A retriever is in the first place a gundog so they should been bred for this in the first place.

Lydia, Filip and Stef have been working with Retrievers for several years. Their passion for the breed goes back to their grandfather and other family members who loved to hunt and who used retrievers to help them. Today, they like hunting themselves and on every occasion they take their retrievers. Going out for shooting or picking up with friends and dogs is the best reward for all the training they put into their dogs.

They founded their kennel “STARCREEK” that fluctuates in size from 10 to 15 retrievers depending on the quality of dogs. Up until now they have produced eleven FT Champions. Lydia, Filip and Stef are FCI Field Trial judges for retrievers and defend the working retriever and sport in several national commissions.

The British way of training, handling and breeding gundogs is their example. They share some of their knowledge with us in the following interview:

Why do you train your retrievers the so-called ‘British way’?

Filip: When we started, 26 years ago, there was not much know on the continent about training retrievers. Dogs were drilled instead of trained and that’s the reason why a few handlers from the continent went to England or organised seminars with British handlers to know more about the way they trained their dogs.

In Scotland a very successful and brilliant trainer once said to us: Get the right dog, keep his head clear and keep it simple. These words I will always keep in mind when training my own dogs. If you let a dog use his brains instead of his instincts you are lost. Dogs don’t have brains. Not everybody agrees with me when I tell this, but I never had a dog who picked the bird after I told him in his ears where it was ;-) So the handler is responsible for the thinking by bringing his dog as fast as possible to the area and once he’s in the area, it’s the dog who use his instincts. The only thing we have to learn the dog by conditioning him, is to make him run where we want.

When a dog runs his tail shouldn’t move. If it moves, he’s thinking or hunting and you will get in trouble ;-)
Stef: We don’t need to invent new things. In the UK they train retrievers for 100 years so they tried everything out for us. It’s all there so just take over which fit’s best for your own dog(s) and don’t try to invent new things because it looks rather silly at the end. Sometimes we see handlers sending their dogs with their foot or knee instead of their arm and hand... can you imagine this in a walk up Field Trial or shooting day where you walk in cover of 1 m high. It will be more difficult for the dog to see your knee or foot then to find the bird.

Lydia: :-)
Why did you decide to start breeding Labrador Retrievers?

**Stef:** If you breed them yourself they are cheaper :-) and if you have a good bitch you hope to get a similar puppy out of it. If you know the line you are breeding in, it’s more easy to react on problems during training because it could be that you encountered the problem already before.

In your opinion, what main characteristics represent a good bitch that you choose to breed?

**Lydia:** The bitch line is the most important as everybody can use the same stud dog. A good bitch has the right temper, does not squeak, is fast, has style, a good nose, is not hard mouthed and is willing to listen. All those thing are hereditary as well and can only be tested during a shooting day. Further she has to be healthy.
According to which standards do you choose the stud dog?

Filip: The same as Lydia mentioned for a good bitch. We would only choose a dog which behave well on a shooting day or Field Trial and who fits into the line we like. We don’t breed often and almost keep every time a puppy out of the litter for ourselves. We believe in our breeding and we don’t have to live of it as we have all three a full time job.
Are you considering the various health issues we face within the breed when breeding?

**Stef:** In Belgium it’s the Kennel Club (KMSH) who is responsible for the LOSH-Pedigrees under FCI. The Belgian Retriever Club or any other breed Club has nothing to say about those pedigrees.

The minimum things you need in Belgium before you can breed are the hips done and gain a result “GOOD” on a show. Further you need a DNA passport from each dog to make sure you used the dog mentioned on the papers. Dogs with hips A, B and C can be bred.

All the other tests, like eyes, elbows and shoulders are not obligated but are done by most breeders because everybody ask them. Sometimes we get the impression that this is more important than the dogs instincts. Luckily they don’t apply all these tests on people. :-(
Where do you see risks and opportunities?

**Lydia:** Like Stef says, we all breed under FCI and every Country has different breeding rules. It’s rather silly that a dog which cannot be bred in one FCI Country can be easily bred in another FCI Country. At the end they all have the same FCI pedigree.

