

Field Trials In Ireland Take to the Moors

By BILL FARRELL

I stood in a phone booth in Dublin on a rainy Wednesday night. My flight back to the United States was set for the following Friday morning, and if I was to see a real live Red and White Irish setter, it would have to be tomorrow, Thursday.

Seeing a Red and White was one of the things I'd come to Ireland to do. My cousin, Vera, had gotten me the telephone number of a well-respected breeder. The trouble was, he was out in the garden training his dogs. (The sun doesn't set in Ireland in July until after 10 p. m., and even then, the afterglow lasts until 11. All but the heaviest rain is simply ignored here.)

When I finally got him on the phone, I asked if I could come out tomorrow. "Sorry," he said, "I'm leaving very early for a field trial in Galway."

"A field trial you say?"

As soon as I got into Jim Sheridan's car, I could see it was going to be an educational day. I was wearing Levis, black walkers and a sweater; Jim was wearing heavy wool knee socks with red tabs at the tops, heavy green knickerbockers, a tattersall shirt with vee-necked sweater and a tie. His green Wellies were in the back seat.

We had two hours to get clear across the country. With the new highways that wasn't a problem, nor was spending two hours with a person I had never met before. Hospitality is an art in Ireland, and our mutual interest in bird dogs gave us plenty to talk about. Rain had been predicted (rain is always predicted) but the further west we got, the bigger the patches of blue in the sky. (Totally blue skies occur in Ireland only on post cards.)

All the contestants assembled in the Mount Bellew village square. Parking in Ireland is not the regimented business it is here. We drive on the right and park on the right. They drive on the left and park where they please. The paved central area in the village was filled with cars, most with dog trailers behind, parked where they stopped when the driver figured this must be the place.

The gathering was a cheerful, noisy affair with friends greetings friends, funny stories being exchanged and the elation field triallers feel just before a trial. Jim introduced me to a lot of people, including judges Jim Hogan and Eric Lynch. Eric is a tower of a man. He shook my hand firmly and offered the traditional greeting "you are welcome".

The first order of business was the drawing. Field trials here are limited to thirty dogs, with five alternates named in case of no-shows. As the participants gather, printed programs are distrib-



Before the trial. Participants gather for the drawing at village square, Mount Bellew.

uted, listing the names of all dogs and their handlers. Each dog is assigned a number, and the drawing is held only when the officials know which dogs are actually present. Show up late and you'll lose your spot. Everyone writes down the numbers of the dogs in each brace. Then all the cars form a single file and wagon train their way to the venue.

There are two types of trials in Ireland: those held on a mountain and those held on a moor (pronounced moo-ur, rhymes with newer.) The mountain trials are deemed to be harder on the handlers, who must run up and down steep slopes. I'm here to tell you, though, that following a dog across the spongy, springy peat bogs they call moors is an excellent way to burn calories. The moor is a great flat expanse, reminiscent of the prairies, except that the prairies don't go squish when you walk across them.

The cars were parked on a narrow strip of firm ground between two vast wet plains. There were very few hedgerows or patches of brush. The principal vegetation was the foot-high heather, on

which the pheasant they hide. There are run to here; a method required, with the dog scent a bird.

We want our dog flagpole tail so we don't want the dog seeing the dog in the lem, so they train the like a stalking tiger,

The dog's job is to handler. If the bird enroute, the dog w Then, on the handle the bird and immedi out of the way of the lates with his starter stay put until sent on

At the start of the trial, all thirty dogs are released, and the spectators and a breakaway. The dogs are released, and the wagon; where one No birds are released. Every brace gets ne again on the same co

The dogs have no first series to co to be named for the off, handle it right expect a call back. N that a dog might go the strength of his absolutely silly. Lik and then went on, a bird on that patch, first dog didn't kn series for him.

Because a handler on leads for the ent collars were used to dogs waited their t harness; the concept them.

The majority of the red Irish setters. Th two Red and White few pointers. And in



Participants arrive at the moor and ready the first brace.



A lull in the action. Spectators and participants on the moor during the trial.

had, and that many Americans have, the red Irish setters were all bird dog, relentless in their hunt, responsive to their handlers and skillful in their handling of the wild birds. They were lighter in build than the version seen in the States at bench shows, and their noses were always pointed into the wind, whether afield or on their leads. The criticisms we have of the American bench dog did not apply here.

It is generally considered that the Red and White dogs were the original Irish setters, but that a vogue for all-red dogs caused selective breeding for coat color, which led to a reduction in the number of breeders concentrating on the production of good Red and Whites. It was not unusual for a Red and White puppy to appear in a litter of reds, and these pups, and the offspring of the remaining strains of the old Red and Whites, are now in demand among breeders like Jim who want to re-establish the Red and White's preeminence among pointing dogs.

Jim's Red and Whites have another advantage: they are a lot easier to see afield. The moor was a study in earth tones: reddish brown peat, dark green heather with pinkish purple blooms. The Red setter tended to blend in; the Red and White stood out starkly. They have no body ticking, so their white seems whiter.

