

Big Red is Not Dead

by Charles Frisk

When I was a young boy, one of my favorite books was *Big Red* by Jim Kjelgaard. Red was the ultimate multi-purpose dog, an Irish setter that won dog shows, hunted grouse, fought renegade bears, and even killed wolves. Like thousands of young boys, I dreamed of the day when I could have an Irish setter just like Red. But by the time I was old enough to buy my first bird dog, the gun dog writers were all writing off the Irish setter as a has-been, supposedly bred into brainlessness by fanciers interested only in the dog's looks and suppliers looking to cash in during the peak years of the breed's popularity.

I never completely gave up on the idea of someday having an Irish setter, so I kept my eyes open for articles and ads in the sporting magazines. The ad that caught my eye read, "AKC Irish setters, natural pointing and retrieving ability, close working, calm temperaments. Contact Rose Smyth, Lakewood, Wisconsin." This all seemed too good to be true. There weren't supposed to be any Irish left with hunting ability and good temperaments, and these were less than a two-hour drive from my home in Green Bay, Wisconsin.

My wife and two young daughters decided to take a drive with me and check out the dogs. Rose had a fenced yard surrounding her house with three Irish setters running around. My wife and I fully expected all hell to break loose when we opened the gate and the potent mix of two young kids and three Irish setters got together. Instead, the setters just ran up to my daughters, sat at their feet, and waited to be petted. Maybe there really was something to this calm temperament. I already owned as many dogs as Green Bay regulations allow but I was greatly tempted to go home with another. Instead I made a date to go hunting that fall with Rose and see if the rest of her description of her dogs' abilities was accurate.

That fall I hunted grouse with Rose and learned more about her and her dogs. I've heard Rose described by her friends as a genuine northwoods character, and she fits the bill very well. As a young girl she trapped bobcats and collected ginseng for money. Married to a

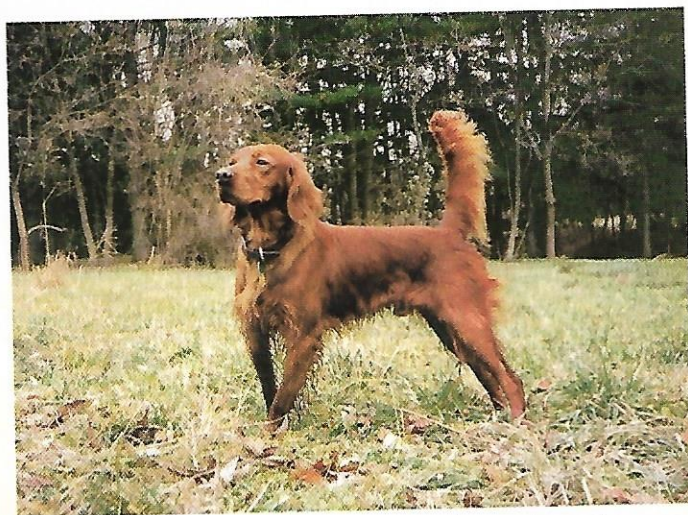


Photo by Paul R. Ober.

Celtic's Superfund, owned by Paul R. Ober of Reading, Pennsylvania, is a son of National Champion Celtic's Comeback Fireboy. There's little question that Superfund inherited his sire's lofty style on point!

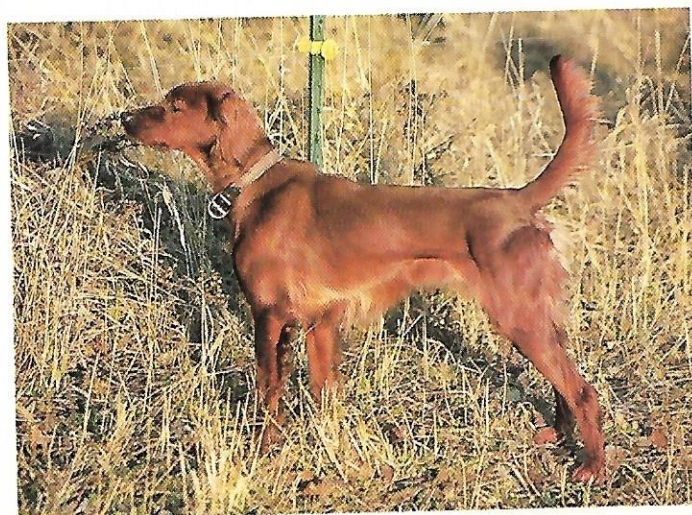


Photo by Charles Frisk.

