

ARE THEY RUINING OUR DOGS?

Many dog lovers are convinced that some of our best breeds are being spoiled to produce animals whose appearance will win blue ribbons.

and

By HENRY P. DAVIS

HEAD HELD HIGH on a taut leash and his forepaws fanning the air, the big Irish Setter flashed by, every hair in his mahogany-colored coat glistening like burnished copper, his tail carried like a red plume. The crowd roared its approval.

"Magnificent!" exclaimed the man on my left. "What spectacular action, what dash and fire! He'll win this one for sure."

"Bunk," protested a friend on my right. "That action is utterly impractical, unnatural and artificial. Put that dog on a loose leash and he'd almost fall apart."

We were sitting at the press table of The dog show of the year, the Westminster Kennel Club's annual event at Madison Square Garden several years ago. The Irish Setter was a big favorite with the crowd, for he was pleasingly shown and there were many in the audience attending their first dog show.

This one didn't win the group competition for sporting dogs, but he did place high in it. And no doubt the "spectacular action" had a definite influence on his high placement. The very artificiality of the dog's gait was viewed by such practical field dog men as my friend with mixed emotions... tolerant amusement and deep concern for the often-asked, too-pertinent question, "Are they ruining our dogs?"

I had observed this Irish Setter before the judging and took a good look at him after the awards were made. My friend was not far from right. The dog would indeed, have had a rough time performing the task for which his breed was once noted...the finding and handling of upland game birds. A bird dog should be built to travel at a good clip over rough and rugged terrain for hours at a time. Well-sprung ribs that will give ample lung and heart room, and well-muscled running gear that can carry him at a gallop for long periods without undue fatigue are musts in a hunting dog. This fellow, like most bench show-winning members of the pointing breeds, had neither. His chest, deep enough, that's true, was slab-sided and shaped somewhat like an inverted hairpin. His smooth shoulders were characteristically devoid of the extra muscle a hunting dog needs and his hind quarters were lacking in the bulging muscle essential for propelling power. His handsome coat, beautiful coat, beautiful to look at, was far too luxuriant to be practical in the field.

Besides weighting him down it would prove a catch-all for burrs, beggar-weed and other foreign matter, and had he enough courage on hunting desire to tackle a briarpatch, which is doubtful, he would emerge looking as though he had just had a haircut at a barber college. The high action which intrigued the spectators so much was induced by the fact that his head was held so high the forefeet barely touched the floor. Given his freedom this dog traveled with a rather low head and his natural gait was often a shambling pace. But under the guidance of a clever handler he was "fire and dash" to first-time dog show visitors.

This was not an isolated instance. It is far too common at bench shows all over the country. Far too common, that is, from the practical hunting dog fancier's point of view. But there are two sides to every question and "Are they ruining our dogs?" is no exception. When considered point by point, this individual dog, with an impressive bench show record behind him, met fully the written requirements of the breed standard, intended to describe a working-type field dog.

It is in the manner in which this standard is interpreted that the hunter, who looks for utility, and the bench show fancier, who places emphasis on beauty, are at variance. What the bench show man may describe as "well-sprung ribs" may be considered flat and slab-sided by the man who looks for a physical characteristic vital to endurance in the field. Hind quarters that the bench show judge accepts as "wide and powerful," as called for in the standard, are more often termed "narrow and weak" by the man who admires well-conditioned gun-dogs. The bench show fancier places great emphasis on head and coat. The "practical" dog man takes as his yardstick the maxim "Pretty is as pretty does."

This divergence of opinion is by no means confined to the Irish Setter fancy. It is particularly prevalent among fanciers of Pointers, English Setters, Gordon Setters, Cocker Spaniels, Springer Spaniels, and perhaps to a lesser degree among those who prefer members of the working dog group such as Collies, Great Danes, German Shepherds and others. And the forks of this road will never meet until there is common agreement as to how the various breed standards should be interpreted.

