

## The New Irish Red Setter Breed Standard: An Interview

*On November 4 2005 the National Red Setter Field Trial Club (NRSFTC) Board of Directors unanimously approved a new breed standard for the Irish red setter. This interview was conducted by Deborah Fazenbaker, Editor of the national publication for the NRSFTC, The Flushing Whip. Her husband, Allen Fazenbaker, is a co-author of the new breed standard approved by the NRSFTC Board of Directors.*

DF: What is your affiliation with the National Red Setter Field Trial Club, and how did you become involved in this initiative?

AF: I was on the Board of Directors and actually serving as President of the Club in 2002 when we elected to adopt our first breed standard. Today I am serving on the Board of Directors as the club's Futurity Secretary.

DF: Why did the club decide to create a new breed standard?

AF: Actually, the NRSFTC has had a breed standard for several years. As I stated before, in 2002 our club adopted the Irish red setter standard of the parent country of Ireland. We felt that Ireland's emphasis on a breed standard highlighting the working qualities was essential in any description of a bird dog. Most dog standards today unfortunately de-emphasize the original working abilities of the breed. When our club adopted the Ireland standard in 2002, we concurred with the parent country that the working abilities of a breed should be paramount.

After several years of holding this standard, we came to recognize that while the Ireland standard certainly was a huge improvement in defining the breed, the unique culture of American field trialing as well as our culture of hunting, presented many obvious differences between the Ireland standard and the reality of the Irish red setter in America. We realized that if we were to hold our breed to a standard, it needed to be one that honored the spirit and intent of bird dog culture in the U.S.A. So, we elected to write a standard that reflected our American values.

DF: Who were the authors of this new breed standard?

AF: Four members of the Board, Christie Young, Don Beauchamp, Roger Boser, and myself did the majority of the work on the document. Much of the work was done during the spring and summer of 2005, with some fine tuning done prior to Board approval in November of this year.

DF: What is unique about this standard from previous breed standards?

AF: First, and most importantly, this breed standard is based expressly on performance. While canine breed standards in the past have relied heavily on conformation traits, this standard utilizes performance criteria to define the breed. Conformation traits are noted only as necessary to support the performance of the animal.

One must remember that breed standards were originally developed to identify breeds based upon looks. In the old days prior to the emergence of registries such as AKC and FDSB, breed identification was a loosely defined talent, often more art than science. Dogs were frequently crossbred to produce performance traits desired by the owners. Performance of the dog on game was most important to the owner, and conformation traits were utilized only to the extent that they assisted the owner in identifying other dogs who might likewise have similar performance traits. With the advent of registries to assist the owners with record keeping, conformation traits became even more important for the breeder. Certain traits such as color, head shape, skeletal framework, and other visual traits were used to identify certain animals who likewise had desirable performance traits in the field. Thus, Irish red setters, English setters, English pointers, and other breeds became segregated, as breeders and hunters focused on particular traits that pleased them. Breed clubs became established and developed standards that could be used by breeders to promote those qualities sought by the hunters.

Unfortunately, the advent of standards based upon conformational traits did not preserve the original intent of the breed standard. Conformation became a means to an end, and the performance traits that had been affiliated with those conformation traits became disjointed, and eventually lost. Breed clubs began to focus on conformation traits by hosting "bench shows," and the "show ring" became the norm for judging canine breed standards. Performance traits became secondary, or in many cases, nonexistent. Today, most breed clubs name championships to dogs who have no performance ability for which the breed was originally intended. As a club whose reason for existence is to promote the Irish red setter as a class bird dog, such an emphasis on conformation without the more important focus on performance

was unacceptable. The reason for our initial adoption of the Ireland standard was based upon that concern. Irish red setters are, first and foremost, bird dogs. Any standard that does not give credence to this PERFORMANCE trait is, in our eyes, not an acceptable standard. The authors of the Ireland standard are to be commended for recognizing this and acting upon it when updating their standard several years ago. We simply took it a step further... or should we say, a step further back... to the original intent of the breed standards of the old days.

