

OUTDOORS

Recreational opportunities in the region



SHAWN DOWD staff photographer

Ready, set, go On command, Storm, Sue Keroack's Chesapeake Bay retriever, leaps into Oatka Creek during a training session.

A gentle commander

Mumford woman excels
as patient dog trainer

By DAWN BRACEY
STAFF WRITER

Sue Keroack insists she sort of "backed into" the dog business.

It all started 21 years ago when she attended a 4-H dog obedience competition.

"I sat there, watched it and said, 'My dog can do that,'" she said.

Now, at 50, as owner of Spendthrift Kennels in Mumford, she specializes in things like tracking, competitive obedience, pet training and confirmation (dogs shown and judged on how they're put together against breed standard).

She leaves her clients — human and animal — quite impressed.

"I've got a hundred percent faith in her. She calls it like it is, she tells you like it is," said Augie Tantalo of Rochester.

He's taking his English setter, 8-month-old Maggie, to Keroack with designs on bird hunting season.

An avid hunter since age 15, Tantalo belongs to Central Game Preserve that leases land in Hamlin, Clarkson, Parma.

When it comes to training, "Sue, in my many years, is the finest I've ever seen," he said.

Right now, Tantalo and his dog are working on improving the dog's pointing and retrieving skills.

Tantalo, 63, said he likes Keroack's method of positive reinforcement. "No beating, scolding or harsh treatment. It's training and reward and the results are remarkable."

Wayne Merritt of Mumford and his Chesapeake Bay Retriever, Annie, started training with Keroack a year ago. He purchased Annie from Keroack's kennel.

"It's just amazing how intelligent the dogs are and how easily they can be trained when you have someone who understands how to teach the student, how to teach the dog," he said.

Merritt is an avid bow and arrow hunter and basically disavowed gun hunting until he and his son, Matt, 14, went duck hunting with shotguns two years ago.

They met a young man who was training his golden retriever and "hunting with a dog was just a lot more fun for a father and son thing to do."

What started as a family project turned into a "father project," Merritt said, "but it's been an awful, awful lot of fun."

He trains with the dog six times a month in obedience, waterfowl and upland bird hunting.



Drying off Keroack whistles Storm back to shore, below left, while Autumn dries off.



"Probably the biggest thing I'm working on right now with my dog is obedience in the field," he said. "The retrieving thing is born into them but the obedience thing has to be taught."

He appreciates Keroack's technique. "She has kind of a gentle style of training," he said. "She's not into punishing the dogs to get the results she wants. She trains with a slower but more patient style, with positive reinforcement."

Merritt echoes Keroack's philosophy of training both dog and student.

New clients have to sign up for a 1½- to 2-hour evaluation session in which Keroack inquires about the history of the dog and owner.

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