

Lost at a Field Trial in Southwest Idaho

Finding Finey



Larry and David tracking
Photo by Ron Dunagan

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Ken Barber

The Idaho Field trials are held at grounds high in the Owyhee region - a remote expanse sprawling over nearly 9 million acres where Idaho, Nevada and Oregon join. Named for some natives of Hawaii who perished there during a fur trapping expedition in 1819, Owyhee is an early spelling of Hawaii. The land consists of rugged rim rock ridges, snowcapped mountains, deep rhyolite canyons and vast areas of sage and grasslands. The area is home to deer, elk, bighorn sheep, coyotes, cougar and rattlesnakes. In the fall, the area turns cold and winds howl through the rim rock.

The Saturday Brace

It was a cool, damp, breezy morning on September 29th at the Idaho Brittany Club's (IBC) Fall 2007 field trial held at Mile Marker 9 in Marsing, Idaho. The weather was perfect for dogs, handlers and horses alike when the Open All Age stake started. In the seventh brace, FC/AFC Jalo's Running Josephine (Chick's Blaze'n Sawtooth Sam x Top Knot Annie Ban-Dee) was poised to put down another memorable performance, having many wins on these grounds over the past decade. Owner/handler Jim House was contemplating retiring the 10 year old "Finney" (pronounced Fee Nee)

after the trial. At the break away, Finey put down her usual spectacular race running far to the front and high up on the hill where she knew chukars could be found. At approximately 7 minutes she was seen near the top of the mountain to the east. Instead of returning to the course, she continued over the top and was not seen again. At past events, Finey had run off in similar fashion, and later returned to camp after being judged out of contention. Everyone thought that this would be the outcome this time. Finey was wearing a Tracker collar, and Jim and others were able to pick up the signal from high points on the grounds.

By late afternoon on Saturday, Finey had not returned. Roger Borine and Jim Hammett drove the area adjacent to the course to try to recover her on horseback and by vehicle. They could pick up the signal from her tracking collar but she was in a remote area and attempts to recover her failed. Tom White, working independently, searched the canyons in the area north along Highway 95. Although he received a weak signal to the east from near the Field trail grounds, his search in the canyons to the north, and along the southern perimeter, were not successful.



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Sunday Morning

By the Sunday morning break away, Finey still had not returned and attempts to pick up the signal from the tracking collar now were unsuccessful. Steve Ball, Ron Dunagan and others drove to high points but no signal from the tracking collar was received. Finey was now seriously lost and the weather report was not encouraging. High winds, cold temperatures and heavy rain were expected and Sunday night the weather hit.

Sunday evening, Ron Dunagan made contact with Ken Barber, President of Tracker Radio Systems, and asked for his assistance. Ken is a member and past President of IBC. He packed up receivers, antennas and other communications gear plus an ATV to aid in the search on Monday.

Monday - The Formal Search Begins

Arriving at 8:00 AM to consult with Jim House, Larry Sandusky, Ron Dunagan and David Kirk, Ken found the weather to be a major concern. It was cold, damp and enough rain had fallen to make all but the best roads impassable. Ken and Larry drove to the Mile Marker 7 road and covered the area to the South to see if they could pick up a signal. They stopped at several spots along the road, and Ken took the ATV to the top of Flat Top Butte (5828') to no avail.

The two returned to camp, and a crestfallen Jim House made the tough decision to return home to Oregon to monitor his phone should someone pick up the dog and try to contact him. Larry and Ron hauled club equipment and their gear home and agreed to search on Tuesday if there was no success on Monday afternoon.

Ken contacted David Kirk and they decided to spend the afternoon searching to the north. After driving around for several hours on all the passable roads they could find, Ken and David reviewed the maps and determined that her most likely location was the West Fork of Squaw



Creek and Little Hardtrigger Creek drainages. Late in the afternoon they separated. David spent the remainder of the time trying to find roads into the area as well as searching some additional new area on the Hardtrigger drainage. No signal from the collar was heard.

While unsuccessful in hearing the collar, the Monday search activities did rule out the area to the south, west and north of the grounds. This left the area to the East of the Mile Marker 9 grounds to be searched. In setting a plan of action for Tuesday, Larry, Ron and David decided to split up to access the area from two different points. Armed with David's Tracker Maxima (standard issue) and a second Maxima

with a long range antenna, provided by Tracker, they put their plan in motion.

