Going to

Handlers and dogs love the AKC's new earthdog tests.

This Oct. 1 at Laurel Acres in Hillsboro, Ore., lively Dachshunds and terriers barked at horses on the boarding kennel grounds that had been provided free to the Greater Portland Dachshund Club to hold the first AKC-licensed earthdog tests that day and the next.

Their enthusiasm for large animals would soon be transferred to small ones, when club president Dave Niebur finished digging tunnels through which the dogs would track rats, just as their ancestors had done for hundreds of years.

Gordon Heldebrant, the new AKC field rep for the event, looked on and gave pointers. "There's a good spread of breeds here today," he said. "Smooth Fox people don't seem out of place."

There were lots of Dachshunds in both sizes and all three coats, of course, but lots of terriers too: Borders, Cairns, Smooth Foxes, a Scottie, Westies and Welsh. Pretty Ch.s, a smart UDTX, a Field Champion, even a Dual Champion, all ready to prove Heldebrant right when he said, "These dogs can do it!"

Judge Sil Sanders explained the rules of the three tests he presided over on Saturday to the handlers. Judge Karla Diethorn did the same on Sunday. Both have judged den trials for other groups.

The AKC currently has a program to train new judges. Gary Rich, who apprenticed at Hillsboro, said, "Every breed is different and presents its own challenge. For example, some just don't like the dirt. Clubs teach
GROUND

by Stuart Gittleman

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people how to get started and will help get judges started too.

Heldrebrant agreed. "There's a core of judges across the county. It will be a challenge to get more good judges as tests catch on. Clubs that enjoy this fairly inexpensive event [reusable den liners can be built for under $200] should be sure local people appreciate for judging approval. Judges make the event."

Judges like Sanders and Diethorn explain the rules and the reasoning behind them before each test, then they critique the performances and offer tips on how competitors can do better next time.

Many handlers had trouble with the Senior Earthdog test's recall, which is not a requirement at the earlier levels. Diethorn explained why training the recall is so important. "In real hunting situations, your dog must come when called. If it corners a badger twice its size, you may not be able to dig it out in time. If the den is in a mountain under 30 feet of rock, you'll never dig it out alive!"

"Train the recall by taking dogs to prey, then call them back. Teach them they'll get something if they come on recall: If they leave this den, you'll take them to a better one."

Barking presents another important training challenge. Many dogs kill rats in their owners' barns, where they stare but don't bark. In the tests, barking is required; a dog that just stares will not pass. Diethorn said, "The program tests your dog's instincts and trainability and your ability as a trainer. If you want your dog to pass, train it to bark at caged rats."

Like Heldrebrant, Sanders and Diethorn, many handlers had taken part in field events with other organizations. As Niebur said, "I love to do things with my dogs."

The AKC earthdog tests provide a safe but challenging venue to do those things. Many other earthdog tests involve hunting live prey, and some exhibitors worry about the risk of injury to their dogs. And, since many terriers go to ground and to the conformity ring, even a small, cosmetic injury can be worrisome.

Border Terrier breeder Eric Dahlstrom said, "We're trying to prove you can breed to the standard and keep character. Now you can take your dog as far as it can go or stop when you want" without risk to a show or breeding prospect or a special.

Nor is there danger to the prey. The two rats in every test are caged and there are wooden bars in the den liner; the dogs and rats can't hurt each other. Some handlers say the rats become so accustomed to dogs barking during tests that they fall asleep.

Nevertheless, the program is "as close to a real-life hunting situation as you can get, yet still safely and accurately test the dogs at every phase," said James R. Tebbetts, whose champion Welsh was the only
Earthdog tests are open to AKC-registered or ILP Dachshunds and Australian, Bedlington, Border, Cairn, Dandie Dinmont, Smooth and Wire Fox, Lakeland, Norfolk, Norwich, Scottish, Sealyham, Skye, Welsh and West Highland White Terriers 6 months or older. The four classes require increasing levels of skill and training on the part of the dog and control by the handler.

**Introduction to Quarry** tests instinct only, offers no credit toward titles and is not a prerequisite for other classes. The tunnel is 10 feet long with one 90-degree turn. The handler brings the dog to a point 10 feet directly in front of the entrance, releases the dog from no higher than waist level, gives one short command and may stand quietly at the entrance but may not give any other command or signal. The dog has two minutes to reach the quarry and must work it continuously for 30 seconds. (Working quarry includes barking, lunging, pawing, digging and generally harassing the caged rats.)

In a Junior Earthdog test the tunnel is 30 feet long with three 90-degree turns. The handler must stand quietly at the release point and may not give any command or signal after the release. The dog must reach the quarry within 30 seconds and work it continuously for 60 seconds.

A dog must be registered in the AKC Stud Book and qualify at two licensed or member club tests under two different judges to earn a J.E.

The Senior Earthdog test is open only to dogs with a J.E. (or an equivalent title from another organization until Oct. 1, 1995). The release point is 15 feet from the den entrance, which is steeper and less visible than in the J.E. test. A false den and a false exit are added to the tunnel structure.

The dog must reach the quarry within 90 seconds and work it for 90 seconds. Then the judge removes the quarry and instructs the handler to recall the dog. By command or whistle only, the handler must retrieve the dog within 90 seconds.

A dog must qualify at three tests under two different judges to earn the S.E. title.

Two S.E. dogs run the Master Earthdog test at a time. The den entrance is not readily visible, is 100 feet from the release point and is blocked by a removable obstruction. There is a visible false den entrance closer to the release point. The dogs must reach and indicate the real entrance before the judge gets there to remove the obstruction; if they bark at the false den, they fail.

One dog is then run through the tunnel, which has a constriction point and an obstacle. The dog must reach the quarry within 90 seconds and work it for 90 seconds. The judge simulates digging sounds for 30 seconds while the dog is working; the dog should not be distracted.

The handler must recall the dog from the working area without it being injured, then the other dog is run. The honoring dog must show interest but not bark continuously. A dog must qualify at four tests under two different judges to earn the M.E. title.

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A rat's-eye view of a longhaired Dachshund.

dog to qualify in the weekend's Senior Earthdog tests.

Tebbetts has participated in den trials and helped develop the AKC tests. "I learned about my Welsh—so that’s why they’re built like that! The tests are a good way to get more people involved in activities with their dogs.”

Heldbrant said the program works because so many people and groups got involved and worked together.

“The AKC cooperated with us and anticipated our needs. It was very helpful in getting the program off the ground. Now we have to promote it by word of mouth.”

From an overall entry of 155, the weekend ended with 13 new Junior Earthdogs (Dachshunds, Borders, a Scottie and a Cairn) and a Welsh Terrier with one leg toward its Senior Earthdog title. Heldbrant said, "We were concerned about people who had tried other trials. These tests were fair but more challenging than expected. Dogs failed the Senior Earthdog by very small margins, which validates the tests. The titles are attainable but not automatic.”

Before her dog failed the Senior Earthdog test a handler said, “My dog is too smart. He knows to go to the judge; that’s where the rats are.” Her dog has a natural instinct to go to ground. Now this handler must prove she can train and control this instinct.