In the exhilarating sport of earthdog tests – a safe, fun event that tests a dog’s natural working instincts to go to ground – competitors find themselves going into the test with a dog and coming out with a terrier.

Small terriers and Dachshunds have been digging up excitement in earthdog events for years. The noncompetitive atmosphere encourages spectators and allows the dogs to be themselves, bringing out hardwired impulses passed down from their ancestors.
owners of small terriers and Dachshunds have been discovering the fun, fantasy and enrichment of one of the AKC’s many performance sports — earthdog tests — for several years. The noncompetitive atmosphere of the earthdog scene encourages newcomers to observe an experience that their dogs truly enjoy. They are often overcome by the hardwired impulses of their distant relatives, 19th-century dogs who earned their place next to the hearth by working deep in the earth routing foxes, badgers and otters from the depths.

Today’s terriers and Dachshunds can safely exercise their instincts in manmade tunnels, facing nothing more dangerous than a tame rat in a cage. Whether they spend the rest of their time as show dogs, family companions or merely couch potatoes, terriers and Dachshunds show their unique talents whenever they get out in the country — and an earthdog test is a natural showcase. There, they can be themselves. Gordon Heldebrant, a Dachshund fancier and the AKC’s executive field representative for earthdog events, often says he has watched owners “go into the earthdog ring with a dog and come out with a terrier.”

Basic Instincts

Just how does this happen? Basic instincts, bred into earthdogs from the beginning, are hard to extinguish. Even though there is little need for working earthdogs in the United States, and few terriers or Dachshunds have met their match in a natural den for at least 100 years, most of them still retain at least the glimmer of their birthright. Show them a squirrel running up a tree, they’ll chase it. Point out a woodchuck ducking into hole, they’ll do their best to follow. Wave some fox scent under their noses, and they will change their demeanor to “seek with caution.”

Heldebrant suggests that once a person has done research and decided that a terrier or Dachshund is the dog with which they want to share their life, they should look for performance potential. Earthdog events are their opportunity. People who have made a commitment to giving their earthdogs a chance to do what they crave, in the context of a safe and controlled test, have been amazed at the transformation. This new side of their wonderdog is something they come to respect as part of their dog’s identity.

Newcomers to the sport frequently go on to additional activities with their dogs. Heldebrant says earthdog test participants often are versatile sporting dogs that have had the chance to show their potential in obedience, agility, tracking or conformation competitions. Jack Russell Terrier fancier Sally Yancey has made the most of her terriers in the breed ring and in the field, but she started her relationship with an awe of their first few earthdog trials years ago. “Seeing my dogs doing something so natural was thrilling,” says Yancey. “I never dreamed they would react like they did.” Yancey sees the AKC’s earthdog program as a challenge and something different and fun to do.

Working Origins

Understanding this aspect of small working terriers and Dachshunds is an important component of the complete picture of a breed. Only a few standards refer to the breed’s origins as a working dog, but most of them carefully cite qualities that enabled those early earthdogs to do their jobs. They were first written by terriermen and hunters who took it for granted that their breeds would be seen as workers.

As dogs were defined by their ability to adapt to life as household companions and their physical conformation to breed standards, some dogs diverged from their origins. Each breed’s marvelous uniqueness, which is tied to the terrain and quarry where it evolved, has been threatened by the loosened ties to its roots. Breeders, judges and serious fanciers are now rediscovering valuable lessons about breed integrity through the excitement of earthdog tests.

Hound and terrier judge and former master of foxhounds Richard Reynolds cites his experiences in earthdog tests and natural hunting as a positive influence on his perception of a dog in the ring and his interpretation of breed standards. “When the original purpose has disappeared,” says Reynolds, “it is more difficult to keep breeding programs on track.” Reynolds has observed that breeding choices are becoming more oriented toward retaining working temperament and physical qualities.

Breeders seem to be more willing and able to discriminate between those characteristics that are pleasing to the eye but preclude work and those that might be less “flashy” but are consistent with doing a job underground. “In some terrier and hound breeds, the preservation of elusive breed type and temperament may largely depend on recognition by the conformation breeder of the working function and ability of the animal,” says Reynolds. “Until one can observe the abilities and inabilities of a working dog in the field or in a simulation, many of the elements of breed type as specified by the standard may be pure conjecture.”

All practicality aside, earthdog tests are fun. These events have all the components of the great dog sports — people with people, dogs with dogs, and people enjoying their dogs. In this sport, dogs take part in an activity they prefer over all others — just try tearing an earthdog away from a place it suspects of being the tunnel of an earthdog test site!
There are a few general rules that help the transition from 21st-century earthdog to 19th-century worker. First, repeat the same phrase to give your dog a reference point. "Get the rats" is popular. Next, stay close to your dog. Kneel down and touch your dog firmly and often. Make sure it knows that you are in this together and that getting rats is its top priority. Avoid over-training. No matter how fun your dog is having, it is possible to become bored with this quarry. Remember these three T's: tell, touch and temperance.

Senior-Level Tests

Once an earthdog gets acquainted with its quarry and develops its attitude, it is time to see if it has the second

Getting Started

It is easy to get started in earthdog tests. If you have a dog that is eligible (basically, a Dachshund or small terrier that fits into a 9-inch tunnel), it is time to begin. The Introduction to Quarry class is for novice handlers and dogs. The judge will be friendly and helpful, putting you and your dog at ease so its instincts can take over. Dogs are often overwhelmed at first and are not relaxed enough for their natural hunting abilities to surface, so it is wise to give a dog time to discover its instincts. Young dogs often need nothing more than maturity. (See the March Performance column, "Uncovering the Earthdog's Instincts.")

