

OCTOBER 2010

INVITATION

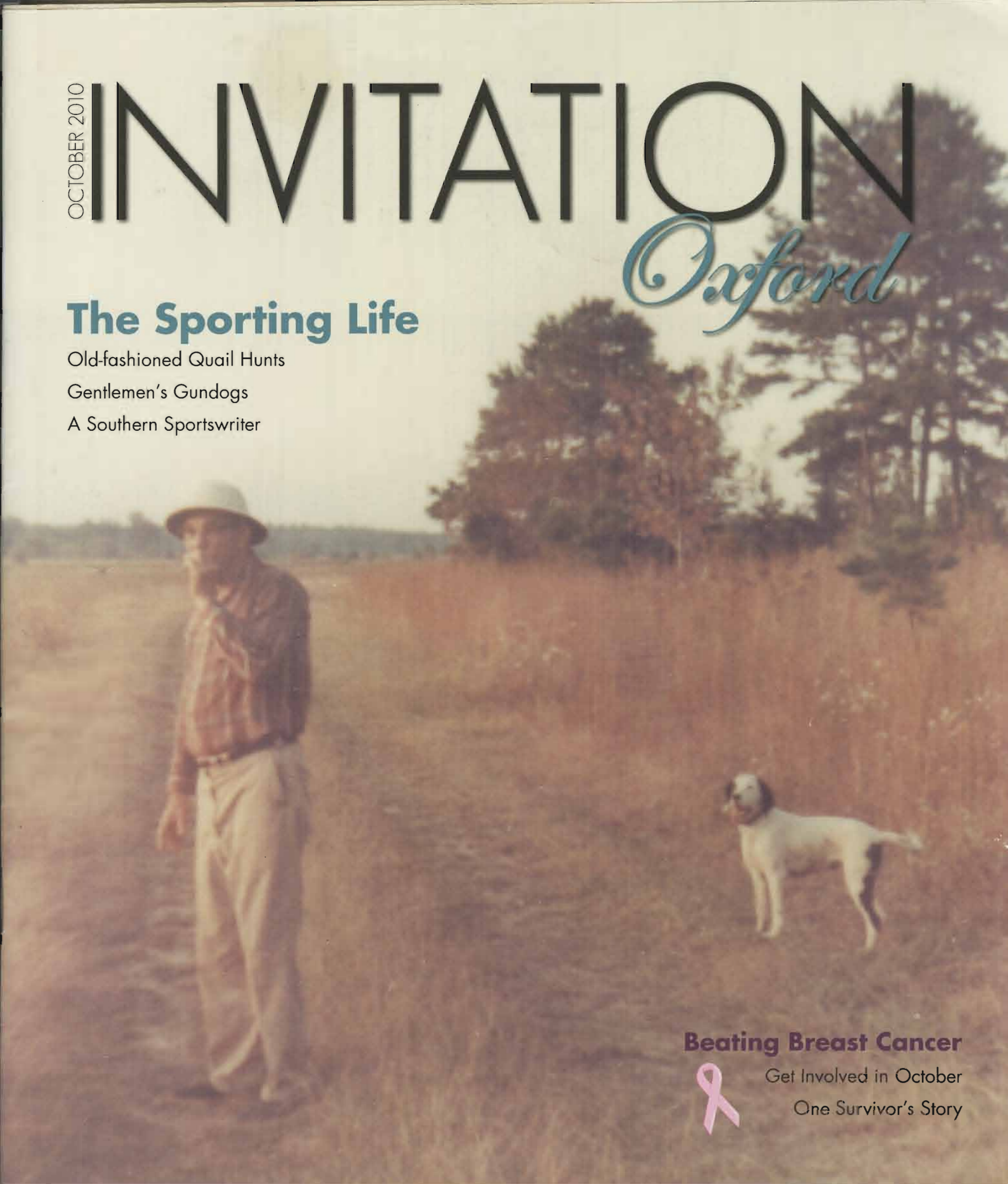
Oxford

The Sporting Life

Old-fashioned Quail Hunts

Gentlemen's Gundogs

A Southern Sportswriter



Beating Breast Cancer



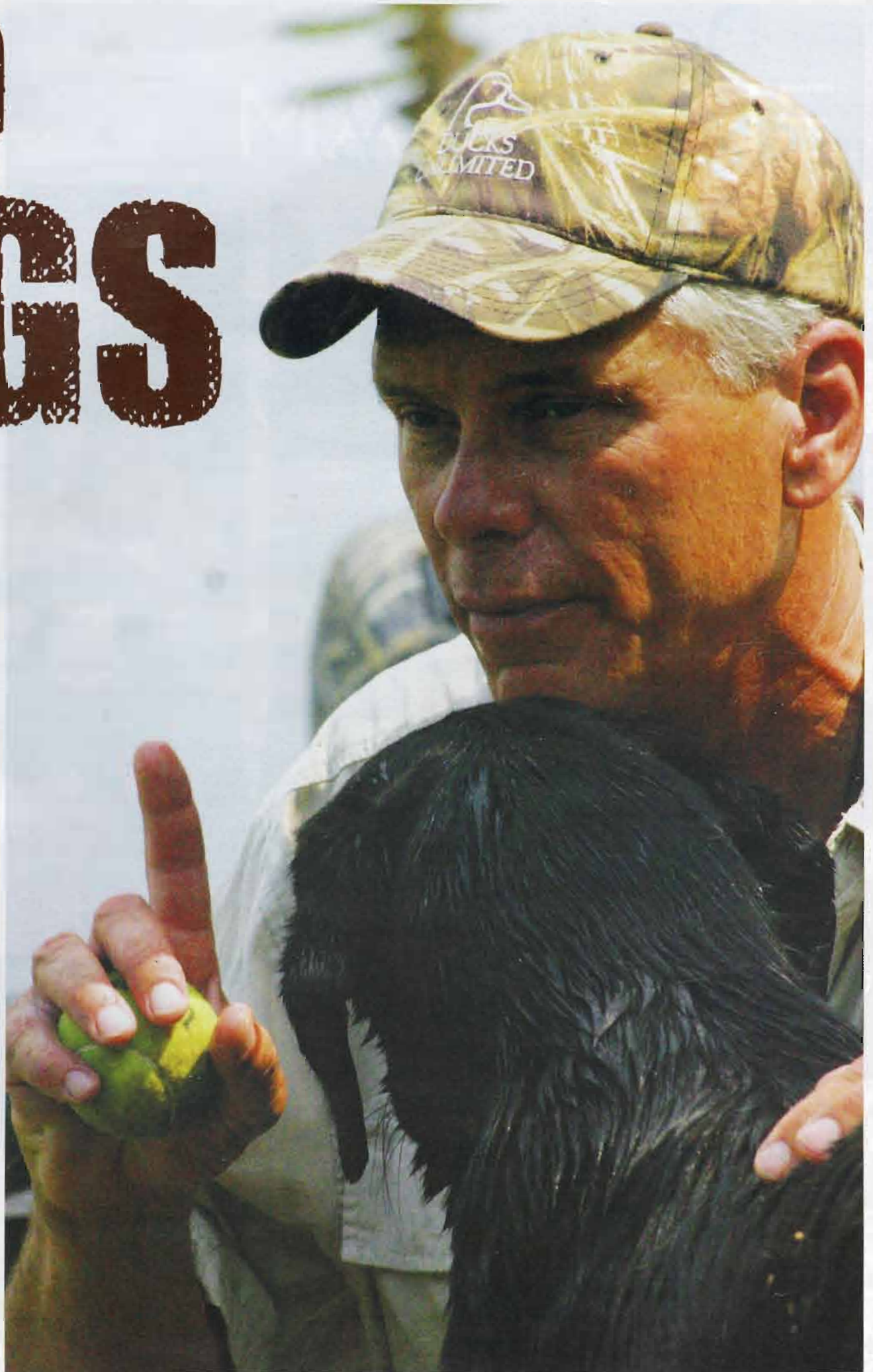
Get Involved in October

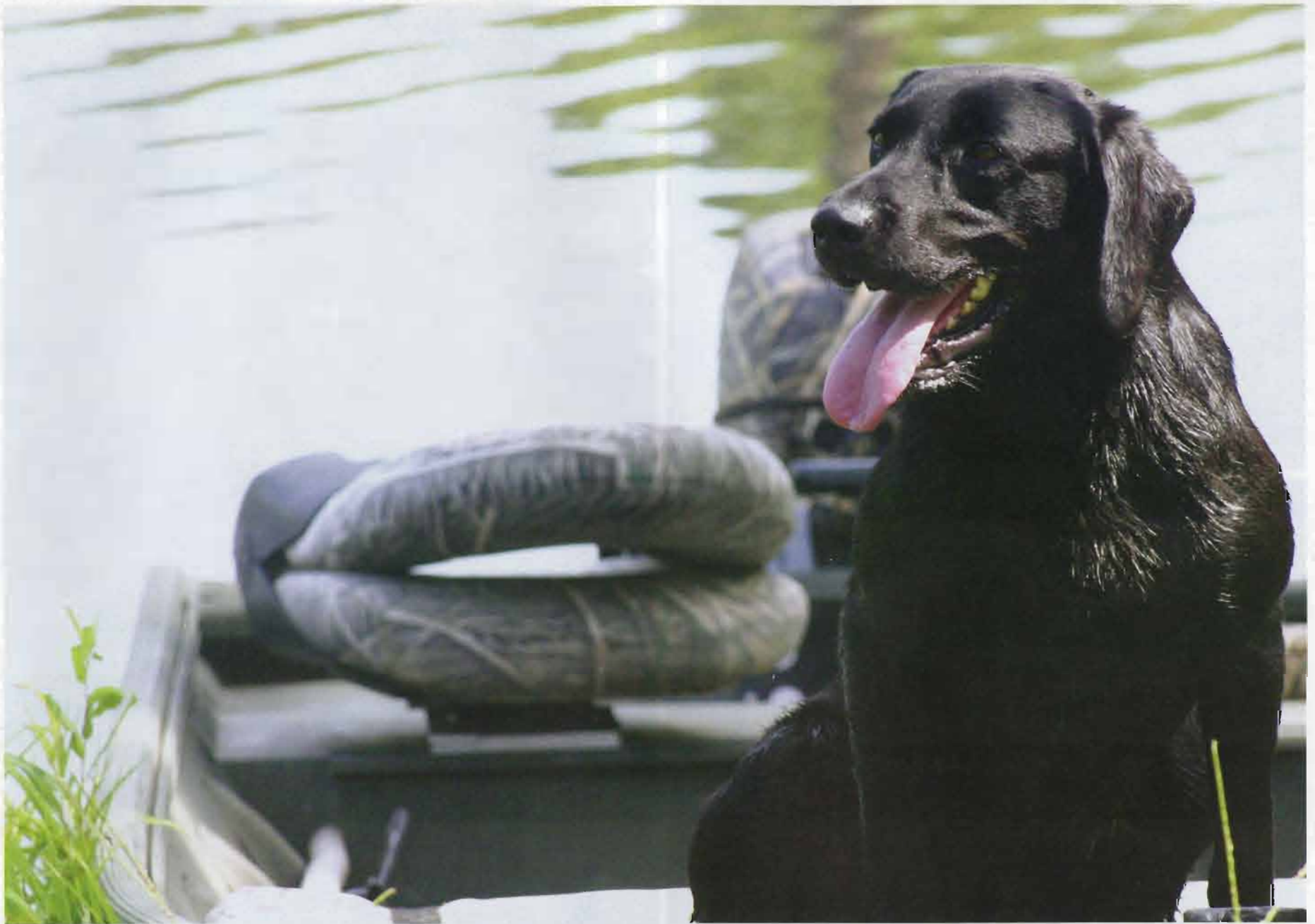
One Survivor's Story

GOOD DOGS

Wildrose Kennels owner
Mike Stewart trains
Labrador Retrievers to
hunt and hike – and
even save lives.

Story and photographs by
Cindy Howle





Wildrose Kennels, situated on 143 planned, wooded acres just 12 miles outside Oxford, has a worldwide reputation as one of the best and most extensive Labrador training and breeding facilities anywhere.

“What we try to do here is turn out the best-socialized, pre-trained puppies as possible,” Wildrose owner and president Mike Stewart said.

Stewart, who can usually be found roaming his acreage in sporty Filson attire and his trademark African Rogue hat, is a world-renowned trainer and breeder of pedigree British and Irish Labs. Appreciated for their calm demeanor, keen intellect and trainability for multiple activities, Wildrose Labs are coveted and internationally recognizable dogs.

In short, these Labs are superstars. Two Wildrose Labs, Drake and Deke, are the official mascots of international wetland and waterfowl conservation organization Ducks Unlimited. They are genuine canine celebrities.

Stewart specializes in training a Gentleman’s Gundog, his own special brand of hunting dog that sportsmen appreciate as wing-shooting companions that flush,

quarter and retrieve game. If their master shoots it, these dogs will find it.

