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Hunting Dog

"The Monthly Authority on Sporting Dogs"

COVER: *This beautiful Golden Retriever was photographed for Hunting Dog by John Ebeling of Whitetail Wilds, Minnesota.*

Special Features

- 10 The Enduring Tradition/John Madson
- 12 The Moral Marksman/Jim Carmichel
- 13 Steel Shot Ready for 1976 Season
- 14 Pick The Right Dog/Pat Robertson
- 18 Red Setter At The Crossroads/J.B. Owen, Jr.
- 22 Trapping: The Fight Has Just Begun/Dale Haney
- 24 Hedgerow Bunnies/Dennis Walrod
- 28 Canine Health: Leptospirosis/Frank L. Johnson, D.V.M.
- 32 Pick The Right Gun and Load/Robert W. Charlton
- 40 Shoulders: Shortcut To Dog Evaluation/Larry Mueller
- 43 The Future of Hunting/Sam Hossler
- 46 Deer Hunt . . . Plantation Style!/Dick Seitz

Regular Features

- 6 The Breakaway/George R. Quigley
- 8 Letters To The Editor
- 20 Ruffed Grouse Society Report/David Batson, II
- 21 Pro's Tips: Quick Change Comfort/David M. Duffey
- 26 Game Cooking/Diana Bixler
- 30 Ask The Vet/Frank L. Johnson, D.V.M.
- 36 Ask Bob About Guns/Robert W. Charlton
- 37 Technical Tips/Understanding The Shotgun Slug/John Ebeling
- 39 Ecologriphs/Doug Jackson
- 49 Pro's Tips: Fringe Benefits From Shots/David M. Duffey
- 50 New Products
- 51 Classified Ads
- 52 Hunting Dog Bookshelf

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Red Setter At The Crossroads

J. B. Owen, Jr.

If you are old enough to have had a father or grandfather that was bird hunting around the turn of the century, you probably remember tales of an old favorite that was called an Irish Setter, a Red Setter or possibly a Red Irish Setter.

Why the breed is not so popular today is a long and sad story, but one that may yet have a happy ending. Robert Wehle in his magnificent book, *WING AND SHOT*, puts it about as clear and concise as is possible. Mr. Wehle says, "At one time the Irish Setter was a very fine bird dog, but his beautiful coat did him in." All too many people bred the dog for the bench, looking for that mahogany or deep chestnut coat with an exaggerated amount of feathers on legs and tail and a gait that is wholly unsuited for the field. Nose, ability to find and handle birds, and desire were simply ignored.

There is no doubt that the Pointer is the best bird finding piece of dog flesh ever put together. You only have to read the list of entries in this past spring's National Championship at Grand Junction. All Pointers. Not even one English Setter was entered. Just how did the Pointer get to this state of

perfection and dominance? By judicious breeding programs that ignored everything except those qualities we look for in the class bird dog! He or she could be liver, orange, brown or black or solid white. The main consideration was the *ability* to perform in the field. Conformation was a considered factor, but the main criteria was performance.

Am I trying to sell pointers and malign Irish Setters? Not quite. I am looking over toward the kennels right now and I count twenty two Red Setters and one Irish Setter along with a few Pointers and one Setter.

Let us clear up the reference to Red Setters and Irish Setters. Anything that can be genetically pointed in one direction, can be genetically pointed in another. The Clydesdale and the Thoroughbred horse developed from a common ancestry. So do all members of the canine species. Realizing this, some years ago a group of dedicated bird dog people set out on a very far sighted and well thought out program to put the Irish Setter back in the field where it belongs. They were well aware that to accomplish this goal in their lifetime that drastic measures would have to be taken.

They took their ideas to Wm. F. Brown of Field Dog Stud Book and laid it on the line. By infusing English Setter bloodlines into the Irish Setter gene packages available they could skip maybe fifteen or twenty generations of careful breeding. The offspring of these matings could then be bred back "true" Irish Setters and after four generations would be eligible to be registered as Irish. To differentiate between the two breeds, they simply called it a Red Setter. A very nice compromise indeed.

These breeders scoured the country for any Irish showing field ability. They hit pay dirt in a small town in the southeast when they found the only Irish Setter in history to be honored by induction into The Field Trial Hall of Fame, Askew's Carolina Lady. Every Red Setter today will trace back on at least one side to this foundation brood bitch. These men imported from England and Ireland the very best of their stock and this infusion helped greatly.

Has the goal been achieved? Not quite. The Pointer still dominates the field and the English Setter is a very good second. The so called minority breeds are a very bad third indeed.

The folks in the Irish Setter-Red Setter world have actually split into three distinct categories. There are the purists who show their Irish Setters on the bench and could care less if they ever point a bird or show any field ability whatsoever. God forbid Shamus ever getting a cockleburr or stick-tight in his beautiful coat! Then there are the middle of the roaders; people who are convinced you can have the best of all worlds—a dual Irish Setter who can perform equally well in the field and on the bench. This is a beautiful dream and these are very dedicated folks, but they are fighting a genetic battle of horrendous

proportions. Last, there is the band of purists on the other end of the spectrum that are developing the Red Setter with only field ability in mind.

How are these folks faring? The bench enthusiasts go about their business of developing a dog to their standards and could care less what others do. The dual dog people have developed their dogs to the point that they can compete in open all breed AKC competition about like the Red Setter competes in open all breed FDSB trials. You don't place many times, but you are a constant threat.

So where does this leave the Red Setter? The dream is a National Champion at Grand Junction. It will not be achieved in our lifetime, but the dream is still alive. All you have to do is check the numbers of Red Setters placing in all-breed competition.

The distance to go is well illustrated by the recent record of Red Setters competing against themselves at the semi-annual National Red Setter Field Trial Club's championship events. All too many times a winner has been declared with the championship withheld. The most recent of these events is a very good example. Thirty dogs were cast off and they score only two clean finds in all. One dog chalking up both finds! A sad state of affairs? Yes it is, but again, the dream is still alive. We proved we have dogs that can find and handle wild birds and we proved that we have dogs that can run with the best of them. It is simply a matter of matching the gene packages.

I learned very early in pilot training that to get to point B from point A, you first had to determine where point A was. The Pointer and Setter people found point A years ago. Hopefully, we in the Red Setter world are getting close.

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