

RED SETTER REVIVAL

Thirty years ago, these mahogany-colored dogs were useless in the field. Today, they're back on top once again. by Jerome B. Robinson

One of the most remarkable reversals in the history of dog breeding has been achieved by a small, determined group that refused to let Irish setters lose their value as bird dogs.

In the past 30 years, red setter bird dogs have been brought back from near extinction. Today, it's again possible to buy red setters that are every bit as birdy and stylish as their English setter cousins.

These are not the cumbersome, slope-backed, long-headed, mahogany-feathered Irish setters of show-ring fame and calendar-top portraiture. Instead, the modern red setter resembles a red version of the English setter that has been winning field trials in the United States and excelling in the field as a gundog.

Modern red setters are built to run. The small-boned dogs move with speed and elegant grace. When they hit the scent of gamebirds, they slam into a point with all the style that any bird dog can muster, and hold their birds with the kind of intensity that makes your spine tingle. Present-day red setters point with high tails that stand up like banners.

The modern red setter owes its existence to a few far-sighted individuals who accepted the challenge that many knowledgeable dog men said was impossible—to produce red setters that could compete



An eager gundog waits for its turn at the 1980 red setter field-trial championship.

with and beat top-of-the-line English setter and pointer field-trial dogs. Today the red dogs are veteran field-trialers that have new snap and dazzle. Gundog buyers once again can find red setters with the same savvy, endurance and intelligence of dogs their granddaddies used to talk about.

That has not always been the case.

Thirty years ago the Irish setter hit the

bottom as a gundog. In 1950, there was barely an Irish setter alive that could compete in the field with good English setters and pointers. During the first 50 years of this century, the breed had gradually lost its bird-finding ability, its running gear and its classic style. Meanwhile, bench-show fanciers gradually changed the Irish setter from a functional bird dog to a fashionable freak.

The bench show people demanded that the Irish be of a solid mahogany color without any white in its coat. They bred for larger and larger sizes until the result was a heavy-footed, cumbersome animal that ran like a buffalo and looked as if it couldn't get out of its own way. In breeding for the solid mahogany color, pups carrying any white coloring were destroyed. More than white hair was lost.

By 1950, some Irish setters still retained an instinctive desire to find and point birds, but they were a sad sight in the field. Their oversize bodies were not capable of long periods of hard running, and they lacked the snap and dash that make a bird dog beautiful to watch. When they found birds and pointed, observers were in for another disappointment. The typical Irish setter of the day pointed with a drooping "pump handle" tail, whereas classic English setters and pointers stood their birds with a high tail that judges preferred.

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At the same time the mahogany-colored dogs were becoming immensely popular as pets. The demand for Irish setter puppies led to a breeding binge that soon populated the nation with nonhunting Irish setters. By the end of this breeding blitz it was hard to find a hunting Irish whose bloodlines had not been contaminated.

The Irish had slipped a long way from 1875, when red dogs took first and second place in the first field trial ever held in America. The Irish breed again won distinction in 1876 when a red setter named Joe Jr. far outdistanced Gladstone, the best English setter of the era, in a two-day sunrise to sunset match. Joe Jr. scored 61 finds to Gladstone's 52.

Market hunters liked red setters because of their endurance and a high degree of intelligence that made training easy. They were also wonderful companions. By 1900, the red setter was firmly established as an outstanding hunting breed. Sporting calendars of that period most often depicted red setters as bird dogs.

Although breeding for beauty rather than ability in the field had been weakening Irish setter bloodlines since the turn of the century, a red setter named Red Hot smashed through in 1924 to beat the triple National Champion pointer Becky Broomhill. Other Irish setters were still winning occasional places in the open all-age field trials dominated by English setters and pointers.

Unfortunately, the breed's beauty eventually led to its destruction as a hunting dog.