Due to natural differences in personal preferences, and even the foibles of those entrusted with the task of interpreting the standards and applying them to individual dogs may never come about. The terms of the standard are simple enough, too simple in many instances, for they are relative. What one judge might consider a "light" eye another might and frequently does, accept as "fairly dark." Such terms as "moderately long", "slightly arched", "well bent," "not too throaty," as frequently found among the standards, are subject to varying interpretations. When one realizes that three eyewitnesses to an accident will seldom describe the incident alike it is not hard to understand that a dog which does not receive favorable consideration at the hands of one judge might be handed the blue ribbon by another.

It is also easy to understand why some should ask the question, "Are they ruining our dogs?" The answer depends largely upon the speaker's point of view. Back in the 1870's when bench shows first got their start in this country, dogs of the sporting breeds competed on fairly even terms in both bench shows and field trials. Many dual winners were to be found among Pointers, English Setters, and Irish Setters. True there were considerable difference in the conformation of the winners but most bench show contenders were also good performers in the field, which is far from being the case today.

For example, in Pointers there was Bang-Bang, imported by the Westminster Kennel Club in 1883, and described by the late A. F. Hochwalt, America's outstanding authority on sporting dogs, as a "well balanced, medium-sized lemon and white dog, with a wealth of bone and muscle, well-sprung ribs, great depth of chest and a long, lean neck." He already had a record of several wins in important field trials in England and a first place on the bench at Crystal Palace. In America he proved worthy of his reputation and won both in the field and on the bench.

Writing in *The Modern Pointer*, published in 1923, Mr. Hochwalt said: "In the days of early importations all of the field trial sires were champions on the bench. Graphic, Lad of Bow, King of Kent, Rush of Lad, Tempest, Tribulation - in short, the pointers of our time - trace to a common origin. At the present day nearly every field trial man could show and win on the bench if he selected his best specimens, and no doubt every breeder of so-called bench show dogs could win in the field if his stock were developed for that purpose;

so there is really no such thing as two types. A pointer should be a pointer, whether he is a field trial winner or a bench winner. Some breeders, as I have said, however, preferred the bench show game to that of field trials, either from choice or because it was a less expensive sport. And that is how we have come to think of two varieties. It is true some judges, with no experience in the field, will lean to the exaggerations that are sometimes seen; but the average man, who knows real conformation, will select the type that is a mean between the old extreme and the weedy type which, we must admit, has cropped up occasionally."

Many generations of Pointers have come and gone since Mr. Hochwalt wrote the above. Even in those days there was a sharp cleavage in the ranks of Pointer admirers. Rather than coming back to the mean, or happy medium, to which Mr. Hochwalt referred, the cleavage in type and temperament, which is unfortunately greatly reflected in hunting desire and ability, is much wider today. There is so much difference that seldom are the two types seen in direct competition either in the field or on the bench. And the ancestry of both types frequently must be traced back quite a few generations before the common bloodlines are established.

In the early days it was not necessary for a gun-dog to possess excessive speed or wide range, for game was fairly easy to find in most areas. But with civilization's encroachment upon natural habitat, game became scarcer and harder to find and, in order to enjoy a day of good shooting, the hunter required a dog with speed, range, nose and stamina to cover more ground in less time. Thus more emphasis was placed on the dog's hunting ability than on his looks. The bench show fancier, who prized his dogs for their beauty and companionship rather than their worth as an asset to the gun, was unwilling to accept any sacrifice in beauty, and confined his breeding activities mainly to types that stressed conformation and color.

Fanciers of the bench show Pointer began "refining" the breed. Nowadays we see many leggy, narrow-chested Pointers winning blue ribbons, although the breed standard specifies that "legs should be moderately short rather than long" and calls for a chest that is "deep and as wide as a proper shoulder will permit." Many dyed-in-the-wool gun-dog men deride the gait of the modern bench type Pointer as unsound and unsuitable for field work. The smoothness and symmetry so appealing to the bench show fancier connotes "softness" and lack of ruggedness to many gun dog breeders.

