

Rocky's Domain

Training hunting dogs in Homesley's blood

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Herald Correspondent

Rocky Homesley has a knack for training dogs. Teaching dogs to point and retrieve comes easy.

His Rock Haven Kennels & Shooting Preserve on Highway 274 three miles south of Cherryville is a hunter's paradise and outdoorsmen are now coming from all over the country to enjoy Upland bird hunting in classic Southern tradition.

There's plenty of room to hunt and relax on the sprawling 116 acre preserve on the 200 acre farm that once belonged to his father and grandfather. There's a lake stocked with fish and the shooting preserve is well marked for hunters of quail, chukar and pheasants. New state-of-the-art kennels are open for boarding of dogs and hunters can find lodging at "The Shed" in Fall and Winter Season.

Rocky, father Jim Homesley, Morris McGinnis and Ray Ernst are the genial hosts who welcome guests with a big smile and who treat them and all the dogs like extended members of the family. They train as many as 16 dogs at a time and each animal gets plenty of tender, loving care.

"We've been very blessed and are striving to make Rock Haven an even better place to hunt and share in the camaraderie that has been associated with bird hunting since the early days," says Rocky.

In this fast-paced world where most people don't take time to smell the roses, Rock Haven Kennels & Hunting Preserve is a Shangri la - a perfect mini vacation from the every day work place.

Rocky Homesley's love for animals developed at an early age. When most of his little friends were getting started in youth ball, Homesley was following his Dad and his bird hunting friends John Butler and Clarence Plonk Jr. to the fields. Rocky would hurry home from school every day to go hunting. "They'd let me carry the sack for them," he recalled.

Homesley said his first real trained dog was a white German Shepherd named Vaughn, a gift from the late Kings Mountain Police Chief Paul Sanders. The animal knew right from left and how to play dead. That got Rocky loving dogs and he started training dogs at age 12 when John Butler Plonk gave him some of his older dogs to get him started. The first person he trained a dog for and got money was at age 14 from Sid Thrift, who pitched in the World Series for the Pittsburgh Pirates. Rocky took Thrift wild bird hunting and Jerry Runaway Bandit was his first real good pointer.

Homesley, who started training dogs in 1976 and who is the first to use an electric training collar on a dog, opened Rock Haven Kennels and Hunting Preserve in 1992. Raised on Long Creek Church Road near Kings Mountain, he graduated from Cherryville High School in 1976. He is the son of Jim Homesley and the late Joyce Patnam Homesley and grandson of Broughton Homesley who used to farm the land where his preserve is located today.

Rocky worked for Lithium Corporation of America and ran a milk route for his father who operated Jim's Distributing Company before turning his lifelong hobby into full-time employment. During the past 10 years he has won 583 field trials and has been National Bird Hunters Association Handler of the Year 11 times and runner-up five times. In addition, he has been voted Trainer of the Year in the two Carolinas during this same period.

Along with his multiple champions, Rocky has had many of his dogs featured on TV and in numerous national hunting publications. Rocky offers Bird dog training which includes force breaking to retrieve, steadying to wing and shot, and Man's Best Friend's pre-season tune-ups, also gun dog training and field trial dog training. He often has puppies from champions, started dogs or broke dogs for sale.

Guided hunts are popular and unguided hunts are always welcome. Guided hunts require a minimum of 30 quail and include birds, hot country meal, unlimited practice on the multi-station skeet range, cleaning and travel packaging of game for a total fee of \$350 for as many as three people. Rock Haven can also provide trained dogs necessary for a hunt, all steady to wing and shot, says Homesley.

Homesley credits his Dad for his career success. Rocky's Cracker Jack, an English Pointer, is the stud for breeding. Pearl, an English Pointer, died last year at age 11. Pearl's puppy, Ike, was bred and trained at Rock Haven and was the 2004 winner in the 17th NBA Futurity, judged the best two year old dog in the nation.

Homesley's reputation as a trainer of champion bird dogs is well known. He specialized in Pointers, Setters and Brittanys and has trained dogs for many well known personalities and their pictures with champion dogs are displayed in the lodge. His dogs consistently win in field trials all over the country and he says there's nothing more enjoyable than watching a dog in field trials.

Rock Haven offers yearly memberships to businesses and organizations that entitle the member to 100 free quail to be shot by Dec. 31, lodging at the Shed on site for the Fall/Winter season, reduced rates for all birds bought, reduced rates for boarding at the kennels on premise, members only activities, use of skeet range, summer activities at the Shed which include cookouts and skeet shooting and dove hunts.

The official hunting season is October 1-March 31 but it really gets busy during the holidays from Thanksgiving through Dec. 31. To hunt you must possess a North Carolina hunting license or a preserve license. North Carolina requires a hunter's safety course if you have never had a hunting license, cannot provide a copy of a previous license or were born after 1958. Homesley said that 7 1/2, 8 1/5 or 9 shot is allowed and hunters can take their own bird dogs if they are manageable.

Maybe you are too young to remember bird hunting in the 50's and 60's or maybe you remember and miss those days. Old fashioned bird hunting the Homesley way is fast flying bobwhites, cackling pheasants or elusive chukars. A 2004 delegation came to Cherryville from Japan to hunt at Rock Haven.

It's easy for a visitor to see how Rock Haven got its name. The farmhouse is underpinned with rock and rock was used to build the chimney. And the owners added the word haven because hunters consider it that and much more.



Rocky Homesley and Rocky's Cracker Jack, the English Pointer, used as the stud for breeding at Rock Haven Kennels & Hunting Preserve.



Jim Homesley, left, Morris McGinnis and Rocky Homesley are pictured in the lodge at Rock Haven Kennels & Shooting Preserve. Pictures of champion dogs from the kennels are in the background.

Photos by Elizabeth Stewart

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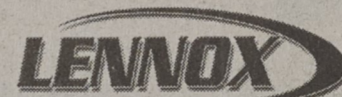
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