DF: But isn't there already a breed standard in the U.S.?

AF: Yes, the Irish Setter Club of America has a breed standard developed under the auspices of the American Kennel Club (AKC). However, the standard makes only a passing reference to the bird dog qualities of the breed, and in fact makes no requirement for the breed to perform in any sense as a bird dog. There are hundreds, perhaps thousands of AKC Irish red setter champions in the USA that have never pointed a game bird. We could not accept such a standard.

DF: But if the Ireland standard is based upon performance, why not continue to use the Ireland standard?

AF: Well, the Ireland standard makes great strides in increasing the performance attributes of the dog. In fact, there is an entire section of their standard, which is devoted to the "working qualities" of the breed. But nonetheless, conformation traits are still listed as primary criteria in judging the breed. Our position is that performance traits should be the primary criteria, and the conformation traits should be used only to support the performance traits. What we do in our standard is start off talking about performance... it's in the first paragraph of the standard, and it's there because we place it as the highest criteria for the Irish red setter. To quote the first paragraph of our standard... *"As Irish red setters were originally bred as partridge and grouse dogs their style of hunting these birds may be taken as the norm. Primary focus of the breed standard shall be upon the performance of the animal while hunting wild or native game birds. Conformational traits of the breed are described only with the intent that such conformational traits shall be supportive of performance as a bird dog."* Thus, we have re-established the spirit and intent of breed standards... to assist the breeder in identifying those traits that will make a great Irish red setter as a BIRD DOG. Much of our standard is still based upon the language of the Ireland document. We simply modified the document to better suit our needs here in the U.S.A.

DF: You mentioned earlier that one of your goals was to write a standard that reflected American values. What exactly do you mean by this?

AF: American bird dog culture has some unique characteristics that set it apart from bird dog cultures in other parts of the world. Probably one of the most obvious points is the importance that we place on tail position. The Ireland standard, for example, calls for a tail that runs horizontally. Here in the USA, we place a high emphasis on a high mast tail. Thus, our standard reflects this important difference. Of course, we recognize that the tail is not the only factor in judging the performance of a bird dog. In fact, to quote Dr. Boser, one of the authors of our new standard, *"it's what's up front in the brain department that is most important."* And so, our standard places great emphasis on intelligence... especially what we refer to as "bird intelligence." The Irish red setter should display great intelligence in handling wild birds in their native habitat. THIS is the ultimate expression of what an Irish red setter is about... an intelligent bird dog with the savvy to handle native, wild birds. Everything else that follows is, as they say, "gravy." That's why our standard lists intelligence in handling wild birds so early in the document.

DF: Aren't you concerned that adoption of a standard by the club will lead to the same sort of undue focus on particular traits, such as is often the case with current breed standards?

AF: That concern has been a topic of the authors as well as that of our Board of Directors. One of the reasons for our desire to discuss this document is to express our "philosophy of use" of a breed standard. What we do not want to see is the establishment of "conformation shows" utilizing our standard to judge a dog. Irish red setters should be judged on prairies of the Dakotas, the grouse woods of the northern woods, the piney plantations of the south, and the pheasant-laden cornfield stubbles of the Midwest. In other words, the criteria for determining the "best of breed" (to borrow a phrase from the bench show fraternity) is in the hunting environment. Under no circumstance would we ever envision a venue in which a bird dog could be judged as "acceptable" or "unacceptable" except in a performance situation. Although the National Red Setter Field Trial Club considers itself as the "keeper of the breed" here in the United States, we would never abuse our sacred commitment to the promotion of our breed by using our standard in a conformational context.

