Competing on Field Trials is often said to be a matter of luck. Starcreek Zally run in the field trial season 2004/2005 7 Field Trials, and she won 6 out of these 7, getting as many CACT and CACIT titles which are normally more than enough for a life-time in a life of a dog and his owner. Zally also won a Field Trial in our country, Hungary, she got a CACT / CACIT and also won the Final of the Individual Challenge Cup.

Do you believe it is just a matter of luck?

No, it’s not only a matter of luck. I have never seen a bad dog winning a trial by having a lot of luck. You need some luck with the retrieves you get over the day in a way of „Getting the right retrieves on the right moment”

When you drive with a car through a red traffic light and nobody hits you, then you are lucky, but when someone does, doesn’t mean you are unlucky. You received what you asked for because you did something wrong. It’s the same in trialling. When the dog is not good you will receive what you deserve and if not you must be extremely lucky.

The only moment you need luck is when the draw for a trial is done hoping you get a run in it. To win field trials you need in the first place a well trained dog with natural hunting ability’s. If there are too many short comings in the dog you can have as much luck as you want, those
Zally is a dog of your own breeding, comes from the kennel Starcreek. Her father is the very well known IFTCH Saxthorpe Buzzard of Brindlebay (Herbie), her mother is FTCH Kelland Holly. From which of her parents did she heridite more – I mean to which of her parents is her character similar to?

I do think Zally has more of the father side but I wouldn’t have mind if she had looked more like her mother. To us, both of the parents are good dogs, but Zally has a very similar way of working, running, and have the same expression as Herbie.

Nigel Mann, the owner/handler of FTCH Lafayette Tolley once said to me that my bitch reminded him to Tolley in some way when working. At that moment he didn’t know that Tolley was Zally’s Grandfather so I do think that this proofs she has more of the dog side as Tolley is Herbie’s father.

Do you have Zally with you since her puppy hood? (sorry, Stef 😊) How did you choose her?

No, Zally came to me when she was about eight or nine months old. I don’t remember the exact age. Stefaan bred this litter in 2000 of which I didn’t keep a puppy. I already had two young dogs to train at that moment so I was planning to have the next year a puppy again. Lydia kept one puppy (Zunny) out of this litter and Stefaan two (Zuckey & Zally). Stefaan was planning to sell one of the two bitches after he had sorted out which one was the best. As Zuckey was his favourite (good choose😊) he was thinking of selling Zally but as he didn’t had
much time at that moment he asked me first if I could make her holding the dummy which she intended to spit out at his feet.

So, after I cured this little „problem” I felt in love with her and told Stefaan he wouldn’t get her back. I am still paying him today to rent her, and since he gave me Zally, he never asked me again to cure a little problem with one of his puppy, unfortunately 😊

Further, choosing the best pup out of a litter is being lucky in the first place. We definitely don’t believe in puppy tests. I just don’t take the shy or independent puppy sitting whole alone in the corner while the others are playing. If you are the breeder of a litter yourself you got a better view and idea about the behaviour of the pups because you will see them every day till they leave the house, but still then it’s a lottery to choose the „best” one.

When I have to choose a puppy in another kennel, most of the time it’s done in 10 minutes time. I have a look, throw a tennis ball, and drive home happily thinking I took the best pup out of the litter. When starting to train it after having his childhood I will see if I did, yes or no 😊

You are a very experienced trainer, having trained many dogs successfully, having had many Field Trial Champions in your kennel. When did you have a feeling that Zally should be an exceptionally good dog, that she is going to become such a bloody good dog – I mean did you have the feeling before her real career began that you have a treasure in your hand, or it just came?

I loved her from the first moment I got her. All my other dogs I only like them 😊. She was full of energy and power, yes sometimes a little bit crazy. That’s maybe the reason why we understand each other that well 😊. She is a biddable dog and was learning so fast and very easy to train. I never told Stef I cured the little problem for holding the dummy in one day as he would have asked her back the next day 😊.

When I took her for the first time to a shoot for picking-up, being very carefully in sending her, I saw she would become my best dog ever. I sent her for a bird in sugar beets of which I thought it was dead. I didn’t know the bird had moved some distance so when she hit the fall she took some scent but couldn’t make a lot of it. She kept looking for the bird for maybe 10 minutes without asking one time; “where is the bloody thing”? She was so inexperienced in this and then finally she picked the bird. An older and more experienced dog would have picked this bird much easier and quicker, but the way she was trying to solve this out herself was a joy to watch.

