



Sue Kendall (r) introduces Shannon Honl and her Airedale, Vesper, to the training tunnel made of straw. **Photo by Christine Thomas**

"I am headed over to the Oh Rats Training Center in Sheboygan Falls on Dec. 30 for barn hunt training," my friend, Sue Zimmer, shared on a winter solstice call. "I invited some of our other



FROM THE LITTLE CABIN IN THE WOODS

By Christine Thomas

Airedale friends to throw in. Would you want to bring Major over?

A little background here is necessary. You met Sue Zimmer in a previous column when my Airedale, Major, introduced her Airedales, Chipper and Buckwheat, to pheasant hunting. The Oh Rats Dog Training Center is co- owned by another dog show friend, Sue Kendall, and Bernadette Zimick- Stahlkopf. They host many kinds of dog training and offer "barn hunt" trials at their facility.

What is barn hunt? Basically, it is a game where dogs get to test their ability to find rats that are safely ensconced in containers made of PVC pipe and that are hidden in piles of straw. The rats are the domestic variety. They live in a climate- controlled room that sports a placard on the door that reads "Ratisson." They are well- fed, receive veterinary care as necessary, and seemed not at all phased by dogs that find them in the straw. Dog teeth and rat hides never meet.

The trial area is fenced in.



Sue Zimmer and her Airedale, Buckwheat, find a rat in a training exercise. **Photo by Christine Thomas**

Each area contains bales of straw, some of them stacked, and standard- sized tunnels in the straw. The judge hides tubes containing live rats, tubes that are empty, and tubes containing used rat litter. The dog must complete three tasks at the novice level.

It must find the correct tube – the one containing the rat – and signal the handler, in whatever way works for the two of them, that the rat has been found. The dog also must climb up on the straw bales and successfully navigate a tunnel. There is a two- minute time limit in the novice class.

Barn hunts are wildly popular activities all over the country. All types of dog breeds compete. However, this game has "terrier" written all over it. The word terrier means "to the ground." These dogs were bred for varmint control. Airedales, the largest of the terriers, were bred to root out larger prey, like badgers. They, apparently, hunt rats as well. Stan, my husband, who grew up on a farm in southwestern Michigan, tells of a neighbor who raised blueberries. He had an Airedale in his kennel of mostly hounds, for the express purpose of killing rats in the barn.

I thought this might be fun, if we could get past Major's intact- male inclination to pee on things. Don't get me wrong, he is reliably housebroken. He just does not see a pile of straw bales in the barn as "house." Any form of waste elimination is a disqualification.



Major and Vesper meet "the rat." Photo by Christine Thomas

I have another motivation, in addition to having a fun thing to do with my dog in January, when the Packers have washed out of the play offs. The Airedale Terrier Club of America touts these dogs as being versatile. They have an awards program that recognizes dogs that have proven they are, in fact, versatile. GCH Coldstream Major Mischief JFT CGC TKI has six titles in four categories of competition. He is recognized by the club as being Gold Versatile. Platinum Versatile takes seven titles in five categories. A RATN (rat novice) title would take us there.



One of the rats from the Oh Rats Dog Training Center in Sheboygan Falls. Photo by Christine Thomas

I signed Major up for the three- day trial in January. I figured we could always back out if the training did not go well. When I texted our daughter, Shannon, that we were doing this, she wanted to sign her Airedale, Vesper, up as well.

"Vesper lives in Chicago," I texted Sue Zimmer. "The rats she meets are bigger and meaner than the ones we will see at the training center."

So, Vesper was invited.

Nine Airedales showed up to "meet the rat" in late December. Sue Kendall and Bernadette began by bringing out some of the "ratties," as they affectionately call them. Some were in PVC tubes; some were in wire cages. The dogs could see them. Major and Vesper were wild about the rats, as were most of the other Airedales. The tension on the dog side was electric. The barking was deafening. The rats looked bored.

After this introduction, I put Major out in the Jeep. Sue Kendall provided the group with a rundown of the sport and how the trial would work, including the rules designed to keep rats, dogs, handlers, and judges safe.

There are lots of rules. The main ones are that I must hang up Major's leash when I release him in the ring. I cannot touch anything. When he finds the rat, I need to keep the tube level when I hand it to the volunteer who will collect it. I cannot "scruff" my dog while trying to make sure he lets the hand- off of the rat tube go smoothly. This means that you can only touch him with your flat hand, no grabbing hair, skin, or tails. I cannot swear in the ring. Depending upon how things go, this pipefitter's daughter might find that hard. I cannot fail to call out "Rat" when he indicates a rat. Any of these violations will cause us not to qualify. It takes three qualified runs to get that title ribbon. Also, Major cannot pee in the ring. Sigh.

Sue Zimmer did a demonstration with Buckwheat, a master level competitor. Buckwheat did great. Having met the rat, received instruction on the rules, and seen a demonstration, it was time for the novices to take the ring. Major went first. He would have qualified on the first run. Sue Kendall did a masterful job of communicating with us. She used a rat to introduce him to the tunnel before our turn. He got that right away. He already knows the command for jumping up, from the many other things we do from getting in the Jeep to getting on the grooming table. He hunts birds, so he knows the nose. He is nuts for the rat, so I have no problem seeing when he finds one. I just need to trust.

Timberwyk Vesper did a great job as well. She also would have qualified. She had a completely different style. Major tore into it like a maniac. Vesper was very methodical and lady- like.

Sue Kendall did another barn hunt training last weekend. Stan and I took Major over. He peed in the ring on the first run.

"The fun is over for you buddy," Sue scolded him.

She told me to leash him and take him outside. He looked stunned. When we came back in, he focused on the fun and did not do anything naughty.

So, tomorrow we will head back for three days of barn hunting. Shannon and Vesper will join us on Saturday. Major will get to run six times. I am pretty sure he can complete the assigned tasks. The question is will there be peeing, swearing, or scruffing? Time will tell.

To be continued – unless the telling would be too painful.

Christine Thomas, of Plover, is the former dean of the College of Natural Resources at UW- Stevens Point and the founder of Becoming An Outdoors- Woman. Email her at christinelynnthomas@gmail.com.

From: [https:// npaper- wehaa.com/ outdoor- news- wisconsin:see-2025/02/04:c-4287222](https://npaper-wehaa.com/outdoor-news-wisconsin:see-2025/02/04:c-4287222)