she would add their names. So when we decided to form the club in 1984, we had a list of Americans who were interested in, or who already had, Tollers.

"The club was founded by 25 or 26 fanciers. Most of them were getting their dogs from Canadian breeders. There were few people breeding in the United States at this point. We couldn't show American-bred dogs in CKC shows, and, of course, showing at AKC events was a long way off."

It was the rare-breed ring that provided the Toller a showcase during its climb to AKC recognition. "These shows allowed us to gather as a group and become friends," says Botner. "And they let a lot of judges—AKC judges—see their first Tollers. Breeds like ours and the Anatolian Shepherd might never have been seen as a possible family dog or show dog without the exposure afforded by these shows."

Even during the club's early years, with the Toller's popularity at its lowest ebb, the founding members knew what they wanted and refused to compromise. Waterstaat says "the club had its eye on AKC affiliation from the very beginning. But what we wanted to do was develop a strong club first. We wanted a club that was viable, that had had all the pieces in place before we asked for AKC recognition.

"As we looked at the other retrieving breeds, we saw splits, dogs bred for performance versus dogs bred for show. It gets to the point where they are

tion of throatiness.

Backline: Level.

Faults: roached or sway back. **Body:** The

body is deep in chest, with good spring of rib, the brisket reaching to the elbow. Ribs are neither barrel shaped nor flat. The back is strong, short, and straight. The loins are strong and muscular, with moderate tuck-up. **Fault:** slack loins. **Tail:** The tail follows the natural very slight slope of the croup, is broad at the base, and is luxuriant and well feathered, with the last vertebra reaching at least to the hock. The tail may be carried below the level of the back except when the dog is alert, when it is held high in a curve, though never touching the body.

Faults: tail too short, kinked, or curled over touching the back. Tail carried below the level of the back when the dog is gaitting.

FOREQUARTERS: The shoulder should be muscular, strong, and well angulated, with the blade roughly equal in length to the upper arm. The elbows should work close to the body, cleanly and evenly. When seen from the front, the foreleg's appearance is that of parallel columns. The pasterns are strong and slightly sloping. **Fault:** down in the pasterns. **Feet:** The feet are strongly webbed, slightly oval, medium in size, and tight, with well-arched toes and thick pads. Front dewclaws may be removed. **Faults:** splayed or paper feet.

almost totally different breeds. We were very much aware that this was a possibility. Tollers excel in a lot of things, but we feel it is hunting ability that makes them Tollers—it's what makes them good at these other things. If we lose that, we've lost the essence of the breed."

"This group has been through so much together," says Botner, "and we've become very close. When we got the nod from the AKC, we all called each other and cried. In one respect, it was a sad ending to the little family we had. But now we see it as a glorious beginning."

STATE OF THE TOLLER

Sue Dorscheid, of Rosendale, Wisconsin, is president of the Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever Club (USA). She is a leading breeder-exhibitor who glories in the Toller's versatility and has distinguished herself in conformation, hunt tests, agility, and obedience. We asked her to comment on the state of her breed at the threshold of AKC recognition.

- "We're still in the process of making breed type more consistent. The Toller has been recognized by the Canadian Kennel Club only since 1945, so it's still relatively primitive in its development. I think showing in AKC conformation will work toward establishing more consistent type."

- "We've heard a thousand times, 'Gee, it's a Golden



A born athlete: The Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever has the speed, balance, and brains of a natural agility dog.

BOTH PHOTOS THIS PAGE: ISABELLE FRANCAIS

HINDQUARTERS: The hindquarters are muscular, broad, and square in appearance. The croup is very slightly sloped. The rear and front angulation should be in balance. The upper and lower thighs are very muscular and equal in length. The stifles are well bent. The hocks are well let down, turning neither in nor out. Rear dewclaws must not be present. **Disqualification:** rear dewclaws.

