

HOW FAR BACK DOES IRISH SETTER HISTORY GO?

By Herm David PhD

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We've been studying the history of the Irish setters for some time now and we're just about ready to settle for the date given in a recent find of ours as the earliest we're going to see. The date we've been able to document is 1801, and that pushes the written history of the Irish setter back further than any other record we've seen. A little known work, *The Field Book*, by William Hamilton Maxwell, published by Effingham Wilson of London in 1833, is our source. Maxwell credits Brown and Thornhill for most of his information, but it is his one, final note that interests us most. This is what was written: "There is not a country in Europe that can boast of finer setters than Ireland; they are there called English spaniels, and differ widely from the setters of England and Scotland. They are not esteemed in Ireland unless their color be either a deep chestnut and white, or all red; a black and white setter, or any color but red, or red and white, would not be looked upon or reputed well bred, allowing them to be ever so good. It matters not whether they are all red, or red and white; but those most esteemed have a black nose and a black roof to their mouth, as most sportsmen conceive the black nose to be finer and superior to any other. Sir William Barker, Mr. Oliver of Castle Oliver, Mr. McCarthy of Spring House, and many other gentlemen of Ireland, have the most beautiful and steady of this kind.

A circumstance occurred, with respect to the steadiness and discipline of this breed, which the compiler was and eye witness to: Col. MacDonald being on a visit to Mr. Oliver's during the grouse season, and going out one day, took with him five braces of setters; on getting to the mountains, one of the dogs found some birds, all of the rest backed in at once, upon which day after she'd won the National Red Setter Championship at the same trial. I covered both of those performances, and wrote in the glowingest terms about the jobs she did in both instances.

The last time I saw Sue (Celtic's Sua Sponte) was when I reported the Region 2 Red Setter Amateur Championship recently held at Roger Boser's farm in Pennsylvania. I also wrote in glowing terms of her performance there. Throughout her hour I was constantly reminded of the job she'd done at Assunpink four years earlier. She had won a lot of trials in between, many of which I hadn't seen, but it would be hard to imagine a performance that would put her Region 2 Red Setter Amateur Championship performance in the shade. None of us had any idea at the time that we were witnessing her last complete performance.



Sua Sponte
(Courtesy Celtic Kennels, Reading PA)

As I understand it from Paul, Butch Beyer alerted him to a problem with one of Sue's hind legs the week after the Region 2 Red Setter Amateur Championship. Butch said she seemed to be favoring it, and Paul should keep an eye on it. She was already entered in another championship, and Paul left her. Her breakaway was such that she left her pointer bracedmate eating dust, but within a minute or two she was favoring the leg heavily. Paul called her in, checked her pads, and found nothing wrong. Suspecting a pulled muscle or damaged ligament, he moved the leg through the full range of motion and still found nothing wrong. It soon became evident that she couldn't use the leg, so Paul laid her across the saddle and returned to the truck with her. She was down a total of three minutes.

A day or two later Sue was on a veterinarian's table. I don't know the complete details, but surgery revealed a cancer in the pelvic region, which had evidently caused another softball sized mass (which later proved malignant) in the abdomen. Amputation of the leg was considered, but when told she would probably only live a couple of months, Paul made the decision to end her suffering.

Sue's impressive list of wins started in the spring of 1987 when she topped the entire field in the Jockey Hollow Derby Classic. She won the first of her seven championship titles that same season when she won the National Red Setter Championship. A week before her all-too-short career ended she won the Region 2 Red Setter Amateur Championship.

John George of Kansas, reporting in the American Field on the National Red Setter Championship at Lee's Summit, Missouri a few years ago, which he helped judge stated, "She was entered on the program as "Sue". No more than 10 minutes into her hour, we knew we were watching something special. Her three find performance towered above the field. No dog was her equal in application, bird finding, or style and composure on game. After her performance Judge Eaton and I both agreed we

had not just seen a great Red Setter, but a great field trial bird dog capable of winning at any level of competition."

Sue's greatest performance, according to her fond owner, was when she topped a field of 35, including the great pointer competitor Bases Loaded, in the Keystone Open Shooting Dog Championship in April 1989. Her five stylish finds were not tops in the stake, but judges Delmar Smith and David Fletcher were greatly impressed with the way she attacked the course and handled her birds. The winning of this trial, along with the winning of the New England Open All Age Championship in the Fall of 1987, must rank as the two most significant wins of her career. Sue is the first modern Irish setter to have won an open all breed championship. Beating the best dogs within the breed (which she did twice) is all right, but really doesn't prove a lot. Beating some of the best of all breeds is something else again, especially when it's done in the tough competition we have here in the East.