

Irish step into the limelight

Despite a strong continental and domestic challenge the Irish team held their nerve to win a memorable international at Sherborne Castle.

Sarah Whittington reports.

They came, they saw, they conquered - was very nearly the phrase on everyone's lips as an on form German team led into the final day of the second Skinner's Dog Food International Gundog Event for Retrievers at Sherborne Castle - but an outstanding performance from the Irish meant it was not to be.

Held over the bank holiday weekend, Sunday and Monday May 25/26, in association with the *Shooting Gazette*, the event attracted 11 teams from all over Europe. And a few first day slips showed for John Halstead's England team as they went into the second day chasing the Germans by 14 points and with Austria snapping confidently at their heels a further five points behind.

But neither team was to enjoy the glory as Ireland, just off the pace in the early tests, crept up on Sunday afternoon with consistent all-round performances to lead the chasing pack and finally take the title and beat England for the first time in several years. Although nothing was clear-cut with the lead changing backwards and forwards.



Eddie Finn sends Int FTCh Rughlin Bailey of Tirgarve.



A victorious Irish team, James Toal, Eddie Finn with Roger Skinner, Brendan Mack, Damian Newman & Ashley Donnan.

Sunday's mix of long marks (100 yards plus), blinds and distractions over John Wingfield Digby's spectacular parkland of undulating topography, grassland and rushes caused a few to falter. Apart from Germany's Angelika Evans with Barnlight Sappo, no one had hit the elusive 20-point full mark score for a single test, all set by Rupert Hill and John Birkett. Judges Robby Forbes (Scotland), Heike Klieber (Austria), Warren Banfield (South Africa) and Roger Phillips (Wales) - called in to

replace an illness struck Richard Webb, certainly had the difficult task as the stakes were raised with traditionally British retrievers on the final day. Like Sunday, Monday was fine but warmer with constant sunshine, just lacking a cooling breeze.

Decision day was going to be tight as the teams set forth for the hillside overlooking the Castle, hosting its country fair and where final runs were to be undertaken. With the first half of the running order held back for a walk-up

The England team; manager Sandra Halstead, Alan Thornton, John Halsted, captain John Halstead, Darren Hales, Andy Latham & reserve Tess Lawrence.



Top dog

Anja Moeller's homebred yellow labrador bitch Gunsights Autumn Sage proved why she was top dog in Germany last year by heading the national team and winning the coveted individual prize at Sherborne – the Believer Perpetual Challenge Trophy. Presented by Rupert Hill and John Birkett for the highest scoring dog, the trophy could easily have been won by a descendant of FTCh Birdbrook Aston of Believer, who had sired a prolific number of the continental dogs and was one of Rupert's own bred dogs. But building on last year's fourth place (and the highest placed continental) Gunsights Autumn Sage's performance only demanded some fine-tuning for a victorious return. Homebred, by Conneywarren Spike and out of Petope Firecrest, Anja's four-year-old bitch worked with tremendous style and pace. And with a keen nose she winded consistently to lead the field, although as Anja explained she is very special little dog. "Sage really is my dog of a lifetime. She is so loyal and always wants to please. I started out handling dogs about nine years ago she is the best – she is just so eager to learn. We have won several German hunting tests and an Italian field trial so it's my ambition to make her out an International FTCh, but I would like to breed from her in the future."



Anja Moeller sends Gunsights Autumn Sage.



The number of people it requires to host an international, Caroline MacGregor (fourth from right) with some of her helpers.



The Welsh team; Alan Rees, Paul Clark, captain Roger Tozer, John James & Gareth Davies.

The Austrian team; Herbert & Robert Kaserer, Andi Pozlberger & Helga Strasser.



The Scottish team; Billy Steel Jr, Dave Robertson, Len McLean, captain Hugh Paterson & George Greig.

James Toal & Brendan Mack accept the Skinner's Perpetual Challenge Trophy from Roger Skinner.



Setting the tests, from left; Rupert Hill & John Birkett with stewards, Peter Castleman & Barry Taylor.



The judges, from left; Roger Phillips, Roddy Forbes, Heike Klieber & Warren Banfield.

SHERBORNE CASTLE INTERNATIONAL



The German team, from left ; captain Ole Richter, Betty Schwieren, Adrian Lunn, Anja Moeller & Angelika Evans.

in stewardship grassland, the rest set out into woodland and a grassy ride for a retrieve over a fence. In fact the test was divided in two with a nasty blind tucked just behind a fence-post some 90 yards up a tiring gradient, before the return and a mark further up the hill again over the fence. A regular feature in the British shooting field the home dogs were not going to struggle with an obstacle and the Scottish dogs boosted their scores accordingly. Although it was England's Andy Latham and his experienced Endacott Shelf who really shone with a perfect 20 score - straight out, winding the blind and back for a following spot on mark.

All was to play for as gundog organiser Caroline MacGregor relayed the scores back to competitors. Brendan Mack's Ireland team stepped into the limelight, the last to go, knowing they could win but under pressure. England had dropped a few points on the walk-up - with careful handling and a dash of good luck, Ireland could slip into the lead before the afternoon's decider. Nail biting stuff as Eddie Finn with Int FTCh Raughlin Bailey of Tigarve delivered a heart stopping 19, Damian Newman's Brookbird Daniel finished with a 15, Ashley Donnan's Int FTCh Glenloch Trojan on 16 and James Toal's Tanaghmore Teal with a 14 - the latter three following walk-up scores of 19. Not so much luck as skill.

The Irish appeared triumphant, and indeed they were, as final runs were conducted at Sherborne's lake in front of a large show-going crowd. Each team had to nominate one member to sit their

England team member Darren Hales with Casey Ainsworth - better known as Little Mo from Eastenders.



Andy Latham sends Endacott Shelf.



This winning lark is hard work - some of the Irish contingent take a break.



Event co-ordinator, Caroline MacGregor (centre) with David Andrew & Lorna Stephens of Skinner's.

dog for a distraction, sending for a blind down the bank into the water and back before returning for the mark. Not easy in front of spectators, but Billy Steel Jnr's experience paid off as he hit a 20 with FTCh Broadlaw Damsen, followed finally by Eddie Finn and his CLA Game fair 2002 top dog.

The stakes had been upped on the international stage and as winning team captain Brendan Mack said: "The continental teams had seen what was required last year, gone away and practised and come back to try and win. We really won it on the walk-up but might not next year."

TEAM RESULTS

Ireland - 393
 England - 382
 Scotland - 379
 Germany - 377

Judges' comments

Roddy Forbes (Scotland)

I've run dogs on various Scottish teams since 1985 and this event offered some really tough competition. It has been a real delight to judge and great to see the Europeans performing so well. The weekend was well organised and I don't think my fellow judge differed in any scores by more than one point such as the consistency of standards.

Heike Klieber (Austria)

I ran on the Austrian team last year and have been amazed by how much the standard has gone up. The continentals are getting right up there now but the atmosphere is still very friendly between the teams, no doubt thanks to the organisers who make sure the competition is sporting yet fun. Now I'm just worried about next year, as I'll have to train even harder to get onto the team.

Roger Phillips (Wales)

It has been a great honour to judge at this event. I have judged all over the continent - Germany, Holland, Belgium etc and the standard here has been very high with all the dogs performing consistently. Of course running a dog is the real enjoyment and I'll hopefully be here next year.

Warren Banfield (South Africa)

I've had a great weekend and have learnt a lot about gundog handling in Britain, although I don't think a South African team would have disgraced itself. We've just got to hope quarantine restrictions are relaxed more to allow us entry in the future. Everyone wants the opportunity to represent their country in their sport and we'll be training hard.