The Introduction to Quarry class is one of Heldebrant’s favorites to watch. He enjoys seeing, as he says, "the light bulb go on." Sometimes, a dog may have an appropriate response that goes slightly wrong. "One Miniature Bull Terrier," says Heldebrant, "entered the tunnel cautiously and showed just a slight interest in the quarry. Only when the owner retrieved the dog did she begin to bark and snap convincingly." Thereafter, crowds gathered to watch the happy owner try to control this thrashing dog-without-handles as she found her determination to get the rats. Heldebrant notes that little breeds, unhindered by a squeeze to get through the 9-inch square tunnel, often run back and forth between quarry and handler at first.

If possible, it is a good idea to give a dog a quiet chance to meet its quarry either at home or in a practice situation. A proper setup for introductions includes a strong cage and a pet-store rat or two. When the dog sees the rats, it is important to allow the dog to react at its own pace. If the dog and owner already have good rapport, it is easier to know when to encourage and when to be quiet and let the dog think.

earthdog instinct. Will your dog go to ground to get to its quarry? Earthdogs should be willing to go anywhere — no matter how small, deep or scary — to find their quarry. A good way to start is by positioning the rat cage at the end of a tunnel on top of the ground and then encouraging your dog to go through. Once your dog decides that rats live at the end of tunnels and understands that tunnels that smell like rats will have rats at the end, it is time to challenge your dog. Bury the tunnel underground and let your dog go through it and find the rats. Some dogs are not comfortable in a dark tunnel and avoid going in and through, but practice can sometimes overcome their timidity.

Dogs that have met the rats and have enthusiastically negotiated a short tunnel to find them are ready to try longer, darker and more challenging requirements. The
AKC tests have three progressively more complex levels of performance, each building on the skills of the first. Junior Earthdog is purely an instinct test. Dogs are released 10 feet from the entrance with one command and are expected to follow a 30-foot tunnel with three turns and try to get to the rats, or work them, for 60 seconds.

Most often, judges observe barking, digging, lunging or biting the protective bars. Dogs are lifted from the tunnel at the “quarry end” when their work is done. The handler has little influence on the dog’s success in this basic test, and few dogs can be trained to perform if they lack the instincts to go to ground and engage quarry.

Hunting wild quarry requires much more than just instinct. Success in hunting dangerous animals in their own dens requires a fine combination of courage, caution, intelligence and a strong partnership with people. Advanced earthdog tests offer a safe environment for terriers and Dachshunds to make choices and prove they are motivated to find quarry and take it, no matter what the conditions.

The Senior Earthdog test adds several problems for earthdogs. The main tunnel has a side tunnel containing heavily scented bedding, and a second side tunnel that leads to the outside. The main tunnel and approach runway is scented before the test begins. The naturalized entrance is mounded and is not visible from the release point.

Focus and determination are necessary for the earthdog to find the entrance, follow the correct tunnel and work the quarry. The dog’s nose should be at work from release to rats. At the end of the dog’s work, the rat cage is removed, simulating the success of ancestors when ferocity made the quarry bolt. Since the quarry is gone, the dog should recall to his owner at the entrance. With experience, this exercise becomes quite easy for most dogs, but when they first start in the Senior class, many of them are confused by the disappearing rats. Handlers get frantic, and dogs race in and out of the tunnel trying to find their quarry. Some stubbornly stay put, silently waiting for the rats’ return.

The Senior Earthdog level is a spectator-friendly class, as there is much action above ground. Heidebrant recalls one performance at an early trial, when handling skills were in their infancy and everyone had a lot to learn. A handler was prone with his head in the entrance, earnestly calling his Border Terrier. As he called, his dog finally exited from the side tunnel and walked over. The terrier studied his master at length, then gently tapped him on the shoulder. The owner brushed him aside, thinking that someone was trying to tell him time was up. His Border wasn’t discouraged. The silent gallery broke into laughter and cheers of approval for the terrier who taught his handler a lesson.

Mastering the Skills

In some ways, the Master Earthdog class is easier than Senior, but it adds tests for more advanced skills. Master earthdogs experience something similar to natural hunting. Master dogs work across a natural area in randomly drawn braces. They seek the tunnel over a distance of 100 yards or more. Presumably, they encounter the trails and scents of wildlife during their approach — and, once in a while, they even find something wild!

Even so, it is their job to cooperate with their handlers in search of an active burrow. Handlers may communicate with their dogs, steering them away from areas that are off limits and reminding them of the hunt. As in a natural situation, however, it is the dog’s job to find the test system, and the handlers may not lead or direct their dogs to it. Dogs who exhibit correct earthdog temperament will tolerate the presence of another dog and, with experience, often begin to look upon a brace mate as a helper.

It is a thrill to see a brace quarter the field in harmony with each other and their owners. After finding the entrance, one dog is released into the tunnel to work and the other is staked nearby to “honor.” The master tunnel is identical to the senior tunnel, except that two obstacles are added to assure that the dog is confident, flexible and determined. The working dog must accept handling and removal at the end of its work to demonstrate biddability. The honoring dog is expected to remain calm and interested while it waits its turn. Each dog performs both roles.

For some dogs, mastering this sequence is quick. For others, it may take several tries and lots of practice. Earthdog work is a sport that is fun for dogs at all levels, and even dogs that have finished their titles are welcome to try again. Owners enter earthdog tests to see if they can meet the demands at a new and challenging location, they enter them to find out how they will score under a certain judge, and they enter them to qualify at a prestigious test. But most of all, they enter them because it is exciting.

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