After she found it I was a very happy man and some friends and guns who saw her working were also quite impressed like myself. The same hunting season she won her first novice FT at the age of 20 months and only needed 3 runs in Open Field Trials to become a FT CH not being 3 years old. In the same period she also won a novice trial in England making her qualified to run in Open Trials. I only know a few on the continent who are qualified to run in Open trials in England and maybe one day you will be the first Hungarian.
Hopefully, one day…

In which way do you think is Zally more or different than „average” dogs?

I was extremely lucky to get a dog like Zally. In a way of speaking, she already had her FT-Title when we normally start our other dogs in Field Trials. She had something „more” then the other dogs I had till then. The difference is the dog himself and this is difficult to describe, but by having something „more” she also received automatically more attention of me, as we all intend to train the better dog more likely than the less better ones.

We do put a lot of time in training all our dogs but Zally was always that one which received the biggest part of it and this is still the case, together with the dogs under 2 years old.

What do you think is her strength that makes her win every time?

Luckily I don’t win every time. I would be happy if I could win every year one trial with a dog. Winning too much will make people think I know all the judges 😊 Some do so but most of them are not competing with dogs or are involved in the wrong sport. In an other word we call it jalousie.

Zally won 13 trials out of the 26 we have run, including those in the UK, and she gained a total of 23 FT awards. All the field trials she has run are burned in my mind and of every trial I can remember every retrieve she picked or not picked 😊

I don’t like to show up about her strengths. I prefer to let other people talk about her, good or bad, but I am a proud man about her and I think I can say that she’s an all-rounder. She can be run in any trial, walk-up or driven, in any cover and on any game. She will face brambles, nettles and water without any doubt, and this just to please me. She is easy to handle, has a very good memory and makes less mistakes then myself. If we fail, most of the time it’s my fault but I still feel a privilege person being in the first row watching her to hunt. She has a special style and I miss her every time if I take another dog to shoot instead of her. In the future I will have to learn that one day she will be too old for trialling and it will become very difficult for me to do better. I am well aware of this and hard working on a replacing dog.

Do you think if Zally has a weakness or would you say she is just the perfect dog in every way?

Like people, a perfect dog doesn’t exist. We all try to get as close as possible to perfection but as we are not perfect ourselves, the dog can’t be neither. It’s up to us to train the dogs to a good standard and develop their natural ability’s. In that way we have a big influence in getting the dog as close to perfection. Some people can do this better then others even if they have the less better dog..

Zally also has weaknesses but I don’t tell them 😊 As long as I know them I can work on the it trying to solve them. It’s up to the judges to see and find the weaknesses of a dog, not up to the handler to tell them to everybody, especially not to the judges 😊

If they can find the faults of a dog by doing this in a way they don’t want to see the dog failing, then we are talking about good judging. Unfortunately this is not always the case because some people like to see dogs failing.
Zally is now 6 years old. Do you plan to run her in the next season or was it her last season when you run her on Field Trials?

Next season I will run her again in Field Trials. If I look back to last hunting season I don’t see a reason to retire her. She still catches my eyes and when training she’s running and working like our youngsters. Further I am not afraid of losing or not feeling too good to say to another handler his dog was better. In Field Trials, one day you’re up and the next you’re down again. Relativating the good results you gained one day makes it easier to accept losing the next day. If you don’t see your own, or the dog faults you want stand long in this sport. People who are always looking for excuses for their own or dog mistakes are quickly forgotten. Nobody will believe them anymore after a while and they will be standing whole alone one day.

There is only one place which count in a Field Trial and this is the first place. Only one competitor can gain this result and all the others are in one way or the other, the losers. I will run Zally as long as I feel we can compete for the first place and I hope she doesn’t want to become smarter than the handler by starting to do her own thing. Herbie was eight years old when Lydia retired him so if she looks after her father in this as well, I can run her for 3 more seasons.

Next season I only would like to be luckier in the draws of the open trials in the UK. After I qualified her to run in open Trials in 2002, I only had two runs out of 40 nominations. We are members of 12 gundog clubs in the UK but it’s so difficult to get a run in a trial with 100 to 200 nominations for each open trial and this only for 12 places in a one-day and 24 in a two-days. It’s easier to get a run in an all-age or a novice trial but still then you got much more entries then places. I am dreaming of gaining a good result in an open trial in England, just like her father did. Maybe after that I will retire her, so let’s hope.

