

BRINGING BACK THE SETTER

By Guy Beck

(This article appeared in the 12/1/62 issue of THE AMERICAN FIELD and is reprinted here by permission of the Editor.)

Many years ago an old friend of mine used two favorite expressions to focus attention on the facts of any discussion. If you said something almost happened, he would reply, "Close only counts in horseshoes." And if you mentioned something that happened long ago, he would say, "That was so long ago it isn't true anymore."

My old friend's philosophy, applied to a discussion of setters, would pretty well strip Setterdom of its rationalization that setters are today a top field trial breed.

To prove his point, my old friend could mention the setter's record, which dearly shows that they do indeed run only close to the top its most major events. And my old friend would not likely be confused with the setter schmetter that resounds Setterdom. That constant chatter of the mystic, but long gone, setter lot of yesteryear. For example, Mississippi Zev (whelped 1942), Sport's Peerless Pride (1934), Florendale Lou's Beau (1923), and Eugene M (1908), are mentioned as if they were "right close up in the breeding" when a setter man, through pomp or circumstance, talks about his dog.

My old friend was an ornery cuss, and it seems I can hear him snicker now over such remarks, but the truth is that the past is important only for what it produced, and today's setter is at best an inept contestant, a major field trial competition.

If Setterdom is serious in wanting a dog that can consistently win on the major circuit, then Setterdom is going to have to produce a NEW setter, for the present is just not good enough. And it's going to take more than just an improvement in the old dog to get the job done. Here's why! If a setter were bred that was bold, independent, developed early, took hard training, and covered his ground to the limits in a smooth, businesslike way, that dog would assuredly be a new, rather than an improved setter. For today's setters, as a breed, are supposed to be a little timid, a little less independent, a little more handler oriented, a little slower maturing, and a little more difficult to train for major circuit competition.

Setterdom generally condones these "little" faults simply because the dog is a setter. Yet these "little" faults are the ones that so greatly hamper the setter in competition. It is these "little" things that make the setter run second best most of the time.

Admittedly, scattered among the top performing talent of the breed today (Grouse trial setters not included) a few individuals can be gleaned from the chaff. These dogs are usually held up as shining examples of the entire breed. For example: Turnto's endurance and rugged determination; Glencrest Doctor's bird-finding ability; Gray's running and pointing style; Kilsyth Storm Jerry's magnificent loftiness on game; Briandale's Pensive's intensity on point; and the good size of any one of several of the

Commander setters are characteristics quickly pointed out by the setter enthusiast as if these traits were generally reflected throughout the breed.

The fact is that the setters running on the major circuit today are the oddballs of the breed. The dogs that have either profound demonstrable basic traits, or are dogs that have, at least to some degree, been spared the usual basketful of setter faults. Each of the above mentioned dogs have outstanding ability. That lifts it above the ranks, yet each of them, regardless of the circumstances surrounding its performance, has failed to come better than just close when the chips were down. What are the reasons?

Some say the setter is outnumbered. yet it takes only performance to win. Some say the setter needs time. yet Turnto is the canine world's answer to the ageless Archie Moore. Some say this and some say that, but the fact is that setter enthusiasts, as a whole, are not putting down a breed of dog that can honestly hope to win consistently on the major circuit. Instead Setterdom seeks out the individual, the oddball, that can at least to some extent compete. And thus fan the flame of hope.

Of course there is always hope, and perhaps even a chance that Setterdom will find its "Blockbuster", a dog that can make a clean sweep of all the major events. But the ironic thing is that should Setterdom find such an individual he still is with a stud for want of an equally good bitch.

Sport's Peerless Pride was a setter blockbuster; so was Mississippi Zev. But even these dogs could not stem the tide of pointer superiority. And for "lo, these many years," a setter has not been whelped that has caused the pointers more than an occasional anxious moment. And such a setter is not likely to be whelped until Setterdom picks itself up by its collective bootstraps and produces a dog free of the accepted setter faults. a dog that can compete, and win, on the major circuit. The present day timid, slow maturing, emotionally unstable, small, dependent dog called a setter will never be improved that much.

It might seem to many setter enthusiasts that perhaps breeding a NEW setter; is a little drastic. and that with the few talented dogs now available, the setter could, in the foreseeable future, be 'improved" enough to run on the major circuit. but don't hold your breath for strange as it seems, the biggest obstacle in producing a winning setter is that there are too many setter men breeding setters. Too many breed-blinded fanciers who are willing to accept setter faults, and justify their acceptance with the statement "setters are supposed to be that way."

That's why the setter, as a field trial competitor, might be better helped by men who just plain don't like the breed. Such men, unchained to the apparent nostalgic lethargy of Setterdom, would, in a short time, and with clear conscience, eliminate the timid, undersized, slow maturing, cat hammed pups from their litters, and produce not an improved, but a really new winning setter,

Producing a new setter will not be easy. And it is perhaps beyond them. and it is perhaps beyond the ability of the average breeder to select and develop strains for specific traits, and in turn blend those strains into a finished product. a winning setter. But there are men in the ranks of American field trialers who could, with cooperation and planned breeding programs, establish a new setter that could meet the challenge of today. Naturally any breeding venture, regardless of the method used, line breeding, inbreeding, out crossing, is not an assured success. And the results cannot be seen until the finished product is produced and tested. but it is a fact that breeders have only scratched the surface in breeding for specific traits and then crossing to other closely related groups. In other words blending the traits of selected groups, or strains, to produce the finished product.

