

Teacher, Trainer, Coach:



AGERMAN SHORT-HAIRED POINTER, Pre, has developed into a champion field-trial dog, reaching the National Gun Dog Association finals. Here, Tim Thornton prepared Pre for the field.

— Herald staff photos by Jim Merriott

Man enjoys working with youngsters, dogs

By **JIM MERRIOTT**
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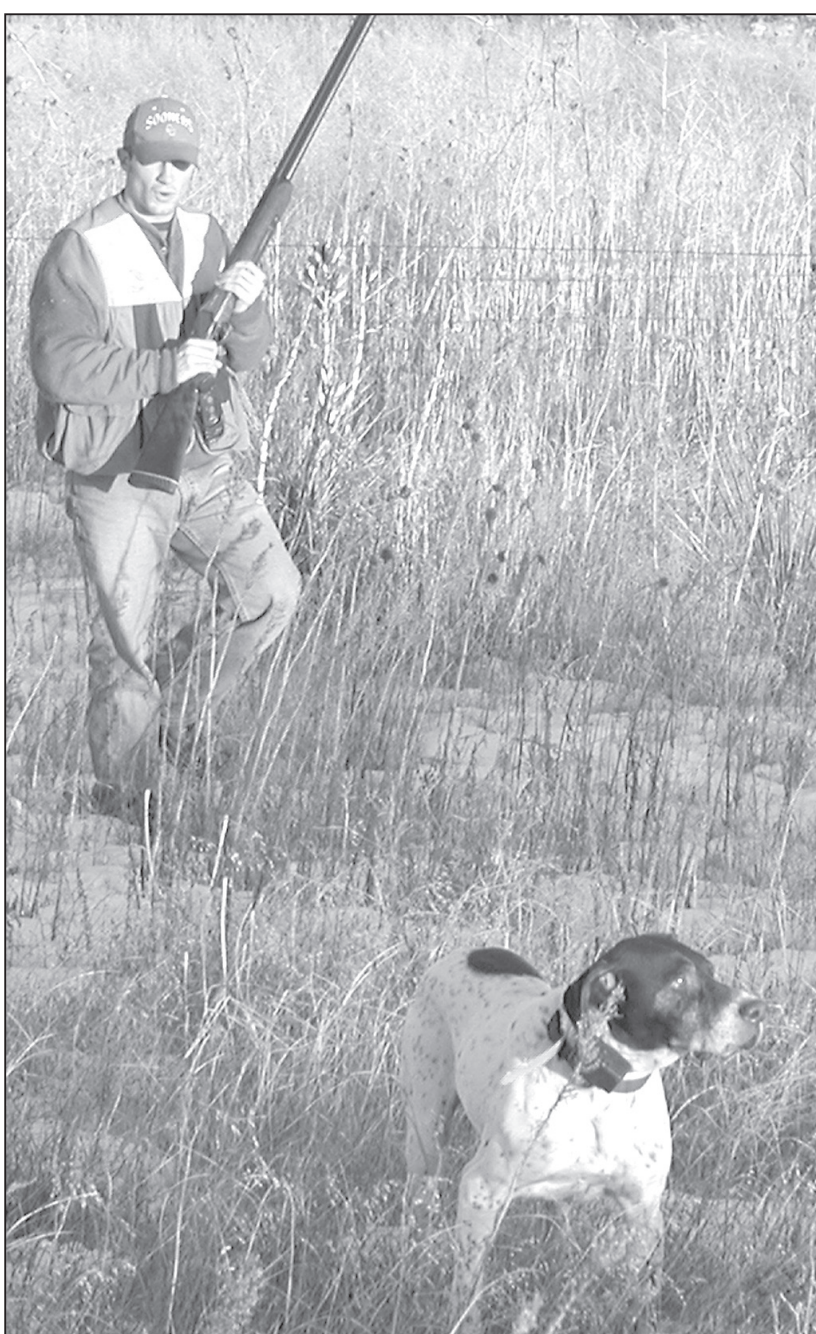
Tim Thornton likes kids and dogs. During the week, he teaches kindergarten at Oberlin Elementary School. After school, he's the assistant boys basketball coach for Decatur Community High School. But teaching doesn't stop when he leaves school, because in his spare time he's a professional dog trainer, hunting guide, breeder and field-trial enthusiast. "During the off season," he said, "I travel throughout the Midwest, taking my German shorthairs to sanctioned field dog trials sponsored by numerous dog food companies. "It is kind of interesting how I got started working with dogs. My first dog showed up accidentally at our home on opening day of pheasant season my sophomore year in high school. She had an injury that required a vet's attention. We advertised her in the newspaper, but no one claimed her, so I

nursed her back to health. "I named her Daisey. I had a tough time working with her, but I loved her. She wasn't much of a hunter and I spent most of my time during hunting trips hunting her rather than hunting birds. She was the main reason that I got hooked on bird dogs. "When I was a senior, I got my first German shorthair as an early graduation present. It was a 3-month-old male pup. It was also a miniature pointing machine. I named him Pre after the late distance runner Steve Prefontaine. After high school, said Thornton, who grew up in Oakley, he attended Colby Community College on a track scholarship. Colby was a good fit because it was close to home and he and friends could go hunting with Pre. He moved to Manhattan to finish his degree at Kansas State University, leaving Pre with his parents. In Manhattan, he decided to train an-

other puppy and bought Pre's half brother, Harley. After working with Harley, Thornton decided to take the new pup to field trials, where he did quite well. However, he eventually sold Harley to a broker to help pay for college. The broker liked Thornton's training style and hired him to train his dogs. "It was a great gig," he recalled. "I could work with a lot of different dogs and hone my training methods, finding what worked best for me and the particular dog that I trained." Eventually, he said, dog training helped pay for college. Now, however, with his other responsibilities, Thornton works with only a few clients. Most of his training is for his own dogs. "Today, I have been trying to find a replacement for Pre, my first dog, because of his age," he said. "I'm also trying to train a

horseback trial dog." He said that chasing his dogs all over the Midwest and competing in field trials has been one of the greatest experiences of his life. He started doing field trials in 2002 and has been competing ever since. In 2004, in his first national competition, he was able to qualify for the North American Gun Dog Association finals in Stratton, Colo. "We only did mediocre in the semifinals, finishing fourth," he said. "It was the first time Pre had to compete against Hall of Fame hunting dogs." However, over the years, Pre has qualified for regional championships and nationals and Thornton believes in his dog. Pre, now 9, continues to hunt with the enthusiasm of a younger dog, finding birds and covering ground that the average dog misses, Thornton said. "Over the years, he has pointed thousands of birds," he added.

Several other dogs Thornton has raised and trained have done well in American Field Horseback trials in Oklahoma and Texas. Thornton said he loves to hunt and hopes to bag all six quail species in America in one year. This fall, before basketball season started, he and a friend, Preston Mease, a former client, headed for Utah to hunt California quail, one of the types not found around here. After bagging all six types of quail, Thornton said, he plans to turn to hunting grouse. Whether it is hunting, training or teaching, Thornton said, he has learned one lesson. "I have learned that patience is the key to training my dogs and I believe that patience is the key to helping young children learn," he said. "I also believe that it is the key to successful coaching, along with dedication and hard work."



OBERLIN'S TIM THORNTON (above) is considered an up-and-coming hunting-dog trainer in northwest Kansas. He is also an assistant basketball coach. He diagrammed a play (at right) during a basketball game against St. Francis.