Flash, a young Irish setter owned by Ken Ruff of Sycamore, Illinois, shows the kind of style and intensity admired by bird dog fanciers everywhere.

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logger who doesn't hunt, Rose has hunted grouse, woodcock, and Gambel's quail over Irish setters for 20 years. In the field Rose's dogs also proved to be the genuine article, hunting close but covering a lot of ground at the same time, and managing to find a few grouse to point even in a down year in the cycle. The dog that impressed me most, Star, was a six-month-old pup who covered lots of territory with a smooth, graceful stride but checked Rose's location on every swing. Star was having a little trouble with the idea of being staunch on point, but she was finding lots of birds.

Rose's first dog came out of the Argo Kennel. The pedigree showed a number of show champions and dual champions. Her first dog was a natural pointer and retriever, and she has worked to maintain a line with those qualities. Rose estimates that she hunts grouse at least 50 days a year before heading to Arizona for the winter where she lives in a camper and hunts Gambel's quail for another 60 days. Her dogs get ample opportunity to prove their worth.

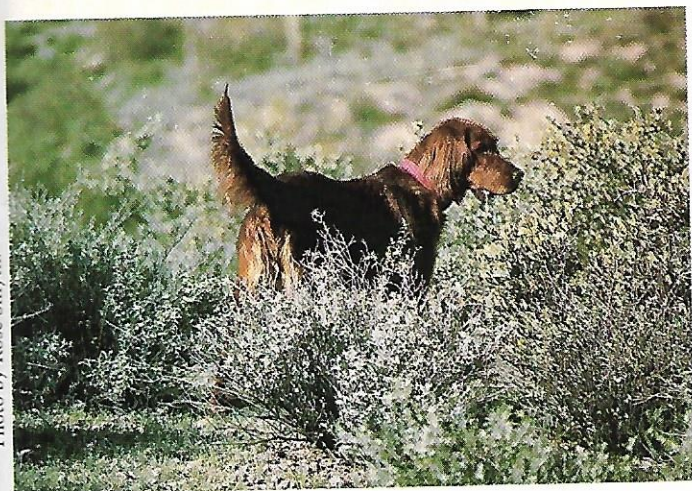
Her present top dog, Star, is the great-great granddaughter of her original dog from the Argo line. Rose has bred her females to males out of show lines and has produced some good pups but did not get the consistency throughout the litters that she likes to see. Breeding to American field trial dogs has produced some outstanding dogs, but some have more range than she likes to see in a grouse dog. Her greatest success has been in breeding to Irish setters of field trial breeding from Scotland and England. Those dogs seem to more consistently have the range she is looking for.

If you would like to see Rose's dogs in action, she is always looking for people to hunt with. Just be prepared to do some serious walking. Until hunting with Rose I'd never met the man I felt I couldn't outwalk, but I have to admit that now I've met the woman. Once I'd seen what Rose's dogs could do, I decided to learn more about the Irish setter in the field. Since that time I've come across other outstanding Irish setter kennels.

If you spend any time researching AKC Irish setters, one name you'll run across repeatedly is Ken Ruff. Of the 74 dogs entered in the 1992 Irish Setter Club of America National Field Trial, 33 list an Irish from Ken's Brophy Kennel as either the sire or the dam, and in many cases both sire and dam are out of the Brophy Kennel. Ken has run his Irish setters in field trials for 21 years. He is the main breeder of the Ivor Glen lines which go back to old hunting lines from the 1940s.

I spent a weekend hunting with Ken near his home in Sycamore, Illinois and had a chance to talk with him about the history of the Irish setter in the field and the future of the breed. According to Ken, in the 1880s and '90s, Irish setters were the most competitive of the setters in field trials in this country. Although the English setter definitely moved to the forefront in the early 1900s, many Irish setters continued to be competitive. In those days even some of the show lines were competitive. In fact, the first U.S. show champion sired seven field trial winners.

Ken had some very definite ideas on the supposed decline of the Irish setter in the field. He felt that too much has been made of the negative impact of show breeders breeding for looks. Without a doubt most



Irish setters can handle a variety of gamebirds and adapt to a wide range of hunting conditions. Rose Smyth of Lakewood, Wisconsin hunts ruffed grouse in her home state with her Irish setters and also travels to Arizona each winter to hunt Gambel's quail.

Bearcat, owned by Roger W. Boser of Seven Valleys, Pennsylvania, is a fine example of red setters registered with the Field Dog Stud Book. Bearcat has 10 field championships to his credit.