**Filip:** Yes, it’s ridiculous if you look to the stupid tests they need to do in some Countries. A few years ago I saw some pictures in a magazine of the “wesentest”. Someone jumps out of the wood with a blanket over his head like a ghost and apparently the dog should react normal without being scared. It’s horrible! Who invent those things and what do they want to prove with this. Can you imagine someone jumping in front of a human being like this. Everybody would be scared and if not, there is something wrong with the man or woman. This has nothing to do with the dog himself but the way you treat him during his childhood. I don’t want my dogs being everybody’s friend. They have to be my friend and ignore other people and dogs so I keep them away from crowded places. We only do this when a pup intends to become a shy one which is a big difference. Further dogs need nowadays more titles behind their name than before.

**Stef:** :-) And on the other hand we see a lot aggressive dogs who passed this tests so it would be better to buy a pick-up and put 6 dogs together in the back like we do during shooting days. I think this would be a better wesentest then to forbid people to breed with a dog which is 1cm to small. In this way you will not lose a lot of good dogs with natural abilities.

**Filip:** Anyway, we don’t have to deal with all this in Belgium. In some Countries they have rules for everything which makes live very complicated while it should be easy. If someone would propose tests or rules like this in our Country there would be a lot of opposition against it. Apparently in some Countries people are more easy to accept and respect rules, even if they are wrong.

The worse thing of all is that this comes very often from people who have a certain profiling urge and which are not really involved in gundogs but have either political reasons. If you want to have fun in the gundog world you need to get rid of those peoples otherwise the good handlers and trainers will get fed up. I have seen too many handlers and friends being fed up due to those people so I don’t have any respect for them.
Why do you participate in competitions with your dogs? Do you have a preference for one specific type of challenge?

Lydia: We participate in competitions to check if the dog is up to the standard of a retriever and as we are competitive minded, we will try to win as much as possible. We would never go to a FT if we think we can’t win. FT’s are the most difficult discipline in the Retriever sport so this should be the goal of someone who has a good dog. We sometimes compete a dog in working test because we need to qualify them to get a run in a Novice trial but further are working test only a test to see how young dogs react under stress on the day. WT’s don’t proof you have a gundog. Sometimes we go to an International event in team or a local working test - if it’s not too far away from home - to have some fun with friends. In the rules is written that a WT should be organised as close as possible to a shooting day but this not possible. In every test of a WT the dog see max 2 dummy’s and he/she can pick them both. Further there is no distraction for the dog and mostly WT are kept on grass or woodland without presence of any game. I have almost never seen a WT in sugar beet, mustard field, comfield and so on... We are happy if our points are not under 16 out of 20 on every test. In a FT it would be every time an A retrieve but if you have 5 times 16 points in a WT, you will never win it but to us it’s better than 4 times 20 and one time 8 out of 20. In a FT they will drop you with that one bad retrieve. So we have a different view on a WT as most people. It’s only a test to see if the dog has the obedience which we will need in the field.

Filip: If Lydia talks about FT’s, she doesn’t mean the National Trial’s they keep in France or Italy. This are no FT’s but warm game tests. It’s forbidden in International Trial’s to manipulate dead or live birds by hand. In those trial they do. They take the birds out of a crate to execute them. It has nothing to do with hunting or Field Trials and it’s horrible and a disgrace. I once judged such a trial in Italy and I would never ever of my live judge it again. I need 10 pages to say what I saw there but the only good things I remember was the food in the evening and my flight back home. You can even win the bloody thing with 2 or 3 retrieves and the judges don’t take care of sending order. They should forbid this activity by law. They even create champions à la
Française in those Countries. Can you imagine a retriever kept on a lead during a Field trial to become a Champion... pffff. It's like winning the 100 m sprint backwards in 200 seconds and saying you are better than Usain Bolt. All those pseudo titles are created for the dogs which can't be run in a decent FT: Cold game champions, Dummy work champions... where will it end.

