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Bob Farris and the Boise State Pudelpointer

by Butch Goodwin, Idaho

If you are a fan of college football, I would guess that you are familiar with Boise State University. Even if you don't know that Boise State was No. 3 in the BCS ranking for most of the 2010 season or that their quarterback, Kellen Moore, finished No. 4 in the 2010 Heisman Trophy balloting, I'll bet the one thing that you do know about Boise State is that their football field is blue!

I rushed to clean my kennels on the morning of September 25th because "ESPN Game Day" was broadcasting

from Boise State where they were set to take on Oregon State University later in the day. When I turned on the TV and was reaching for the remote to switch from the local station to ESPN, I did a double-take. The local sports anchors weren't interviewing either of the two head coaches. They weren't even interviewing the players from either school. There on the blue Boise State field, they were interviewing my friend of almost 20 years, Bob Farris – who was talking about training his pudelpointers! I sat down – if

for no other reason than to find out how Bob had wangled a way to get his face and his dogs on TV on, perhaps, the biggest day in the history of Boise State football!

After watching the interview for a while, I realized that Bob was being sponsored by Zamzows, a local lawn and garden chain, and his dog, Eli, was retrieving the kicking tee after each kickoff. Bob was explaining how he went about training his dogs to retrieve the kicking tee and, perhaps just as importantly, how he and his dogs learned to work through the deafening crowd noise of 30,000-plus screaming fans. As a trainer – and one of your columnists – I found the story to be fascinating so I thought I would pass it along.

First a little background. Through the 1970s, Bob trained and field-trialed Chesapeakes. Wanting a dog that wasn't as specialized and that he could hunt chukars, Huns, and quail with as well as pheasants and waterfowl, he says that he was personally very surprised when he discovered that pudelpointers have nearly the equal prey-drive after the shot as the retrieving breeds with which he was familiar. By the early 1990s, Bob had totally switched to pudelpointers.

If you don't know much about pudelpointers (no, they are not a cross between a poodle and one of the pointing breeds), they are what is considered a Versatile breed that originated in Germany and are not registered with the AKC but are registered with NAVHDA (North American Versatile Hunting Dog Association). And NAVHDA requires that dogs are field-tested to fairly rigid standards before they can be approved for breeding.

Bob started the training for the tee retrieving during the summer with four dogs on his front lawn. He found



Bob Farris with Eli and grandson Hunter.

that when he added distractions and noise, if the dogs weren't e-collar forced, they tended to slow down or return to him without the tee. After selecting the two dogs that were doing the best job, Bob moved over to training on the Boise State blue field using the black regulation kicking tee. It was then that he discovered that the dogs couldn't see the black tee against the blue field – and, if that's not bad enough, football fields are "crowned" which means that the middle of the field is about two feet higher than the sidelines to allow for water runoff.

Bob says, "So, there was no chance of a visual of the tee from the sidelines at all; this was going to have to be a retrieve done totally from memory, and because of all the crowd noise, there was no chance of using a whistle or anything to handle the dog if he missed the tee."

If you think it's tough so far, the ball is kicked from the 30 yard line, the team and coaches are allowed to move up and down the sidelines as far as the 20 yard line on each end. Bob and Eli had to stay outside of the 20s to keep out of the players' and coaches' way, so Bob had to teach Eli to run diagonally from the 20 yard sideline to 30 yard line in the center of the field. And then, he had to go to the opposite end of the field and teach everything all over again at the opposite angle – for picking up the tee when they kick off from the other 30 yard line!

After all of this, Bob had to deal with the noise and distractions. He ran Eli to fetch the tee and threw tennis balls and retrieving bumpers over his head to teach him to ignore anything that might distract him. He even practiced running his dog to the tee while the track team was doing jumping jacks and running sprints on the field.

But when the first home game was on ESPN, Boise State against Oregon State, Bob says he absolutely had no concept of how loud the crowd and the music from the speakers really was until he was down there. He says he nearly had a heart attack!

But it all worked. Eli made about 50 tee retrieves this year during the games and each one went perfectly. He said he never could have pulled it off if he hadn't previously trained retrievers for AKC field trials.

He did take his two grandsons (ages seven and nine) along and had them retrieve the tee if it was, in Bob's own words, "too unsafe for the dog – when the opposing team runs the ball back past the 50 yard line, I sent one of the boys to get the tee." (I guess that tells us who Bob feels is replaceable!)

Bob was also quick to tell me that he got a chance to meet Erin Andrews from ESPN. He says that she was instant pals with Eli but pretty much ignored him. Oh well, Grandpa.

If you want to watch some of the tee retrieve videos or a great slide show that Bob put together, or if you want to know more about pudelpointers, Bob has all of that on his website. It's well worth taking a look at www.cedarwoodgundogs.com under his photo gallery page and click on slide shows. ●

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