Let's take an example, and assume for right now, that from the ranks of Setterdom five men can be found that are sincerely interested in producing a major circuit field trial winning setter, and that these men are willing to work together. As a starting place, the quintet might study Dr. Scales' article in the 1961 Christmas issue of the Field, "For Better Setters" Dr. Scales pointed out some of the traits needed in a winning setter, and also listed some of the common faults of the breed. Dr. Scales presented his material in chart form for setter families, but a more direct approach would be to apply his charts to a specific living dog. For if a new setter is produced, the foundation sires will not be those dogs shown as the heads of "families" as Dr. Scales showed them, but will be the dogs that are living today; e.g., Turnto, Glencrest Doctor, Briardale Pensive, etc.

The primary task of our group of breeders would be to select the outstanding traits of today's top performers, and then strengthen those traits with specific breeding programs. In other words, if each of our five breeders would select a few specific dogs that have outstanding field trial abilities, and then intensively breed for those traits, five separate, but closely related groups would soon be developed. And each group would have established characteristics. One breeder might have selected his dogs for endurance and determination, and bred for that trait even at the expense of losing some style and perhaps birdability. At the same time, another member of the group might have selected his dogs primarily for style and birdability. The best of each group would then be crossed with the host of another group, and so on. Blending the good and culling the bad. Each breeder would develop his dogs for specific traits rather than attempt, at first, to produce a world- beater.

Whether the traits of such a group could be blended is not known, and the program is far from being as simple as stated, For many of the most important traits of the field trial dog are the intangibles, heart, nose, gait, determination, etc. while the physical features can be seen and corrected, or developed, it takes talented men who know dogs well enough to keep those traits and not lose them. But we are assuming that our quintet of breeders is made up of experienced dog men and know field trials well enough that they would not let this happen.

If such a group could be formed, with perhaps a chairman named to summarize and record the work done by the members, it could in a short time produce a hard core of setter breeding stock that could greatly influence the entire breed. Perhaps Dr. Scales could be persuaded to act as chairman of such a group. If the group was successful in developing specific strains, and in turn could blend the best, or a good percentage of the best of each group, they: would soon produce a dog that could not only win over the best of Pointerdom, but one that could also reproduce himself. Even if the venture were not a total success, it could provide much useful information to the field trial world. Dr. Scales, perhaps with tongue in cheek, suggested that an outcross with longhaired pointers might be made. I cannot agree with Dr. Scales that a new setter cannot be produced from within its own ranks. But the suggestion presents an interesting setter problem. For not only would the group be interested in the "common" setter faults, but there is a basic difference between the breeds, and it is this; Setters, perhaps due to their Spaniel lineage, display a characteristic desire to quarter their ground, and work in a more handler-oriented manner than the pointer. The pointer, with much hound blood used in its formation, tends to extend himself and to reach for flung objectives more naturally.

While the work of such a group could provide much interesting information about breeding field trial dogs, the cost to each member would be only one fifth that of the overall program. Each member could work independently of the others; yet provide reports of his breeding plans and his results. Of course, he in turn would be aware of what other breeders were doing so that he could select from their breeding stock when the time came.

A large percentage of the pups produced from early mating would almost assuredly be destroyed. With only the very best being held for breeding. Maybe members could see among themselves that no dogs would be released to the public (or sold) until been fully tested. The group could, in various ways, make arrangements to see that the best of their efforts were given a chance on the major circuit, or placed in the hands of owners who would give the dogs such an opportunity.

If Dr. Scales, or some other qualified person, could be called upon to act as chairman of such a group, specific plans for a breeding program likely to prove efficacious could be worked out, in some cases, line breeding might be used; in others, inbreeding would be recommended, and of course outcrossing would undoubtedly play a vital part.

Let's outline a case where inbreeding might be tried. If you have a dog that is, say, outstanding for boldness, unless you could find a bitch that is equally bold, you might select the best female produced by said dog and breed her directly back to him. Thus, in cases where a bitch cannot be found that could add to the sire's outstanding traits, inbreeding would be a likely resort. Various other breeding procedures could present themselves to such a knowledgeable group of field trial men that would enable them to form a master plan for overall success.

If there are those who abhor the thought of changing the setter beyond recognition, let them take heart for, as a breed the setter is one of the most indestructible dogs in the world. They have been drawn and quartered for size, color, speed, range, and even fancy names. And yet, Setterdom today presents a few top individuals that could be a foundation for a truly great dog. If field trialers cannot love a setter for what he is, they should respect him for what he's been through. And it is perhaps for this reason that the setter deserves help, not from setter fanciers alone, but from field trial men in general.