Another point worth mentioning is that we certainly do not expect every owner of an Irish red setter to be in anguish because their "Red Rover" or "Big Red" fails to meet the criteria of our standard in all aspects. A standard is just that... a standard, something to strive for, a lofty goal that may or may not be reached in all facets. I seriously doubt that there is an Irish red setter in the United States that meets all the criteria of our breed standard at 100% compliance! The importance of the standard is that now we have a set of common goals, something that our breeders can use as a framework for future endeavors. Far from being restrictive, it provides a common foundation for our breed that can better help us achieve the lofty goals of the Purest Challenge. As always, our goal as an organization is unbending. Our

purpose is to produce and promote the Irish red setter as a class horseback shooting dog and field trial competitor. All of our resources and talents must be focused and directed at that goal. To use a breed standard for anything less would be a disservice to all who worked so tirelessly to achieve the quality breed that we have today.

DF: How do you envision this standard being used by your membership?

AF: I think the standard can be used in several ways. First and foremost, breeders should use the standard as a guide for assistance in choosing the ideal dogs for breeding purposes. When breeding dogs, the breeder always wants to breed the best to the best, with the hopes that sire and dam will complement each other and ultimately enhance the overall quality by carrying the best of both sides of the pedigree. So, a breeder can look to the standard for advice on choosing the proper breeding combinations in his or her breeding program.

Another use might be the person looking for a prospective dog for hunting or trialing. By being familiar with the breed standard, the owner/handler has a better grasp on what one should expect from an Irish red setter, especially in terms of expected performance. The positive thing about using this standard is the focus on performance, which is what bird dog standards should be about.

DF: What do you see as the next step in the progress of the Purest Challenge for the NRSFTC?

AF: Well, I have several goals as a member of the Board and as the Futurity Secretary. I would really like to see more Irish red setters involved in All-Age stakes. I think we have some dogs out there that have the potential to perform in that venue, and I hope that they will take the challenge. Ultimately, it is my dream to see a red dog run in the Grand National. It would certainly be an honor to those who have worked so tirelessly over the past 50 years to restore the Irish red setter to its rightful place.

Another goal of mine is to increase the numbers of Futurity nominations, not only in our own Futurity, but also in other various National and/or regional futurities. Several of our members who are breeding young Irish red setters have taken the initiative and are nominating litters to Futurities; I would be very pleased to see that number increase. I am a firm believer in the philosophy that the way to become better is to compete with the best. If our Irish red setters are competing in National Futurities and running all-breed trials across the country, our program will continue to improve the breed.

Most of all, I want to see more Irish red setters in the hands of hunters. For years, the impression of the Irish red setter has been, unfortunately, determined by the bench dogs. That impression has been "unimpressive," to say the least. But, our club's dedication to the Purest Challenge over the past 50 years has made its mark. Red dogs are now found in the grouse woods of Michigan, the prairies of the Dakotas, quail plantations of Georgia, and the cornfields of Kansas. When I see our beloved red setters in those places, it makes my heart proud, because we honor the dedication of our past members to the Purest Challenge... and that's what we're here for, after all... to honor that Challenge.

## ***THE IRISH RED SETTER BREED STANDARD***

### ***Adapted by the National Red Setter Field Trial Club 2005***

1. As Irish red setters were originally bred as partridge and grouse dogs their style of hunting these birds may be taken as the norm. Primary focus of the breed standard shall be upon the performance of the animal while hunting wild or native game birds. Conformational traits of the breed are described only with the intent that such conformational traits shall be supportive of performance as a bird dog.

2. Irish red setters are bird dogs. In their quest there must be an intensity that gives purpose to the hunt for game. The concentration on the job at hand should be evident in every stride and movement. The cooperation with the handler is part of that concentration and should not interfere with the quest for game.

3. They shall have a keen and intelligent mind, and be especially adept at intelligence in handling wild birds under native conditions.

4. The attitude in working game must be very intense and concentrated. The head remains well up in the air to control the film of scent, muzzle parallel to the ground, the shoulder blades exposed over the line of the back and the tail carried high and with intensity. Irish red setters are fast and wide ranging; they use the ground with intelligence and precision, breaking their casts as they check the wind for the faintest taint of game. Should it be unfounded they resume their cast

with urgency, without wasteful application or motion. The depth between the casts should be moderately open depending on the conditions of the day.