The Gundog is popular with a list of impressive clients, from Delta planters to corporate executives from all over the world who appreciate the outdoor life. And if the clientele is impressive, so is the cost. Wildrose dogs range from \$1,200 for a puppy up to \$12,000 for a fully finished dog. The price rises with degree of training. But so far, Stewarts’ clients haven’t seemed to object to the price tag when they’re getting a custom-trained dog that meets, and often exceeds, their expectations.

“We have sold multiple dogs in every state and at least one dog in every province in Canada and in four [other] foreign countries,” Stewart said. “Ninety-five percent of those have come to get their dog or do training in Oxford.”

Owners must train at Wildrose for at least a few hours for a puppy or up to a couple of days for a finished dog, learning basic commands and how to properly handle the dogs for any task.

Sandra Summers, originally from England, traveled to Oxford, Miss., in

(Opposite page) Wildrose Kennels owner and president Mike Stewart with a Wildrose Labrador in training. (Above) Wildrose Labs are trained as hunting dogs that flush, quarter and retrieve game.



search of a Lab for her husband's 50th birthday several years ago. Not long after, Sandra and her husband, Franz Schneider, packed up and left Santa Fe, N.M., settling here in north Mississippi.

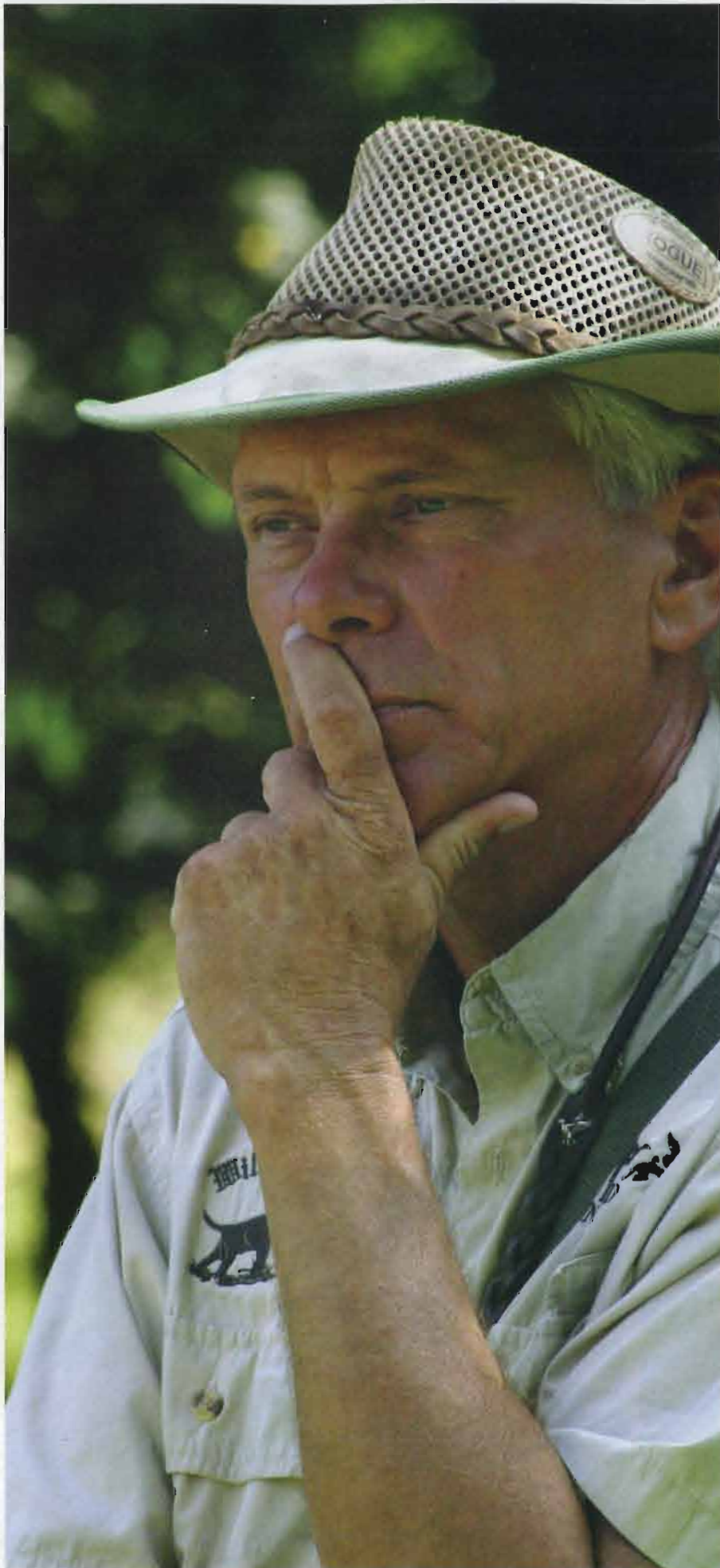
"People ask why we moved here, and we say, 'dogs.' What drew us to Oxford was the kennel. Mike is quite well known," Summers said.