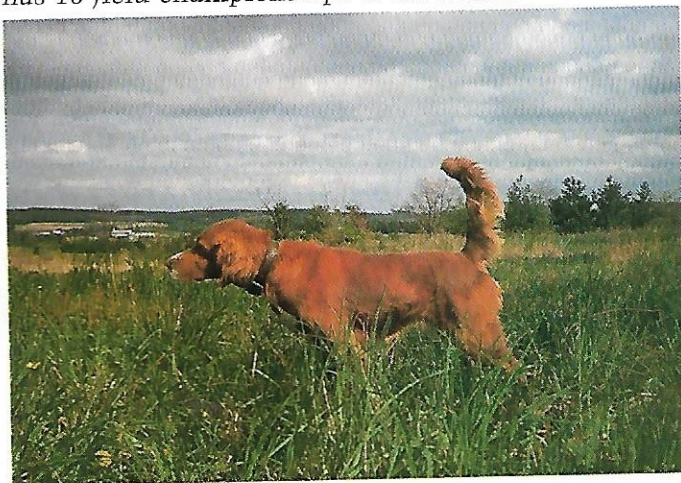


Photo by Roger W. Boser.

Irish setter show lines are not going to be competitive in the field, but neither are show lines from English and Gordon setters or show-bred English pointers. Probably the biggest thing that hurt the Irish setter in the big southern horseback field trials was the increased emphasis on speed and the insistence on a 12 o'clock tail when on point. As the major field trials became more of a foot race than a bird-finding competition, the Irish setter had a difficult time competing with the top English pointers and English setters. However in many areas of the country the Irish setter is very competitive in all-breed trials, and Ken feels that the quality of the Irish setter as a hunting dog is higher than it ever has been.

Although Ken has been highly successful in field trials, his breeding program has always kept the hunter first in mind. Ken estimates that 90 percent of his dogs are sold to people who are strictly hunters, and 10 percent to people who both field trial and hunt. "My goal is always to breed hunting dogs first, field trial dogs second," he says. "If I attempted to breed dogs which can compete head to head with the top field trial English pointers in the country, I would produce a dog most hunters wouldn't be comfortable with." Ken's dogs have the adaptability to handle a wide range of game. He has hunted over his Irish for pheasants, bobwhite quail, scaled quail, sharptail grouse, prairie chickens, ruffed grouse, and woodcock.

Ken believes his dogs should be both great pets and great hunters. After spending some time at Ken's place, I can verify that his dogs are indeed great pets. While I was interviewing Ken, there were always at least three dogs in the house, including a two-time national field trial champion. In some breeds a dog that could compete at that level would be a little too much around the house, but Ken's dogs have the intelligence to turn it up for competition but be calm and relaxed indoors.

One characteristic that stands out whenever you talk to Irish setter owners is their high regard for the breed's intelligence. Emily Schweitzer, a highly successful breeder of both show and field champions since the 1920s, described the Irish setter's intelligence this way: "With many dog breeds you think of the brain as an empty container, and it is up to the trainer to fill it. Think of the Irish setter as already having a full con-

tainer upstairs and it is up to the trainer to work with that brain rather than just filling it up."

For certain owners, it may actually be this high degree of intelligence that gives them difficulty with the breed. An Irish setter can't be browbeaten into performing the way the owner wants, nor is it the dog for the owner who doesn't want to spend some time working with the animal. The great advantage of working with the Irish setter is that it can solve a lot of problems itself if given ample learning opportunities.

A story Ken Ruff told me illustrates the almost human-like intelligence some of the best Irish setters seem to have. When Ken was 14, he worked in a drugstore in downtown Chicago. An older gentleman he knew had just had hip surgery and was confined to his house during recovery. Almost every day the older man would send his Irish setter down to the drugstore with a duffel bag around her neck and a note in her mouth. The setter wouldn't let Ken take the note until he was behind the counter. Ken would fill the order, place it in the duffel bag, put the note back in the dog's mouth, and then tell her where she was supposed to go next. The route wasn't always the same, so the setter actually seemed to know where the shop owners were telling her to go. After the older man's hip recovered, Ken hunted with him over the dog, and she was also a great hunter. Years later the older gentleman helped Ken select his first Irish setter.

It's impossible to write an article about Irish setters without touching on the subject of appearance. You probably wouldn't have read this far if you weren't somewhat entranced by the breed's mahogany beauty. There is definitely a marked difference between the

appearance of the show dogs and the field dogs. Although the show dogs weigh upwards of 80 pounds, most field dogs are between 40 and 60. The show dogs also have a much more massive head and a longer coat. However, beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and I actually find the better-looking field-bred dogs to be the more attractive of the two types. In regard to coat, for example, the show fanciers have adopted the attitude that there is no such thing as too much, whereas most of the field-bred dogs have a coat that looks just right on a hunting dog.