Horace Lytle, *Sports Afield's* Gundog

Editor, wrote an article in 1950 that turned the tide for the red setter. Lytle said in print what others had been saying privately—that the Irish setter was finished as a gundog unless a drastic step was taken. The drastic step he recommended was crossbreeding to English setters, a heresy as far as show-dog fanciers were concerned.

Lytle wrote that there were no longer enough good hunting Irish setters left to provide any basis for breeding. "As field dogs, the breed is doomed unless a few men get together and divorce themselves from show dogs and develop field specialists," he wrote. Then came the kicker: "Breed the best possible Irish bitches to the best sons of an English setter such as Mississippi Zev, National Champion of 1946. Register the offspring as crossbred setters with the Field Dog Stud Book. Thereafter, breed back to purebred Irish setters. Then, when the English setter mating does not appear in a four-generation pedigree, the resulting offspring can be again registered as purebred Irish setters. Yet that potent Zev influence will be there and should linger on beneficially for a long time."

The idea of outcrossing to the best English setter bloodlines was not really so heretical as it appeared. All setters as we know them—English, Irish and Gordon—had the same origins: a blending of early setters, pointers and hounds. Until the show-dog people began demanding a solid mahogany coat, Irish setters were commonly marked with both red and white. Outcrossing back to English setters was

simply a matter of breeding back in order to regain birdiness and intensity, and to produce pups that could run gracefully and fast and would carry the all-important high-tail attitude.

First to accept the challenge was W.E. "Ned" LeGrande, a Pennsylvania sportsman who had spent years trying to breed Irish setters that could compete with the best English setters and pointers. LeGrande noted that early English setter breeders Edward Laverack and R. Purcell Llewellyn had borrowed genes from Irish setters to produce the bloodlines that led to present-day English setter field-trial winners. He considered crossbreeding to be an opportunity for the English setters to pay back their debt to the Irish by replenishing the genes that produced the early pointing instinct, intensity, fast running gait, a high tail and bird senses.

LeGrande had searched widely in America and abroad for the best hunting Irish setters he could find. He ran advertisements regularly in newspapers and magazines offering himself as an easy mark for anyone who had a good hunting Irish to sell. His search was finally rewarded.

In 1951 LeGrande got word from a bird dog trainer in South Carolina that a local farmer owned a female Irish setter that was a crackerjack bird finder—and pointed with a high tail. LeGrande rushed off to see the dog but was disappointed to find that she was five years old, was the family's pet, and was not for sale. She also had an unsightly growth on the side of her neck. On the other hand she was small (weighing only 45 pounds) could run like the wind, and pointed her birds with an intensity that no other Irish setter of the day could match. After some persistence from LeGrande the farmer named a high price and LeGrande went home owning Carolina Lady, who became the fountainhead of the modern red setter breed.

Lady was the offspring of two Irish setters with the marvelous names of Kentucky Bill and Poker-Face Alice. She had been bred by Earl Bond of Albert Lea, Minnesota, who had spent 50 years maintaining a hunting line of Irish setters. Bond died without ever realizing the success of his breeding. When Lady proved capable

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Markings on Clancy O'Ryan (right) and son Abra show English setter influence.



Ramblin' Red Banshee shows the style, form and discipline that made him the 1980 champion. He's owned and handled by Anne Marie Kubacz, shown at right.

Red Setter

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of passing along her intensity, size and style, LeGrande wrote to Bond to see if he could buy more dogs from the line. His letters were returned, and LeGrande asked a local newspaperman to try to track the man down. Sadly, it was discovered that Bond had lived alone with his dogs after his wife died, until resentful neighbors complained that he was feeding the dogs from relief funds. Bond felt forced to shoot the last two dogs of the line that had produced Lady. He moved to Iowa to live out his days with a relative, never knowing that he had produced the Irish setter who, more than any other, was the key to reviving birdiness in modern red setters.