I had been warned back at home that the best breeders of the Red and Whites would not sell their best pups. When I asked Jim about the possibility of acquiring one of his pups, his response was a bit oblique. He didn't want to sell any pups before he had a reasonable confidence he was not selling the best of the litter. He wanted to put those he did sell with people he knew would be able to develop them to their utmost, and who would let him breed back to them if his program indicated the need. So, in spite of all his hospitality and generosity, I came away without the promise of a pup.

His female, Jenny, ran in the sixth brace. She had a nice race but went birdless. The male, Jake, in the seventh brace, had a solid point, but while Jim

was making his way to it, the bracemate ran in front and flushed the bird. Jake was given credit for the find and called back for the second series.

The entire party, or almost the entire party, followed a short distance behind the judges, who followed the handlers, on foot. The question I was most often asked was did we really use horses at our trials. Yes, I said, the judges always ride. "But not the handlers?" they asked. Yes, I'd reply, often the handlers are allowed to ride. This left them shaking their heads in disbelief. Of course, if you were to ride a horse onto the moor, its legs would poke through the surface, leaving him helpless on his belly.

If a horse's legs would poke through, you ask, how is it mine didn't? They did. I hadn't gone very far at all before my borrowed wellies were full of bog water and my socks had turned into sodden wads packed around my toes. It was not a pretty sight when those big green beauties came off.

After most of the braces of the first series had run, we broke for lunch. We had been moving steadily into the wind, giving each brace new

ground to run on, a My heart sank when I slogged all those miles across the endless expanse of sand-year-old druidic turf, fully preserved in the bog was to be my fate.

Actually, the gods noticed a blonde woman with a striking animal as we stumbled off to us a glass. In her twelve-year-old John kind and caring lad.

"This stuff is p... "What kind is it?" when he saw I did back to my benefactor Kristin Jameson.

Lunch was great horseplay and the really a fine day at sandwiches and we then we spread c

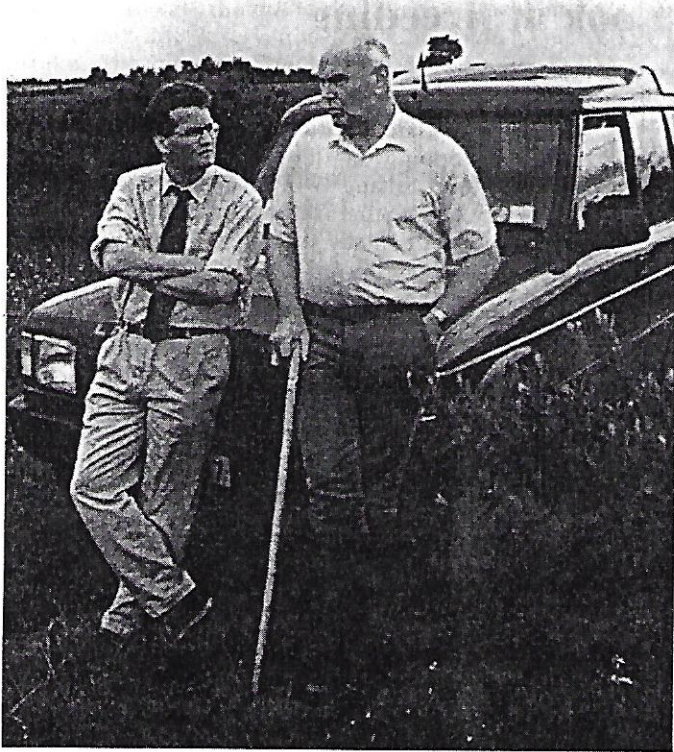
talked and seems to be

I was n... There was a couple from the delegation Club, taking names and

SOON a feet for The handle side with t backs, exp ground in ed his dog his left a height, ur range was although s yards at th working th wind intel patch. Re foot.



Pointing style of Irish field trial dogs differs from what we are accustomed to in the United States.



The judges. Jim Hogan (left) and Eric Lynch confer at length before announcing the winners.



Ray O'Dwyer (left), president of the Irish Red Setter Club, and Jim Sheehan (right) with their dogs.

Eight dogs were picked for the second series, which went rather quickly. Jim's dog ran well but did not have a bird. It was almost as if the second series was designed to refresh the judges' recollection of how the dogs went. We went back to the cars and got out of our Wellies and waited for the decisions. The deliberations went on for quite awhile, much longer than the second series, it seemed. Then we gathered around the table with all the silver and heard John Mullins' dog Sheantullagh Gillie named first place winner with a rating of "excellent".

The dogs are rated against the competing dogs that day, and also against a standard. To become a field champion, a dog must win 12 green stars, and have been given an excellent rating while winning first place in an open competition. That win would get him four green stars. Were he to win but get only a very good rating (against the standard) he would be awarded only three green stars. To be a field champion he would also have to qualify in a bench show, indicating that his conformation, and his teeth, are good.

Judge Eric Lynch then delivered an explanation of why he made the placements he did. I

thought this was particularly useful because one of the purposes of competition was to put your dogs to a test before qualified eyes. If you want to improve your performance, it is very helpful to be able to see yourself from the judge's perspective. Eric's remarks were received in perfect silence, and without dispute.