COAT: The Toller was bred to retrieve from icy waters and must have a water-repellent double coat of medium length and softness, and a soft dense undercoat. The coat may have a slight wave on the back, but is otherwise straight. Some winter coats may form a long loose curl at the throat. Featherings are soft and moderate in length. The hair on the muzzle is short and fine. Seasonal shedding is to be expected.

Retriever, only smaller!' But it's not. Tollers are active dogs, very busy. They need something to keep them occupied, always wanting you to throw something for them. Generally, this is not a dog who is content to sit around all the time."

- "Judges should know that the Toller is a medium dog in every way: medium bone, medium size, medium coat.

"This is a working dog and should be shown naturally and honestly. It should look neat and clean but never scissored. The outline is different from that of a Golden or a Lab."

- "Most Tollers are owner-handled, so we probably aren't as polished as handlers we'll see in the other breeds. I know our people are looking forward to it, and they're planning on entering every weekend. But I'm not sure how many group placings we'll get right off the bat."

- "For pet placements, we look for an active family, one that does a lot of camping or hiking, or takes trips to the lake, a family that is going to provide enough outlets for the dog's energy. Our dog is good with kids, but I veer away from families with toddlers because the Toller isn't patient with roughhousing."

- "Health issues include autoimmune problems, hypothyroidism, hip dysplasia to some extent, PRA—although we do have a DNA test for that now—and some epilepsy.

"Our health committee is working with the AKC Canine Health Foundation to pinpoint the most important health issues in Tollers, and to see if there's any ongoing CHF research that can be supported by the club.

"Recently, in conjunction with the Canadian Toller club, we did a health survey—a worldwide survey that anyone anywhere with a Toller

Overcoated specimens are not appropriate for a working dog and should be faulted. While neatening of the feet, ears, and hocks for the show ring is permitted, the Toller should always appear natural, never barbered. Whiskers must be present. *Faults:* coat longer than medium length. Open coat.

COLOR: Color is any shade of red, ranging from a golden red through dark coppery red, with lighter featherings on the underside of the tail, pantaloons, and body. Even the lighter shades of golden red are deeply pigmented and rich in color.

Disqualifications: brown coat, black areas in coat, or buff. Buff is bleached, faded, or silvery. Buff may also appear as faded brown with or without silver tips. *Markings:* The Toller has usually at least one of the following white

could participate in—based on surveys used in other breeds. We got more than 1,000 responses, which is an excellent turnout."

- "Our club is excited about AKC recognition. In fact, we were thrilled over the past two years to compete in just AKC agility and obedience, and then hunt tests. We had so many members coming out and campaigning their dogs. I think there were 22 performance titles earned during our first two months of eligibility.

"People in other AKC breeds have been so supportive. They say, 'It'll be great to see you guys competing in the big shows. We're glad you're finally with us.' But believe me, they couldn't be gladder than we are!" 🐾

The Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever Club (USA) offers a judges' PowerPoint presentation and corresponding materials. E-mail: IsToller@aol.com; web: www.nscdtrc-usa.org.



TOP DOG PHOTOS

markings—tip of tail, feet (not extending above the pasterns), chest and blaze. A dog of otherwise high quality is not to be penalized for lack of white. *Disqualifications:* white on the shoulders, around the ears, back of neck, or across the flanks.

GAIT: The Toller combines an impression of power with a springy gait, showing good reach in front and a strong driving rear. Feet should turn neither in nor out, and legs travel in a straight line. In its natural gait at increased speeds, the dog's feet tend to converge towards a center line, with the backline remaining level.

TEMPERAMENT: The Toller is highly intelligent, alert, outgoing, and ready for action, though not to the point of nervousness or hyperactivity. He is affectionate and loving with family members and is good with children, showing patience. Some individuals may display reserved behavior in new situations, but this is not to be confused with shyness. Shyness in adult classes should be penalized. The Toller's strong retrieving desire coupled with his love of water, endurance, and intense birdiness, is essential for his role as a tolling retriever.

There will be an open registry for the breed until December 31, 2005.