

IRISH SETTERS IN THE FIELD

By Horace Lytle

A strain of red dogs, distinct from the bench variety, can be produced for hunting

This is a subject on which I may exercise a fraternal prerogative and speak frankly about Irish setters as field dogs. I was an Irish setter man myself some years ago. I always had other breeds, but my first field trial win was with an Irish setter and this associated me with the breed. There probably were many that didn't know I had any other dogs. So, as one Irish setter man to another, I shall speak somewhat crisply. In the field trials at Sauk Center, Minnesota, about 1884 an Irish setter named Friend was the winner. She was a bitch owned by Fowler Stoddard of Dayton, Ohio. Dr. Bruette once wrote of an Irish setter that outran, outranged, and out birded the famous Cowley's Rodfield's Pride in a field trial on the prairies. Pride still rates as one of the great chicken dogs of all time. Then, be it remembered, it was Joe, Jr., that defeated the great Gladstone in a match race of three days. Joe, Jr. was the son of Elcho, an imported Irish setter.

Coming to more recent days, 25 to 30 years ago, we had my own bitch Smada Byrd, McKerry's Pat, and McDoc Bedelia. Between them, these three cooled the pointers and English setters a good many times. But the good ones were becoming fewer and fewer. I shipped Smada Byrd to Oklahoma to be bred to McKerry's Pat; but she didn't catch. There wasn't another living Irish sire worthy of her. At least none with a record to prove it. The breed's popularity as show dogs is what proved their undoing.



Horace Lytle and Isley's Chip

Only recently I was invited to judge an exclusive Irish setter field trial in another state. I accepted, both for old times sake and to bring myself up to date on the breed. With but two possible exceptions, the performances were of the sorriest sort. The breed, from the standpoint of hunting excellence, seems to have slipped farther and farther since my active days with it. I found that the conflict of the shows is still what's doing the damage. This fact is incontrovertible. One man in the gallery owned several but had no entry in the trial I was judging. When I asked him why, he told me that his best dog was entered in a show next week and he couldn't afford to let him get a burr in his tail or damage his feathering. After the trial the secretary came to me with a question: "Mr. Lytle, is it worthwhile trying to go on as we are? One reason we asked you to judge for us was because we wanted to ask you this question firsthand. *Are you sure you want me to tell you what I really think?* I asked him. "I'd rather not; for if I do, I'll speak honestly".

He asked for it, and was so manifestly sincere that I gave it to him straight from the shoulder. This was the gist of what I told him. " Irish setters were once red and white. All of the white has been bred out of them, and along with it has been lost too much of the breed's heart for the hunt." There's no use at all to try to keep going on now on a basis of show and field. The sacrifice has been too great. The breed has gone too far over the hill and is now too close to the bottom as a hunter. There are not enough good ones to provide any basis for breeding. As field dogs the breed is doomed, unless a few bold, determined men get together and divorce themselves from show dogs and develop field specialists. I told him what I would do about it if I were 30 years younger. I believe there is only one thing that can be done.

The best possible bitches from Ollie H. Neimeyer of Ohio, or F.J. Lefferdink of Nebraska must be obtained. I believe that these two have the best red dogs in America that have been used constantly for hunting. Breed these bitches to the best sons of such an English setter as Mississippi Zev, National Champion of 1946. Register the offspring as crossbred setters in the Field Dog Stud Book. Thereafter, breed back offspring to purebred Irish setters, but the dogs and bitches in the meantime should have seen as much hunting as can be given them. Then when the English setter mating does not appear in a four generation pedigree, the offspring resulting from there can be registered pure bred Irish setters. Yet that potent "Zev influence" will be in there and should linger on beneficially for a long time. Even then, the dogs resulting from such matings, should be kept hunting, and far, far away from the effete influence of the shows.

"Will anybody do it? I wonder. If they don't the breed's a goner as a hunting dog."