The degree of crossbreeding still going on can't be pinpointed because much of it is done in secret. There is no doubt that some stylish red setters now on the field-trial circuit are carrying pointer blood as well as the genes of their English setter cousins. Such outcrosses are not common, however, and it is safe to say that the red setter gene pool now contains enough of the long-sought traits and style to perpetuate a fine breed of hunting red setters.

him under a controlled discipline. She worked hard to extend the dog's range. Though he was naturally a shorter-range dog, she succeeded in teaching him to reach out on command. At the National Championship, Banshee showed the degree of Anne Marie's success. The lady's whistle was a signal to put on speed and reach for birds. The dog soared. Flashing across open fields he sped for the hedge-rows and brushy areas where birds would be found. He nailed a covey of quail and a group of three pheasant during his hour and a half, showing perfect manners and gorgeous style.

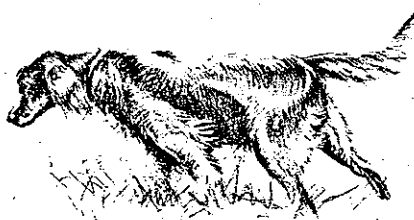
Anne Marie had worked him with long-range dogs in flat, open country for months, traveling several times a week from Long Island to western New Jersey to work the dog from horseback in country where the dog had to extend his range to find birds.

Banshee is an example of the best in modern red setter breeding. A son of Field Champion Clancy O'Ryan, who has produced more winners than any other red setter, Banshee is one of the competing red setters who regularly beats pointers and English setters in open all-age competition—even in southern states, where a judge once told Banshee's handler, "We don't run that kind of dog down here."

The judge compounded his prejudice by saying in public, "I'll eat my hat if that

dog finds a bird . . ." Before Banshee's hour was up the judge was eating his words, if not the hats that an appreciative gallery was passing forward. Neither a pointer nor an English setter had scored a find when Banshee's brace was called, but the red dog amazed the gallery and judges with seven solid finds and claimed the title, an undisputed winner.

Banshee is proof that Horace Lytle's prediction was correct. Though the dog's pedigree traces back to an early crossbreeding of Irish and English setter bloodlines, his more recent parentage comes from the Irish setter gene pool. The dog is



registered under both American Kennel Club and Field Dog Stud Book criteria.

The success of the red setter people in rebuilding birdiness, intensity and running ability within the breed has rekindled interest among American Kennel Club breeders of Irish setters to also breed dogs that hunt and point stylishly. While the

Most red setter breeders today are content to stay within that existing gene pool; they have resisted continued crossbreeding. A few, noting that pointers win the most field trials today, still outcross to produce a red setter that can beat the pointers in an all-breed open all-age field-trial championship. Although the red dogs have beaten many pointers in lesser stakes, an all-breed open all-age championship still eludes them.

On the other hand, modern red setters can hold their own in any league where the name of the game is birds found and pointed with style. The 1980 National Champion Red Setter is a case in point.

Ramblin' Red Banshee is owned and handled by an amateur, Anne Marie Kubacz of Central Islip, New York. She began handling Banshee when her husband Randy gave up on the dog; he thought the 1980 Champion did not run wide enough to win major circuit trials. Elegant on point, the dark-mahogany-colored setter ran beautifully. Banshee was an easy handling dog whose bird work was exceptional. Ideal as a walking shooting dog, his natural range was too short for field-trial competition. Anne Marie changed all that.

She took the dog to several professional trainers but found that Banshee did not do well as a member of a professional's string of competitors. The dog needed personal affection.

Anne Marie brought the dog home and started traveling with him herself. Working in conjunction with professional handlers, she was able to give the dog the affection he needed while still working

competition under A.K.C. sanctions is sneered at by many red setter breeders as being less demanding, there is little doubt that the A.K.C. effort has helped rebuild birdiness among the bloodlines long dominated by bench show influence. At the A.K.C. trials you see larger dogs with less running grace and a generally lower tail attitude, but the dogs do hunt and find birds and point them staunchly. A.K.C. field trial entries have surged upward.