The last noted field trial Pointer to achieve bench show honors of consequence was the famous Mary Montrose, first dog to win the National Bird Dog

Championship three times. Only two weeks after she had won her first national title in a thrilling and grueling three-hour race, Mary was shown at Madison Square Garden, where she won in all her classes and eventually was awarded the trophy for the best Pointer bitch in the show. This was in 1917. The judge was the "practical" A. F. Hochwalt.

Harry D. Kirkover's Ashantee Dominant won consistently on the bench and in field trials, and Dapple Joe, owned by Raymond Hoagland, was also a well known dual winner. The currently famous bench show champion, Captain Speck, owned by Charles Palmer and Walter Armstrong, is a sound dog that attracts the eyes of practical field dog men. He has never been shown in field trial competition although Mr. Palmer asserts he is a splendid gun-dog.

Dual winners are as scarce these days as untaxed "luxuries," for, through lack of the field work necessary to maintain it, the bench-bred Pointer is sadly lacking in keen hunting desire, and the eagerly ambitious field-bred member of the shorthair breed seldom has the physical attributes that attract the bench show judge's eye.

In English Setters the difference in type is even greater. During the early period of the breed's popularity the bench show and field Setter were one and the same dog. Judges were practical men and always had in mind that an English Setter was intended first for utility and secondly for beauty. Such great field dogs as Prince Rodney, Fairy Beau, Master Ben and Jersey Prince won consistently on the bench, but it has been many years since a dog that had proved his ability in open competition in the field has garnered bench-show honors. Perhaps the last was High-tone Tony, a well-known dual winner some 20 years back whose blood is found in many fine and handsome field performers today. They are, however, not of the "bench show type." The title of "field champion" has been bestowed on a number of bench show winners by the American Kennel Club, but they won their qualifying points in competitions licensed by that organization and usually confined to the breed.

Difference in opinion as to what constituted the "ideal" type of English Setter occurred early, to such extent that before many years there were two distinct types of Setters in vogue in this country; one erroneously called the field trial type and the other strictly a bench show dog. Unfortunately, both factions went to extremes, and the practical man was just as much at fault in fostering the snipey, undersized specimens as the bench show man was in breeding the lanky, narrow-chested, big headed dog we see today. Writing in *The Modern Setter*, again in '23, Mr. Hochwalt said:

"For a time there was a movement afoot to change the type of Setter which would meet the happy medium, and Gath was set up as the ideal, but the bench show followers would have none of him, and then followed a period of chaos. Dogs were up one week and down the next, all dependent upon who the judges were and what kind of a dog they admired. Some of the saner judges adhered to the happy medium as far as possible, but the extremist, in either direction, wrought the havoc; and here let it be said that if more practical Setter men, men who were accustomed to seeing dogs afield, had been employed as judges during those days, perhaps the standard would have been interpreted as it was intended.

"This condition prevailed for many years and is still in evidence in some quarters, although at the present there is a tendency to fix upon a type of Setter that is designed to combine the practical with the beautiful. The English Setter Club is doing much in this direction and it is hoped that its aims may be realized, but unless practical judges are called on to officiate then the standard will be interpreted just as it has been in the past years, and the oversized toys which are absolutely worthless in the field will still have their day. We have much of that on the middle west circuit of 1917, when some judges, who probably never saw a Setter in the field, insisted on exalting dogs that were cripples, simply because they had great large heads with deep muzzles and heavy flews. "Quality" they called this type, but what is the use of this so-called 'quality' if the dog is unable to move...and, after all, what constitutes quality?

"What happened in 1917 is still occurring in 1923.* Men officiating as Setter judges who never saw a dog in the field and would not know what is expected of one if they did, continue to tell of the 'beautiful condition of coat, the rare front and the quality,' but never stop to consider that a dog must have rear parts also, and shoulders that are correct, but particularly feet.

There is a tribe of camel-footed Setters that has been exalted time and time again by some judges who prate of their 'wonderful form' and I happen to know that not one of these dogs with feet the size of saucers, could run thirty minutes at a gait faster than a tortoise, much less do the work that is expected of a practical field Setter.