The next title is maybe a tennis ball champion and I suppose nobody is asking for all this. It's again created by politicians who don't run dogs or who can't reach a good level themselves. National rules should not deviate from the International rules otherwise you are bringing down the level. None of those titles is even recognised by FCI and should not be mentioned on the pedigree or entry form if entering in another Country.

What made you decide to become a judge?

Filip: Stef, now it’s your turn :-)  

Stef: We didn’t entered this sport to become a judge but to run our own dogs in the first place. Being a judge is not a royal title like some pretend to think but it’s giving something back to the sport you like to do yourself. We prefer a run with our own dogs in a FT above a judging appointment. It were the handlers and other judges who motivated us to become a judge. Today we try to do the same with other experienced handlers in our Country. We couldn’t be judged in a good and fair way if the good handlers would refuse to become a judge. In Belgium you can only become a judge after you have been running 2 dogs successful in Field Trials. Further you need to be Chief Steward or Steward at 10 Field Trials. If the kennel club accept your application you need to do theoretical and practical tests and only then you can be nominated as a student judge for at least 1 year. After this, you can be nominated as a FCI judge. All together it takes almost 10 years before that point so you got time to gain a lot of experience before.
Years ago some judges were nominated because they knew the right people at the right place but nowadays this is history in our Country. If a judge sends the wrong dog today, the handlers will tell him and forgive him, if he does it three times in the same trial, handlers will ask him why he accepted the judging appointment. People don’t train their dogs every day do be judged by someone who is not applying the rules, the judging guidelines and who is not up to the standard.

Filip: Stef is more diplomatic than I am. I will explain it in another way. In Belgium we don’t have ski champions because we don’t have mountains so if a Country has no field trials, they can’t have judges. Some people in Belgium think they are ski champions but every year Europe Assistance has to repatriate thousands of them with broken legs and arms. So at the end they are not so good as they thought they were.

The first thing to do is to organise Field Trial’s on a regular base for years and only after this organise tests for FT-Judges. In a Field Trial there are so many unpredictable things which can happen and you need to take the right decision in a second. The right decision is the one you can motivate towards the handler, respecting the rules and always giving the benefit to the dog if you are not sure. Some judges are always looking for the bad things in a dog and if they don’t find any, they will created themselves some. I give you one example:

At several occasions, judging a WT, I saw handlers not using the whistle when the dog missed the mark by 5 cm on the wrong side of the wind. They allow the dog to run further then the mark. In this way they are losing a lot of points because the dog is disturbing ground. If after the test I tell them they should have stopped the dog and bring it back under the right wind, they tell me - and I always hope they are lying to me - that if they use the whistle on a mark they receive a zero or very bad points on their retrieve from certain judges. Well the judge who says this is a zero himself and is not respecting the rules in the first place. Disturbing ground is the major fault, not the use of the whistles when necessary. If you go for picking up yourself in a walk up and your dog starts flushing birds where he shouldn’t, the host will ask you to stay at home the next time.

We already had a few discussions about this but nowadays we know it’s a waste of time trying to explain this to people who don’t run their dog in FT’s. Today, we just invite them to come over to our shoot with their dog - if they have one - and show us what they mean about not using the whistles on a mark. Till today nobody of them showed up and I don’t think someone will ever do because at the end of the day he or she will be ridiculous anyway.

But you never know, so the ones who don’t agree, this is an invitation… :-)
What are you looking for judging a dog in a competition?

**Lydia:** We always judge from the shooting point of view. The ideal retriever is steady and quiet at the post or at heal without asking any attention of his handler. He should mark his game well, and should remember the fall for a longer period of time. Sent for a retrieve, he should show hunting ability, initiative, good use of nose and game finding ability. He must not refuse any sort of cover and enter water without encouragement. He should work with will to please, and in good contact with the handler, but should not depend too much on his handler. When finding the game the dog should return quickly, retrieve correctly and with tender mouth. The Game should be brought correctly to hand. This is about was is written in the rules, another thing in the rules is that a retriever is the shooting man's indispensable help during a shooting day. The aim of Field Trials is to select the best dogs having all this things I mentioned before in a good balance, means obedience and hunting ability. Handling is to be considered as an indispensable complement to these qualities. So what Filip said is right. You still can have a good retrieve on a mark after you helped the dog. The good handler keeps always control over the dog and keeps the retrieves fluent, fast and efficient. That’s the team work. The game has to be as quickly as possible in the Game bag so to us there is only one retrieve. The fast and efficient one.
Over the last few years, what were the major changes in terms of training and breeding?