He had almost finished when he came to Jim's dog. Jake, Eric said, had run very well, if occasionally a little too interested in what his brace-mate was doing. But because the brace-mate had the "temerity" to steal his point, and because the judges had not seen him perform the entire bird-handling routine, they regretfully could not place him over dogs that had. Jim's spirits seemed to brighten. My own view was that Jake is a good dog that had a bit of bad luck that day, but that if he kept on the way he was going, he would win his share of trophies.

Then Ray O'Dwyer, president of the sponsoring Irish Red Setter Club, announced that it was "time for refreshments." Back we went to the village square, and into a cheerful little pub.

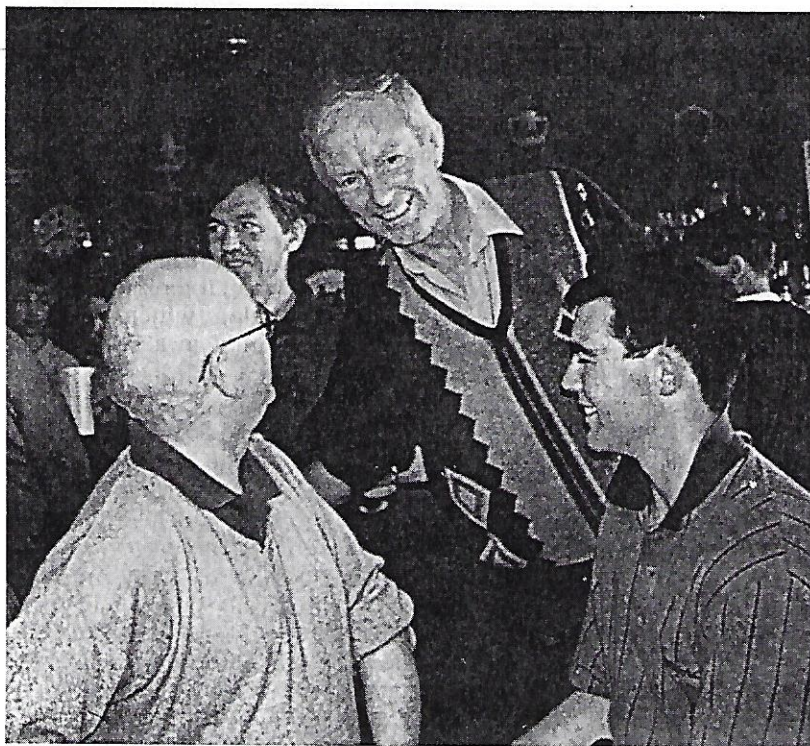
Custom calls for the owner of the winning dog, in this case, John Mullins, to stand the first round.

After winning the trophy, John Mullins gave some words about his dog, and received congratulations of his friends.

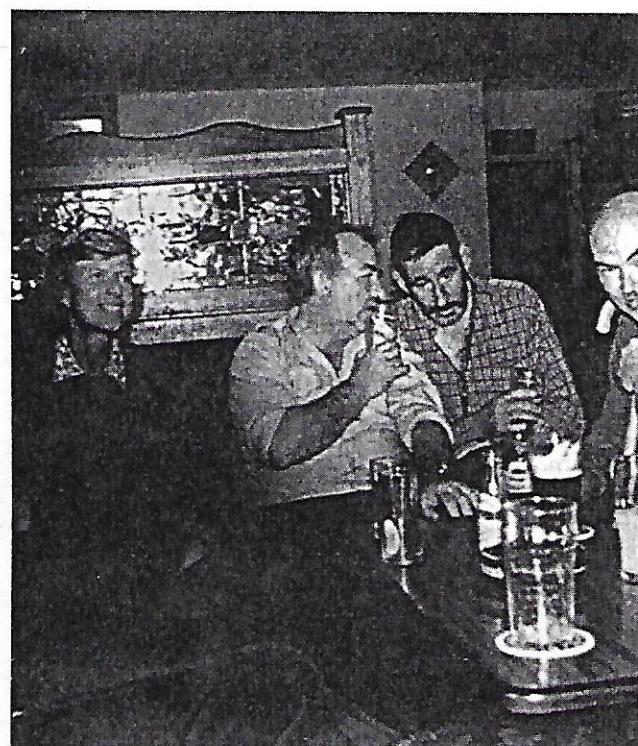
Pubs lend themselves to the occasion. I had the pleasure of talking to a man who had bred Mountain Dogs. A female I had my eye on. I had handled Bibi. From my own wisdom and lore before coming to the States, I had decided to come in October and meet me.

Eventually, it was decided to come back to Dublin and make any promises to the females he has chosen. His tail straight up when he is happy, that while such a trait is not suitable for Irish trials, it is a good trait in the States. We'll see.

There are some days when I get and I have no dog. I have no dog for me. I have careful addresses I collected, and I have, by luck, one or two of the dogs at my doorstep.



Winning owner John Mullins enjoys the day.



After the trial. Participants gather to congratulate the winners.