Everybody who is involved in Field Trials and retrievers, knows your kennel very well. Would you just describe how you select the dogs for your kennel, what are your preferences?

Everybody has his own idea about the dogs he or she wants to train or run. Personally I like dogs which are quiet soft but still willing to work after they received a fair hiding, pretending they know what they have done wrong. Lydia and Stef have the same idea about that. The dog has to stand some pressure as well but we don’t want those who will try you out every time. Training a dog should be fun and not a fight each day. If so we will find them another home. Further the dogs have to be fast, having the hunting ability’s and the will to please. Those things you can’t train into dog, they are born with it. Don’t think all our the dogs are good as we also have failures, even more as we would like but mostly people will not see them 😊

The dog has to be trainable and learn fast once they had there childhood. When we start with memory’s and handling, we will already get an idea which dog will turn out to be a good or bad one and they have to cope with the basic before they are 2 years old. The next steps are
bringing them under shooting conditions and see how they cope with the real thing. If this all go well they can sleep in our or Stef's kennels. Never think you need many dogs to be successful. You just need one good dog every 4 to 5 years, but most of the times you need many dogs to find that good one 😊

How do you choose a sire for your bitches? Do you have a preference for a special English line?

In every line you will find the same dominant Sires. Experienced breeders told me that the bitch line is the first they look at. Finding a good sire is much easier as you can choose out of many FT.CH dogs. If we choose a sire for our bitches we also look first to the pedigree but more to the dog itself. We have to like the dog and want to know something about his character and this you can't read on all kind of papers. Herbie is the type of dog we like, but you can't stay kennel blind so you need to look for new blood else where.

Further we will always choose a dog which has been under shooting conditions and not only working test. The best performer on working tests can be greatest pest on a field trial or shooting days. Retrieving a dummy or warm Game under shooting conditions are like night and day, 2 totally different things. So the dogs had to be under shooting conditions by preference at field trials, real field trials well understood, and not only the ones where they throw pheasants out of cages and shoot them. I don't want to know where the bird will leave the ground and fall after been shot before I arrive in the line. If so, we talk about warm game tests and not a field trial.

I know that you are planning a litter with Zally. Have you decided already for the sire you are going to use? If yes, why did you choose that dog?

I was planning to have a litter with Zally this year. She is very irregular in coming in season and therefore it's very difficult to plan such things with her.

If she would come in season now and we would let her have puppy's, I will loose her for a to long period during the shooting season. As this period is very important to us it will be not for this year but next year.

Last year I already had a list of people who asked me for a puppy of Zally but I didn't want to let her mate because they also asked me to be in the team for the International in Sherborne. One week before this event "the bloody thing" came in season and I had to take the dog which I gave at my daughter to go to England. :-). Luckily everybody can handle her and she still remembered me :-), but for the same reason as now I didn't let Zally mated at that time being already end of May. I also realised then she could become the next time in season around the period of the Coupe d'Europe in Austria. So I asked my vet to give her an injection not to become in season which I still regret. Beside of having gained such a wonderful result in Austria, I was gone in 5 minutes and joined the anti's :-) it turned over her system completely.

So if all goes well next spring I will use Heike Klieber's dog Chairman of Dukefield because we like the dog.

He's still young, but since he is a puppy he attracts my attention.
Heike keeps me informed about him and as we have a blind trust in the owners, I know he’s a good dog. He has been under shooting conditions and saw his father and mother working. He has the natural ability’s we are looking for and Heike loves him like I love Zally:-). This is sometimes more important then choosing the first FTCH of the record.

But I am not in a hurry as we have enough stuff to train at the moment and as we all have a full time job, it’s sometimes difficult to get them trained properly if their are too many dogs. Further we prefer to be called trainers/handlers instead of breeders. We like to say and do what we think, and as being a breeder only, you have to watch your words in talking about the good dogs of others people. You could be losing a potential client :-) 

A last question. Perhaps you have many nice memories with Zally, she must have had some great retrieves while you were trialing together in the last few years, I also saw some of them myself which just made my flesh creep, would you share the most memorable with me, a very special experience you like to remember?

I have a lot of good memories with Zally but also some bad ones 😞. I prefer to talk about an experience instead of a retrieve. It’s not a short story so I hope you have some place on your web 😊.

