

Hunting, Writing and Dogs Become Life and Livelihood

Years ago, she traded pantyhose for kennel boots, a move that led to an ideal career that keeps evolving.

Beth Ann Amico and her husband, John, own Deep Fork Retrievers in Choctaw. Their love of the Labrador has turned into 30 years of breeding, raising and training some of the top hunting dogs in the nation.

While the full-time business takes full-time teamwork, Beth Ann has seen her part of the pursuit take on a writing component that serves to both educate and inspire.

She recently won a Maxwell Medallion Award from the Dog Writers Association of America and was the only gun dog writer to win it. Her article, "Picking the Perfect Puppy" was featured in a cover story for the May 2004 issue of *Woman's Outlook*, a publication of the National Rifle Association.

She has written other articles and short stories for publications across the nation, many of them focusing on women's participation in hunting.

"I'm very privileged to be able to do what I do and to work outside. I share a livelihood with my husband," she said. "It's the Lab that made all this happen."

Amico grew up in Oklahoma City and earned a degree in finance from the University of Oklahoma. She spent 20 years working in commercial real estate until she reconnected with what had been important to her growing up. She was the young animal trainer in her neighborhood (dog walking for a quarter; obedience classes for 50 cents) and had a rapport with everything from guinea pigs to dogs to horses.

As an adult, she had an opportunity to see Labrador Retrievers working in the field, and she knew that's what she wanted to do. Research into the area led her to John Amico, who had started a kennel in the 1970's. Their introduction and shared love of raising field Labradors soon turned into a marriage.

"A lot of couples go to dinner and the movies; John and I go train dogs together," she said.

Deep Fork Retrievers is the first hunting retriever kennel in Oklahoma. At any given time, they have about 20 dogs at their kennel, some in training from clients across the nation, and some from their own brood stock. They've trained dogs for former Oklahoma Governor Frank Keating, Arkansas Governor Mike Huckabee, the pitcher for the Los Angeles Dodgers and many more, Beth Ann said.

The labs at Deep Fork are trained to retrieve waterfowl. Beth Ann and John train dogs owned by others, but they also breed and raise their own, eventually to be placed with other hunters.

At 10 weeks old, puppies enter the “Head Start Program” which introduces them to the tools of the trade, such as “working words”, hand and whistle signals and getting them used to water. That continues until the dogs are 6 months old, when they move to the big kennel for formal training, Beth Ann said.

Formal training is elaborate, but among its specifics are teaching the dog to sit until the command to retrieve, delivering the bird to the hunter’s hand, and holding until told to drop it. Having that control allows the dog to see where birds fall and be lined up to retrieve for subsequent shots, she said. More advanced training includes signals that direct a dog to retrieve when it hasn’t seen the bird fall.

Labradors are a versatile and intelligent dog that make good retrievers, Beth Ann said. But they also possess the important quality of responding well to their owners.

“Everything a retriever does is human-directed. You have to have a breed that interacts well with people,” she said.

All dogs are hard-wired with “prey drive”, the instinct to chase and subdue prey, Beth Ann said. But when breeding dogs, the aim is to produce dogs that are not only healthy, but have lots of prey drive.

“Prey drive is what makes them go after the bird; coming back is trained behavior,” she said. “That enthusiasm is awesome.”

Beth Ann said part of their success is having the ability to read the animal to determine how the training is going and how it should continue. Dogs, like humans, have personalities, and training them isn’t a set process drawn from a book. Rather, the couple works in tandem, each offering suggestions and observations about individual dogs.

“You’ve got to get in that dog’s head,” she said. “You’re not dealing with a car engine. You’re dealing with a living breathing creature that has good days and bad days. They all have prey drive, but different amounts. Our goal is to develop that dog to the best of its ability.”

Beth Ann’s success as a hunter and professional trainer has led her to opportunities of encouragement for other outdoorswomen. She has led workshops on waterfowl hunting and outdoor clothing for women, garnering lots of participation from women of all ages, she said. Some of her magazine writing has been geared toward women’s publications, and she’s on the pro staff of the web site www.womenhunters.com.

“Man’s best friend is women’s best friend, too,” she said. “Obviously, women can go hunting and be involved in outdoor activities. There’s something about women and dogs, and animals in general, that makes them a really good team. If I’m a poster child for anything, it’s showing that you can follow your dream to do something.”

The sky may not even be the limit for Beth Ann's way of life as a hunter and trainer. She recently returned from a black bear hunt in Alaska, where she bagged a 450 pound creature, her biggest catch yet.

"They can eat you, instead of just flying by," she said.

Reprinted with the permission of the author