The well-designed Wildrose facility adds to the overall appeal for its customers. A log cabin crafted of rough-hewn logs harvested from Lafayette and Pontotoc counties serves as the Wildrose Trading Company, a store open to visitors that sells high-end training and hunting supplies and accessories on site and online at wildrosetradingcompany.com.

"We provide the customer with an experience," Stewart said. "Oxford's a great place for that."

All Gundogs are trained for multiple tasks, which include retrieving dove, duck, quail and pheasant, as well as items beyond game such as antler shed and mushrooms. The training can take up to two or three years.

(Clockwise from top left) Wildrose Labs are expert swimmers, retrievers and adventure companions. The Wildrose Trading Company sells high-end training and hunting supplies on site at its lodge and on its website. A Wildrose Lab learns to retrieve antler shed. Feeding time at the kennels, which are open-air to keep dogs acclimated.



Mike Stewart watches as Labs train on the Wildrose campus. Stewart uses a positive and gentle training technique, which he calls "the Wildrose Way."

The dogs spend much of their time at Wildrose in Oxford, but, like any expensive education, training includes boarding school. Wildrose facilities in Jasper, Ark., and in Granite, Colo., which have different terrain from the Oxford location, help train the Adventure Dog, another Stewart invention. The Adventure Dog is trained and socialized for a spectrum of outdoor activities, which include hiking, mountain cycling, canoeing and camping.

At each location, Stewart uses a positive and gentle training technique, which he calls "the Wildrose Way." He never trains with electric or spike collars.

"His approach is unique," said Clay Baird, a manager with Ducks Unlimited. "It's cruelty-free training."

Ducks Unlimited uses Stewart and mascots Drake and Deke in their training videos filmed on the Wildrose grounds and accessed online by thousands.

"Some 750,000 web video users recognize Drake, Deke and Mike," said Chris Jennings, Ducks Unlimited's manager of communication and Web content. "Drake was used for the last nine years with DU television. It's the longest-running TV series on dog training in history."

The third type of dog trained at Wildrose has a more serious job. Stewart, who worked as Ole Miss Chief of Police and as an NCIS (Naval Criminal Investigative Service) agent before turning to full-time dog training, is civic-minded. Besides hunting dogs, Wildrose trains diabetic-alert dogs, which can smell changes in blood sugar levels of Type 1 diabetics. Using cotton swabs of human saliva, dogs are trained to signal any fluctuation in glucose levels, and alert its owner.

"These dogs have an amazing ability to sense," Stewart said.

Wildrose established the national Diabetic Alert Dog Conference, and Stewart hopes Oxford will become a place where diabetics can meet, share ideas and get assistance with alert dogs. Past conferences have been a success, with 50 to 65 participants and some 20 dogs.

"Every dog that has been trained has been successful, and we've placed 30," said Cathy Stewart, who is married to Mike and is vice president of Wildrose.

Stewart's hope is that Wildrose will continue to remain both cutting edge and service-minded.

"Hunting ducks is fun," he said, "but saving a life is powerful."

Through Stewart's innovative methods, these dogs can be trained to do it all – retrieve birds, negotiate the Appalachian Trail and detect low blood sugar. From field to fire-side, owners buy their dogs for outdoor adventures, but quickly find out they have a family companion.

"Our dogs complement our life," Summers said. "We can take ours into hotels, parks and Square Books. Anywhere."

Oxford's Hunting Dog Trainers

Stewart Kennels
Bobby Stewart
Jessie and Jane Steelman
662-234-1288 or
662-816-0907
stewartbritishlabs.com

The Sporting Life Kennels
Marty Roberts
662-832-6690
marty@sportinglifekennels.com
sportinglifekennels.com

Yocona River Boykins
Clay Black
662-202-2906
yoconariverboykins.com