5. In the gallop the head is carried above the line of the back, the line of the muzzle routinely parallel to the ground. The gallop is fast, flowing, and free of obvious effort. The line of the back remains as close to horizontal as possible, due to the harmonious interaction of front and back legs. As the body of the Irish red setter is close to being square, the galloping dog appears relatively high over the ground.

6. The tail continues in the same mid-sagittal plane as the backbone, and shall be carried in a manner parallel to the transverse plane and above the line of the back. In the manner of stylish bird dogs, the tail shall demonstrate the dog's intensity of hunt by a zealous back and forth motion, as though a rudder in motion. This "cracking" tail shall be an extension of the animal's intensity in its quest for game.

7. Movement of the Irish red setter shall be a free flowing driving movement, with head held high, and hindquarters driving smoothly with great power, as befits a racy, wide ranging bird dog. Forelegs shall reach well ahead but carried low. Crossing or weaving of legs shall be undesirable.

8. On finding game Irish red setters shorten and take a few tight casts in the cone of scent, before drawing forward to establish point. From once they wind game to the point, some tightening of tail action is seen. The body may lower slightly at the back but stays high at the shoulder and the head, as they sift the wind for the exact location of their birds. The ears are expressive, being well up and forward on the head as they approach game.

9. The point is intense and rigid, full of energy and concentration, the placement of the feet controlling and balancing the tense and immobile body. The body posture is staunch, with head, forequarters and hindquarters held well up - eyes fierce - ears high, forward and expressive - the tail rigid, bristling with the passion of the find, in a high mast position, as a marker for the hunter of a find of game.

10. The general appearance of the Irish red setter shall be racy, classy, and kindly in expression.

11. The head shall be long and lean, and without coarseness. The skull shall be oval (from ear to ear), having plenty of brain room, and with well defined occipital protuberance. The stop shall be well defined. The color of the nose shall be dark mahogany, dark walnut or black, the nostrils wide. The muzzle shall be moderately deep and fairly square at the end. From the stop to the point of the nose shall be long, and the flews not pendulous. The brows shall be raised. The jaws shall be nearly equal length with a scissors bite, and all expected canine teeth shall be present. The eyes shall be dark hazel or dark brown and not overly large, with no evidence of ectropic or entropic lids. Ears shall be of moderate size, fine in texture, set ranging from low to moderately high and well back, hanging in a neat fold close to the head.

12. The neck shall be moderately long, very muscular, not too thick, slightly arched, with no tendency to throatiness.

13. The body shall be proportionate to the size of the dog. The shoulders shall be fine at the point, deep and sloping well back. The forelegs shall be straight and sinewy, well boned, the elbows free and well let down, not inclined excessively either in or out. The chest shall be as deep as possible, with ribs well sprung, leaving plenty of lung room. The loins shall be muscular and slightly arched. The hindquarters shall be wide and powerful. The hind legs shall be muscular from hip to hock, from hock to heel short and strong. Stifle and hock joints shall be well bent and not inclined excessively either in or out. Male animals shall have two apparently normal testicles, fully descended into the scrotum.

14. Feet shall be well proportioned to the body, very firm, toes strong, arched and close together.

15. The tail shall be of moderate length, proportionate to the size of the body, strong at the root, tapering to a fine point, carried with a high carriage, ideally at a 12 o'clock position, but without excessive curvature or reflection over the back regardless.

16. The Irish Red Setter coat shall be short and fine on the head, back, front of legs and tips of ears; on other parts of the body and legs of moderate length, flat, and free of curl and wave. Feathering on upper portion of ears shall be long and silky, on back of fore and hind legs short and fine; a fair amount of hair shall be on the belly, forming a fringe which may extend to chest and throat. Feet are well feathered between toes. The tail shall have a fringe of moderately long hair, decreasing in length as it approaches the point. All feathering shall be straight and flat.

17. The color of the Irish red setter shall be predominantly a rich golden chestnut with no trace of black, but may vary from a dark mahogany to a red; white color may also be present, provided the chestnut color accounts for the majority of body color.

Adopted by Board Action November 2005  
National Red Setter Field Trial Club