Accomplishment is always the result of hard work. In the case of the red setter, the work has been done by a small group of determined people. Even today, there are no more than 300 red setters in regular competition, though many more are working in the field as gundogs.

Most prolific of the modern breeders is Paul Ober of Newmanstown, Pennsylvania, whose Celtic Kennels have produced more red setter champions and futurity winners than any other breeding program currently in existence. Though field trials provide a measure of accomplishment at which Ober has excelled, at Celtic Kennels he breeds dogs primarily for their ability as gundogs and good-tempered companions. His line-breeding program now breeds "dark, quick, smallish sprites that exude class both going and pointing." Most retrieve naturally.

The most controversial thing about Irish setters has always been their color. The

solid mahogany and red-gold hues blend with natural surroundings and make the dogs harder to see against autumn and winter field and forest colors. This was never a problem with shorter-range gundogs whose handlers could keep an eye on them at all times. When field-trial competition led to wider and wider ranging dogs, however, those with a lot of white were easier to spot at a distance, and many professional trainers didn't want to run dogs they might lose on point.

Early Irish setters were largely red and white, even sometimes lemon and white. But as the breed gained in bench-show popularity, all-red Irish setter clubs were formed and the lighter-colored dogs and those marked with white were banned. The modern red setter field-trial gundog is often a lighter shade of red than the bench-show type. Many have splashes of white on the chests and toes and may have a white face blaze, thanks to the infusion of English setter blood plus genes for white markings that were never erased.

When he first led the movement to crossbreed back to the English setter, Ned LeGrande was criticized by bench-show fanciers for mongrelizing the breed. But he constantly reminded red setter breeders of the smaller size, varying colors and brilliant bird-finding ability characteristic of the originators of the breed.

"In my humble opinion our crossbreed-

ing did not mongrelize the breed. On the contrary, it gave the Irish setter back his rightful place in the hunting field where he could compete on even terms with the other bird-dog breeds. The Irish setter's heredity was not to be bench dogs as big as draft horses, but to run and hunt in the fields and to aid man in his hunting and shooting sport and to help put meat in the pan," LeGrande wrote in 1976.

LeGrande and his friends, mainly Rusty Baynard, Herm David, David Hasinger, Archer Church and Al Barty, took a lot of criticism for the outcrosses. But they refused to buckle, and they formed the National Red Setter Field Trial Club. They affiliated themselves with the Field Dog Stud Book instead of the American Kennel Club, and then went to work to produce red setters that could win against English setters and pointers.

The founders of the club chose to use the words red setter rather than Irish setter so that a distinction could be made between the field and bench strains, and so there would be less chance that the revived field strain would again be subverted by the bench show standard, the club's brochure explains.

The red setter challenge has been a pure cause in which the goal has been to rekindle the fire in the flaming red dogs and to return a fine old breed to its natural heritage. Using the highest field-trial stan-

dards as a measure of their accomplishment, the challengers have brought the breed back from obscurity.

How completely the challenge has been met is still a matter of controversy. The red setters have yet to win an all-breed open all-age championship, and there are many who say the goal is still beyond the reach of the red dogs now in competition. Yet, there are several top-ranking field-trial handlers who would never have accepted a red setter until recently. They firmly state that there are red setters now competing that have all it takes to win at any level of competition.

Most important, the red setter challengers have already achieved their major purpose by generating bloodlines that produce stylish red setters that excel as gundogs. Thus, the breed once robbed of its hunting heritage has been returned to the field. Red setters are once again gaining popularity among bird hunters who for many years have been denied the thrill of shooting over the classy, hard-working Irish breed.

The National Red Setter Field Trial Club publishes a monthly magazine *The Flushing Whip* in which field trials are reported and breeders of modern red setters advertise their dogs. Copies of the publication may be obtained by writing June Eilers, Secretary, 4605 80th St., Franksville, WI 53126. SA