It is also impossible to cover the Irish setter without going into the difference between the AKC Irish setter and the Field Dog Stud Book's red setter. In the 1950s the FDSB agreed to allow a limited outcross to English setters to broaden the gene pool of the Irish setter. The dogs that are a product of this outcross are generally called red setters. Some of the FDSB red setters show white on their feet and may have a white blaze on the face or chest. Some breeders maintain dual registration with both the AKC and FDSB, so there is breeding back and forth between both groups of dogs. Much has been made of the differences between AKC Irish and FDSB red setters, and this is valid if you are comparing the red setters to show Irish. However, the AKC field-bred Irish and FDSB red setters have more similarities than differences.

One of the leading breeders of FDSB red setters is Paul Ober, owner of Celtic Kennels. Paul's dogs have twice won open all-breed championships, something

no other red setter has done. Most of Paul's dogs are dual registered, so they are also having an influence on AKC breeding as well. Paul's philosophy is that the best way to improve the red setter is to run against the absolute best. The majority of trials his dogs run in are all-breed trials. The Celtic Red Setters' field trial wins are too numerous to go into, but over the past 23 years they have recorded more than 1,000 wins against English setters and English pointers.

I asked Paul why he chose to go with Irish setters rather than another breed. The two biggest factors seemed to be brains and personality. He echoed many of Ken Ruff's feelings about the high intelligence of the best of the red dogs. Paul also likes the affection that Irish setters show toward their owners. He remarked, "The Irish setter shows greater affection than a typical English setter, and the difference is markedly greater as compared to English pointers." Paul likes to compare the class exuded by the best Irish setters to a fine English-made double barrel, whereas any other bird dog breed is more like a pump or an autoloader.

I also talked to Paul about the opinion held by many bird dog writers that the Irish setter is not highly competitive in the field. Paul felt that much of that attitude comes from the fact that, compared to English pointers and setters, there are far fewer Irish setters running in field trials. However, the percentage of wins by Irish setters is far greater than the percentage of Irish setters entered. In fact, the best of the breed is now so competitive that it has greatly changed the sales pattern for his pups. When Paul first started out, he sold most puppies to other Irish setter breeders. Today most of his pups go to people who have traditionally been English setter and pointer breeders and have been impressed with his dogs at field trials.

Should an Irish setter be your next bird dog? If you've always admired the red beauties, there is no reason why you can't find one out of good hunting stock today in most parts of the country. After watching many good Irish setters at work and talking to their owners, I've come to some conclusions about the type of owner an Irish setter would be good for and those they would not. All of the owners seem to agree that the Irish is not a breed on which to use rough handling. If that is the only way a person knows how to train, he or she would be better off with something else.

The Irish can handle kennel life but would greatly prefer to be a family pet. With their high degree of intelligence, they learn from every situation they are exposed to. The more time you can spend with an Irish in the field the better he will become. The Irish also seems to make the transition between field trial and hunting situations better than some breeds.

If you do decide to go with an Irish, make sure it is out of good hunting stock. There are some show lines that have concentrated on keeping the hunting instincts alive, but many of the show lines haven't produced bird dogs in generations. If you run across a litter from a show line that claims to produce hunters, insist on seeing Mom and Dad hunt. If you've always wanted one of the red dogs, you can rest assured that there are good ones out there. They'll require a little more work to find in most areas, but the reward will be worth it. □

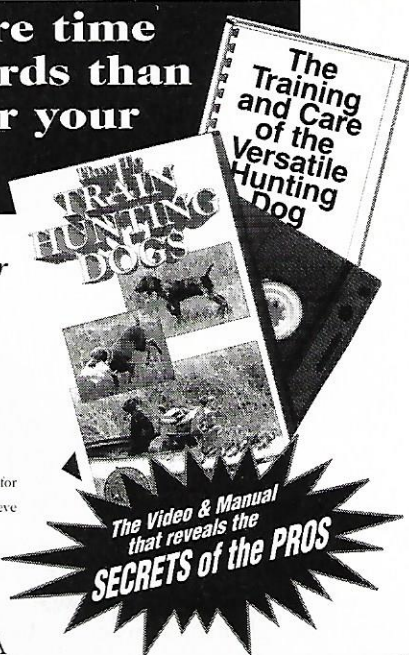
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