

Judge's Report for the Kelperland Trophy Stake 2017

Judged by Peter Brown on 12th November 2017

Thank you to the Bloodhound Club for inviting me to judge this exciting event once again. And thank you of course to those on the ground who made it possible:

- landowners who allowed use of their land,
- organiser Jo Franks who not only set everything up, but also hosted the summing up with *aplomb*, as well as walking the line,
- to Christine, Keith and Sue who manned the road crossings,
- my able and experienced assistant judge Lorraine Priestley with well honed running boots and, of course
- the competitor Duncan Robertson and hound Houndsong Catillion (better known as Malachi).

What a pity the other eligible hounds could not make it. And what a pity there were not more enthusiasts around to witness a fine performance.

The ground seemed great; flinty clay with stubble of lengths varying from short and stiff at the start, to long and flattened that crackled underfoot, and finally to long and untended with seed spill from the harvest growing strong and lush green for the final three fields. The weather was kind(ish); dry with broken cloud and intermittent sunshine, overnight there had been some rain, and the clay held some standing water in parts, but the wind had dried it enough to be firm and leave us with clean boots. My hounds find the scent exciting on mornings when the moisture lingers and it looked just so. However the nor nor west wind was strong and chill, it may have played havoc with scent in the lee of hedges, trees and woods. It was an unhelpful tail wind on the first half and channelled along the valley, head on for the run in to the walker, so strong that the judges had to brace themselves to stand and watch. Footpaths are a significant feature.

The start was uphill on shorter stubble with a crosswind partly shielded by nearby woods. There was one outsider witness, a local dog walker sitting in his car near the flag. The hound did not need encouraging, and set off with a joyful cry.

This set the tone as the fields and woods echoed with his cry much of the time until he found his quarry. If speaking were the only criteria this hound had it sewn up.

The trail rose uphill and past a woody headland before turning right into the wind as the field spread into a woody bay with plenty of wind turbulence. Here the hound needed to cast around and check back several times, Lorraine noted "typical dog hound, they check back, double check and check again", but he seemed convinced enough on the line. Meanwhile, Duncan had gone deeper into the bay toward what seemed an impenetrable forest and encouraged Malachi to follow. The bond being what it is, Malachi obeyed, but soon returned whooping to the line and found the way into the next field, crossing and ignoring a footpath, with Duncan following.

Now on the higher ground the wind was in command as it swirled over the woods to the right. It was obvious that the line should have gone round through the gap to the right. The vegetation was light here and the ground not susceptible to footprints. Not that I have ever known this line walker to leave a print, 'though the rumour that she hovers along the line on her broomstick is unfounded, I have seen her walking lines. So Duncan held his ground while Malachi cast wider and wider to the left, and finally joyously picking up the line to the road crossing, which was to the left, with Duncan in pursuit. We were on course.

Across the road the hound acknowledged the flag and entered the next field confidently. This field is large, a fine amphitheatre, a slight bowl at the head of a shallow valley that we would later be following, surrounded by thick tight, but not too high hedges all round, so the wind could play its part. The line circled clockwise, making the most of the ground, around about two thirds of the field and then passed through a gap in the hedge at the lowest point. A footpath follows down that hedge and passes thro' the gap before forking. Duncan was happy, time to light a pipe. We stayed at the entrance watching hound and Duncan work half of the circuit before we used the high ground anticlockwise toward the next hedge.

In spite of the wind, they made good progress checking and rechecking until reaching the far hedge and footpath where there was a large gap opening to an adjacent field. And Malachi went there, probably taken with the wind that had everything else under control, so we all lost sight of him.

Meanwhile Duncan had spotted the lower gap and went through, probably hoping to cut off Malachi, but was thwarted by another dense hedge preventing sight of that field and his hound. So he returned, coincidentally as did Malachi, they met and tracked back to the lower gap, and through to the next field on line.

This next field is broadly L shaped, with the foot out of sight to the left. And it slopes up on both sides as we go down the valley. It was covered with long dry dead stubble that had been rolled flat, it crackled like bubble wrap as we walked on it. The footpath forked, the main bit followed the immediate hedge, the other part crossed out of the field further down on the right hand hedge. The line curved up towards that right hedge and then, at about the one mile point, swung round to the far left corner. The far right corner is notoriously dead ground for hound scenting. Malachi was still working vocally on the higher ground to the right but then went through the hedge. Duncan's stick was firmly planted and the pipe refilled, wind plays havoc with a good smoke. He waited for Malachi to return and on they went, smoke from Duncan and sound from Malachi. The hound had to go and check that dead ground, but in the silence Duncan sensed it should be ruled out, and called Malachi back, where they picked up the line again with the hound shouting joyously going on to the far corner. Here is another footpath running back downhill on the far side of the hedge, and the hound had to check it out. But here was also another road crossing. Duncan spotted it, and bundled his hound through the hedge.

Here on the field covering changed, it was still longish stubble, but the seed spill from the harvest had germinated and grown vigorously. It looked, and was, lush green, and this covering stayed that way all the way to the quarry. The field stretches more or less level for 200 yards left and right to hedges, and about

100 yards ahead, before falling steeply to the valley bottom; there is a footpath about 50 yards to the right that runs straight across. The line veers acutely right from the road crossing, and before reaching the right hedge, curves left over the brow down into the valley. It continues to bear left for a half circle, and run up the valley partway down the hillside and parallel to the footpath which runs along the valley bottom.

It passes thro' a farm gap out of the first field and gradually down to meet the footpath to use the gap into the final field. The wind made the most of channelling down the valley so was initially a tail wind, but after the turn became a headwind for the last half mile. Duncan looked pleased when he saw the lush vegetation.

From the crossing Malachi initially checked out left, possibly downwind of the quarry, but soon settled to the right, speaking again. There was a diversion when he met the footpath, but Duncan was having none of it. Further on, Malachi was drawn to the far hedge, and his gambolling silhouette and echoing calls gave the impression of some prehistoric predator. But he came back to pick up the line curving left. We lost sight of him for a moment, due to the curvature of the land, but when we crested the brow he was on song again, halfway down the hillside and moving along up the valley. The wind was vicious and the judges had to lean into it; in spite of the good vegetation there was a lot of checking, going back and rechecking. It was slow and the hound's calls echoed off the woods across the valley. Duncan's pipe was giving trouble again and Lorraine was feeling the chill, her running boots had not been tested. Check by check they made it to the line walker, but Malachi was then more interested in getting through the gate to the road, where his quarry had spent most time.

About 110 minutes all told. An exhilarating performance testing both hound and handler working well together. One for me to remember, and certainly worthy of the trophy.