**Lydia:** I don’t think dogs are better bred than 25 years ago. It’s the way of training which is better. Having control over the dog at any moment is what we all try to achieve. Getting the right balance between hunting ability’s and obedience. If you can bring your dog where you want and he has the hunting ability’s to find the game, you will always be in the results. It’s easy to say but more difficult to achieve. In training the most energy and concentration should go to the handling. Marks should only been trained in walk up and never from a sitting position. Too much marking in training from that position will destroy your dog’s steadiness and heal work especially if he has to wait whole drive long during a FT. Even a Jack Russell will run to a mark but he will not be able to pick a unseen bird at a distance. So, it’s easy to understand which points need the most attention. If you have the dog with the right temper and hunting ability’s, it will be the training which makes the difference. The dog which is trained in a complete way will always win from the one who is not trained. Always repeating the same things till the dog is completely under control. Training every circumstance which can appear during a FT and on the dogs poor points, this is the difference between now and years ago.
What do you consider being positive and what tends to be rather negative?

**Stef:** Lydia, now it’s your turn.

**Lydia:** :-D Thank you :-D

We have always been very positive people and had and have a lot of pleasure and fun committing our hobby. Over the years we met a lot of nice people and made friends for life all over Europe. We all commit the same sport and during the day we are competing against each other but in the evening we are having a drink together. You can be disappointed when you got the feeling they treated you wrong but after releasing some steam you need to put everything in the right perspective. There can only be one winner and it’s not possible to win every time. So, it’s not the end of the world when you don’t win but some people always try to find excuses when they don’t win. It’s the judge fault, the helpers fault and so on... Those people will always be the losers even when they win. Personally I cannot stand them and unfortunately not everybody can be your friend. If everybody would be your friend you must be the biggest hypocrite on earth. Other things which are rather negative in our sport are:

- People who knows all the fault of other dogs while theirs are perfect.
- People who spent their time on Forums writing crap instead of training their dogs.
- People who ask in a walk up where the mark will drop down.
- People who ask: “is it on the left or right side in the area”
- People who talk a lot and don’t say anything.
- People who talk about field trials or field trial training while they have never been on a FT.
- People who try to cheat on Working tests.
- People who wants to make mock Trial rules while they should use the field trials rules.
- Judges and handlers which don’t know the rules.
- Throwing happy ball’s.

Positive is that there are a lot of good dogs and handlers on the continent. The level will always getting better and it’s already proven on several occasions that some handlers from the continent can compete in England and gain also there a good result. We also see more and more motivated young handlers and let’s hope they understand that if they have a good dog, a working test should not be the ending point.
What are your future goals?

**Stef:** We have 11 Field Trial champions till now. Maybe we can have a few more. All depends of our motivation. Before we trained twice a day the dogs we competed, today we train them less but the advantage we have nowadays is that we can shoot game all year long. Hunting season start in September till end of February. After this we start pest control on pigeons and rabbits because the farmers ask it to us. Last summer we shot 1300 woodpigeons together with some invited friends, so plenty of opportunities for young dogs to remain steady and have a retrieve once and a while. It’s a big advantage if they get the right experience in an early stage. We also can train our dogs in the farmers fields because they are grateful.

**Thanks for taking your time answering the questions.**  
**Lydia, Filip & Stef:** You are welcome.

One last one question: what's the secret for your success?

**Lydia:** Keeping it simple!

**Filip & Stef:** :-) :-)

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*Image of a man in a hunting outfit with a bag and rifle.*
Imprint

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