Mr. Hochwalt's writings of 1923 could well apply today. However, the English Setter Club of America, to which he refers, is no longer actively pursuing its efforts to settle upon a type satisfactory to all, but now centers its interest in field activities. And the heavily-headed, deep-flewed Setters continue to hold sway on the bench.

What about the Irish Setter? Once a fine gun-dog in high favor with many sportsmen throughout the country, this grand breed has been taking a back seat in the field dog caravan for quite a number of years. Never a really serious factor in major field trial competition, The Irishman does number among his clan many excellent shooting dogs. But he was early adopted as the darling of a considerable segment of the bench show fancy and his honors have been won in that realm rather in the sphere for which he was originally intended, the hunting field.

The Irishman's handsome mahogany coat causes him to be less easily seen in the field than his English cousin, and this has mitigated against him with many hunters. Originally a red and white dog, breeding to intensify the rich red color and eliminate the white may have had some effect on the dog's field qualities. No matter what the breed, its field qualities, hunting desire, pointing instinct and even its style are bound to suffer when no thought is given them in a breeding program that is concentrated only on a physical conformation, color and coat. Particularly is this true when the physical make-up does not lend itself to the hard work expected of a gun-dog afield.

This breed possesses such striking beauty that it always attracts great attention, especially when shown in competition with other breeds. And when one is shown that possesses great animation he invariably captures the keen interest of the gallery of spectators.

An example of this occurred at the famous Westminster Kennel Club's 1953 show at Madison Square Garden. A handsome Irish Setter had won the sporting dog group, which entitled him to compete for Best in Show honors. Defending champion was the famous Doberman Pinscher, Champion Rancho Dobe Storm, about as near-perfect a specimen of the breed as can be found. The Irishman was cleverly shown, his flashy action on a taut leash capturing the hearts of many in the gallery. So intense was this interest that the judge, a noted dog authority, was soundly booed when he waved the Doberman to the place of honor. Yet experienced field dog men were quick to see that the gait of the Irish Setter was impractical for work in the field. The unperturbed judge stated he made his placement on "soundness."

There is, however, an optimistic note in all this. The English Setter Club of New England, which numbers among its members such well-known breeders as Bert Prince and Davis H. Tuck, is devoting its energies to competitions designed to create more interest among breeders and owners in improving the field possibilities of bench show English Setters. Officials of the Club are convinced that, with work and breeding acumen, the dual purpose Setter is not beyond the realm of accomplishment. Theirs is not an easy task, but in the short time the Club has been in existence progress is being shown.

The Irish Setter Club of America has continued its field trial program. It suffered a serious blow in the death of Edwin M. Berolzheimer, who carried on an intensive breeding program to improve the field qualities of the breed, and whose Rufus McTybe O'Cloisters won many field trial honors against Pointers and Setters in amateur trials.

The National Red Setter Field Trial Club, recently formed, is composed of an enthusiastic group, among them Archer Church, R. C. Baynard, W. E. LeGrande and Mrs. Myra Berol, who are keenly interested in restoring the red Setter to his former prominent position in the American gun-dog kennel. They are interested in the dog's field qualities primarily, withal maintaining proper type, and have instigated a breeding program among the membership that is already beginning to bear fruit.

Degradation in the Irish setter's field qualities didn't occur overnight, and it can't be blamed entirely on the dog show. Mr. Davis evidently believed that the Irish never was a threat in field trial competition. There have been many other writers of the same persuasion, yet we have the record, Mr. Betten and others, to show that he was a factor in the early trials. The cause of the decline in field quality was twofold: (1) he was bred only sporadically for field use, and (2) the great predominance of Irish were bred for show or from show stock. There were, from time to time, Irish that popped up and gained some notice in the bird dog world.

Herm David, one of the founders of the National Red Setter Field Trial Club, it's second field trial chairman, and it's second editor, wrote his "Red Setter Challenge" in 1957. It was published in two parts in the "Pennsylvania Game News". In Part 1, Mr. David documents the ~~history~~ limited history of the field breeding of the Red field dog between the Campbell setters and 1950.