I run my first field trial in 1987. I remember I was very nervous that day and after a while my dog run in 😊. The dog felt I was so nervous so I tried to get my nerves under control the next time and it worked quite well. Nowadays I am quiet “relaxed” when trialing without saying I have no nerves at all, so don’t misunderstand me, you need some to win trials but not in a way they take over all the control!

In 2002 I received the schedules of the field trials in England and entered some nominations for a run in a novice trial. After a while I received the draw back of the Suffolk Gundog Club and saw I was fifth reserve for the 3 trials I entered.

I phoned Mike Tallamy, who became a good friend over the years, and asked him if I had a chance to compete in one of the 3 trials being 5th reserve. He answered me definitely, but it can be in the one begin October, end October or the one in January, I don’t know, but if ever you get a run, be my guest and stay at my place.

Three days before the first trial I received a call of the club’s secretary telling me I got a run in it. I started shaking and accepted the run. I ordered the boot ticket, went to the bank getting some pounds and phoned Mike in the evening to tell him I had a run. „Oh you lucky boy but it’s been so warm and dry lately that there is no scent at all. The ground is like concrete. Make sure you have all the necessary documents and to be sure, phone to the kennel club and ask if you got everything“. So I did the next day, Thursday the 3rd of October. I went to work and phoned from there to the Field Trial secretary of the Kennel Club, Mrs Anne Greeves, and asked her if I had the necessary documents. I thought everything was ok and made this phone call only to please Mike.

„Do you have an ATC-number? No, you need an ATC-number if you want to compete in England with a dog not registrated in the UK. It cost you 12 pounds and you will get it by post in 2 weeks“. In 2 weeks but I have to compete on Saturday the 5th ....
No scent, no ATC-number, I started to get very nervous and I will keep the story short, Anne managed it receiving my ATC-number during that day. "Thank you again Anne." The next day Lydia and I started to travel and Zally was in the back of the car and managed to get out of the box and eaten her dinner for 3 days! After we passed the border and also a very stressful moment because of all the paperwork bringing a dog into England, I had to let her drink litres of water because she had eaten all the dry food. I will never forget Mike's first words when she jumped out of the car. "Is she pregnant?"

We went for a little training but she did more “poopoo” then retrieves.

The next day I was feeling like on my first trial in 1987, no scent, the paperwork, the ATC-number, a dog which looked like a balloon, and all those English handlers which I saw thinking, "where does he come from" had wind me up.

I had number 5 and was called into the line very early after one of the dogs run in! I was shaking and tried to get it under control saying to myself it's only a novice trial. The judge saw this and told me to enjoy my day 😊. Yes, I tried but I couldn't. I was only thinking at 1987, "Don't let me down Zally, not here, you may run-in in Belgium, but not here 😊.

Still in the 3rd round at walk-up, she already had retrieved a hair, pheasant, partridge and again a hair, the judges decided to hold a drive on ducks. There were only 3 dogs left in the trial. Mike was right about the scent and a lot of dogs went out because of it, but I had to handle Sally only once on the last hair she picked cross the line. I relaxed when I heard the word "drive" because this was something we were used to do. They shot some ducks and Sally picked the 2 ducks asked for in no time.

"Trial is finished" and I wanted to jump into the air but I didn't. I knew I had won the trial because she was so eye catching whole day and did all the retrieves very well were the other had struggled on some retrieves. After the price giving I wanted to celebrate it with all the Englishmen like we used to do it in Belgium, but they all drove home in their car 😊.

Filip and Zally competing.....

They have the best field trials in England but I think we have more fun after. It’s not only about winning trials but also having some fun after, so Lydia, Mike and myself went to a pub and had some beers. We took this nice memory, together with the silver ware, back home. Stress was gone and I was planning to give her no food for 2 days but she received the same night her dinner because she loved her so much for not running in and winning the trial 😊.

Is this story not to long for your interview? It's almost like a fairy-tale 😊.

Thank you for asking me for this interview and Stef, Ly, and me wish you all the best in Hungary with all your dogs, website, and Field Trials.

My pleasure. Thanks to you for sharing all this with me and with all readers of our website – may your dreams come true, and than hopefully our next interview should report about a new fairy-tale, about Zally, winning an open trial in England......)))

Interview with Filip by Andrea Böszörményi