Tuesday - The Search Continues

Tuesday morning the weather was much improved, and the rugged roads that were "gumbo" the day before were now passable but still extremely rugged. The search crew formulated a communication plan to ensure that their efforts were coordinated and hopefully narrowing the search area. David planned to enter from the North and Larry and Ron from the North East. The group agreed to talk every 30 minutes either by cell phone or FRS radio.

A Weak Signal is Heard

David received a weak signal at 10:45 AM and tried to contact Larry and Ron – leaving a message on Larry's cell phone. At 11:45 AM, Larry and Ron working together were elated to receive a weak signal from the collar from a high point. Later, as they converged, Ron called on the radio saying that they could see David's truck. They agreed to meet up to search together. While the searchers were encouraged by the presence of a strong signal they were also concerned that the collar was now in low battery mode and the dog appeared to be stationary much of the time. Could a coyote or cougar be dragging her or was she just tired and resting? Clearly they had to act quickly before the battery totally died and they had no way to track her.



After comparing the bearings they received, the group decided to proceed south along a muddy, rugged road through the Shares Basin into the West Fork of Squaw Creek, a narrow creek bottom between two ridges rising roughly 3,500 feet above the searchers. As tensions grew they continued tracking and were encouraged by getting a stronger and stronger signal from the collar. Soon they were proceeding along the rugged Squaw Creek stream bed. At one point David stopped as the signal bearing indicated that the collar was directly above him on the hill. Larry and Ron continued on but turned back abruptly after they realized that they were getting further away.

FOUND!

David started climbing the hill with leash in hand as well as his Tracker receiver. He called and whistled for her, but no dog appeared. After clearing a small bluff he had an open view of the hillside and the signal was so strong that David turned off the receiver and started searching visually. Soon he saw a small white object on the sage covered slope about 200 yards above him. David called and whistled but got no movement. He then climbed the steep slope, and soon could make out the orange and white coat. Finey sat there watching him with a scared look until he reached his hands around her and she broke into a Brittany wiggle with her tail beating furiously. David checked her for injuries but found only very raw paw pads. He gave her a dog biscuit, which she wolfed down, and radioed to Larry that he “got her.”

David carried her down the steep hill and met up with Larry and Ron on the way to the truck. Once at the vehicle, they gave her some food and water and headed for home, excited to

spread the word that Finey had been found.

David called Jim House to give him the good news. Jim was elated, and said that he had lost hope that he would see Finey again when he left on Monday. The good news spread quickly through the Oregon and Idaho Brittany Clubs and calls were coming in from members thanking the searchers for their success and persistence. That night at the IBC monthly meeting, there were high fives all around as the club celebrated the

David Kirk, Larry Sandusky and Finey
Photo by Ron Dunagan



recovery of a rare dog of phenomenal ability.

Several of the searchers had additional motivation. Ron and Ken own dogs that are also out of DC Chick’s Blaze’n Sawtooth Sam and David’s puppy (Riley) is out of Finey. Recovering Riley’s mom was very special for David and his wife Arlette.

In commenting about the search, Tracker President, Ken Barber, reviewed the factors that contributed to its success. “First and foremost, there was a good plan. There was heavy use of maps, and areas that were covered without hearing the collar were eliminated from the

search. That made it much easier to concentrate on the remaining area. Secondly, several of the team members had considerable experience with tracking, and one member (Ron Dunagan) had Search and Rescue experience as a career Paramedic. Finally, they were persistent – not willing to give up until Finey was recovered.” Others pointed out that the only way Finey was found is that her owner was diligent in putting a tracking collar on her, even though she was running on familiar grounds.

Jim called all the searchers to thank them for their effort. “I owe a debt of gratitude to everyone that helped in this recovery and also to Tracker that provided equipment and assistance looking for my dog.” For the Oregon Brittany Club, Roger Borine offered “Tenacity and Tracker saved Finey. Those Idaho guys had a plan, equipment and a no quit attitude. My hat is off to them.”

Jim House confirmed that Finey is “officially” retired. She can now pass the rest of her days in the company of a relieved owner. Furthermore, her many admirers and supporters will not have to remember her as the dog that never returned from her last field trial.

