

# Meet the Judge

By Sara Heesacker  
Nunn, Colorado

## MATT MINICH

It takes a special individual to teach youth, especially high school students. The really incredible thing about teachers is that it isn't just a job. It's a passion, it's who they are and it's definitely a calling. In every facet of his life, Matt Minich has the true heart of someone that desires to get information into the hands of people that crave learning.

Matt has his brother to thank for beginning his journey with hunting dogs. His brother had Irish Setters and wanted to go hunting, so he convinced Matt to get a bird dog. After a Google search, he found a breeder he felt comfortable with. Matt, his brother, and his new hunting partner, a Weimaraner pup named Payton, went out hunting before she had her bird or gun intro. He reminisces, "Thankfully I didn't screw her up." Driving to the next field, he noticed a NAVHDA sticker on the hunter's truck in front of them. His brother told him, "Don't get in with those guys!" But the organization was blessed that Matt didn't listen to that piece of advice.

Matt joined up with the Northern Illinois Chapter after seeing that sticker and was hooked from that very first experience. His Weimaraner was too old for Natural Ability, so he started preparing for the Utility Test. He remembers fondly that they weren't very prepared, the test score wasn't very good, but the two of them had a blast. So often we forget that the score is a number but the partnership with our dog is what truly makes the experiences in NAVHDA so memorable.

Matt joined NAVHDA in the spring of 2011. He has been an invaluable presence in the Illinois Chapter ever since. He has held many roles including Training Director, Testing Director and is currently the chapter president. When his chapter was having challenges finding enough judges for their tests, Matt entered the apprentice program and became a judge in 2019. When you combine meeting good people with having fun while seeing different breeds work, it was an easy decision to make.

In 2015, a friend who had bred a litter had a puppy that came back, and Matt decided it was time to add another versatile dog to his hunting string. At four months old, he picked up a German Shorthaired



Pointer puppy at a training day. A new puppy is always a memorable day, and this day wouldn't be hampered by his Weimaraner finding a skunk. Thankfully, the puppy was in the truck and only one dog got the brunt of the spray! Matt really enjoyed his time preparing Gus through the NAVHDA system. They traveled from chapter to chapter in pursuit of a Prize I Utility score. In 2019, they ran the Invitational and received their Versatile Champion title as a team.

Matt is a high school science teacher with three of those classes a day being devoted to special education students. With a full schedule during the school year, Matt still tries to judge around six NAVHDA tests a year. Hunting season is always challenging as a teacher. Matt and the dogs hunt as much as the weekends allow on State Land pursuing pheasants in Illinois. Watching the dogs work provides plenty of excitement but there is so much enjoyment to be found in spending time in the field. He's looking forward to the day when he can take the dogs on longer excursions to Kansas for wild pheasants or out west in pursuit of grouse. With both of Matt's dogs approaching the

retirement years, his primary goal is to let them have fun and enjoy their hunts after all the work they have done for him over the years. He is looking forward to a new pup joining the household later this summer.

Matt volunteers during the hunting season to introduce people to hunting. Annually, he guides youth hunts and really enjoys watching and working with the youth. He also enjoys working with NAVHDA members on training days and shares a unique perspective. Most often we will hear the phrase, "Be a sponge" on training days. Matt states it a little differently: "Be a Sham-Wow!" Especially for new handlers or when you are learning a new progression, trying to absorb everything can make training at home challenging. But if you focus on going home with one take away, then you will have a solid plan for the homework to teach your dog before the next day in the field. Soak in one thing. Work on building the partnership and communication with your dog on that one thing. There is so much more accomplished when you work with your dog at home consistently with good timing... that is where the gains are made.

Like any fabulous teacher, he has sage advice for apprentices joining the judging program: Be aware; watch everything going on. Body language of both the handler and the dog are critical to learn how to read. And most importantly, keep things simple. When you practice your judge's instructions to handlers don't be Charlie Brown's teacher where all your handlers hears is, "Wah wah woh wah wah." Be concise and relevant. That is the best way to help instruct a nervous handler.

You never know who will be influenced by your involvement in NAVHDA. A simple logo on a hat or a bumper sticker on your hunting truck could mean all the difference in an aspiring hunter's life. Matt's career lends a unique angle to how he goes about judging, working with and interacting with people in the organization. He even taught this NAVHDA member a few new things! 🐾

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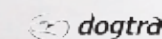
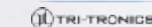
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