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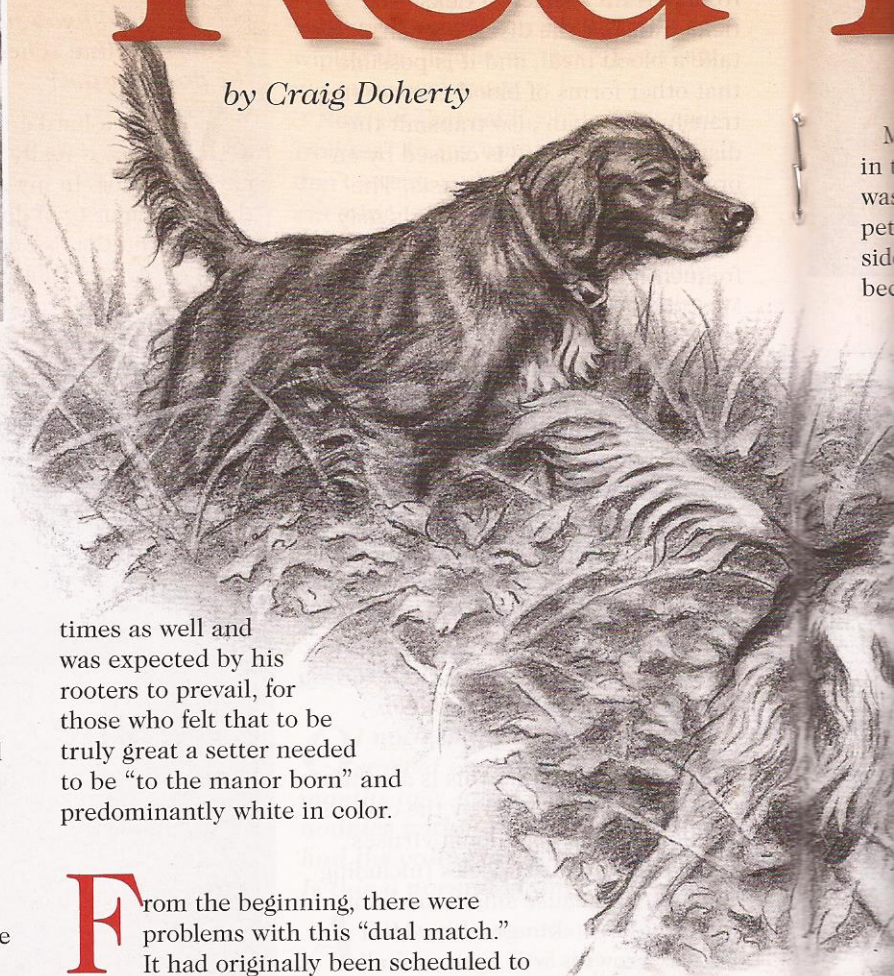
by Craig Doherty

Starting sometime in the 19th century, American sportsmen began importing bird dogs from the British Isles – English setters of various strains, black and tan Gordon setters, and red Irish setters. Each had their fanciers. There were even factions within the different groups as those supporting the English-bred Laverack lines sparred with those in favor of the upstart English dogs coming from the kennels of another Brit, R. Purcell-Llewelin. In addition to those who favored a specific breed or line that could be traced back to its aristocratic origins on the other side of the pond or had recently arrived on our shores, there were breeders who mixed and matched from the setter gene pool trying to develop a truly American setter. In the early literature of field trials, the imports are referred to as “blue bloods” and the mixed-breed setters as “natives.”

Night, a black setter that won the first American field trial in October 1874, was a native setter. And according to Hochwalt in *The Modern Setter* (1923), the natives were holding their own against the blue bloods in those early years of field trials. One would have to assume that the rivalry was something like that between the Red Sox and Yankees in baseball or the Celtics and the Lakers back in the day: Both sides had their die-hard fans, and their loyalties were not always based on rational thought.

In an attempt to settle the issue, in 1879, a head-to-head, three-day match event was scheduled between Gladstone, recently imported from the English kennel of Edward Laverack, and Joe Jr., a native setter that had been bred by the Campbell brothers of Springhill, Tennessee. For the purposes of this story, the fact that Joe Jr.'s sire was an Irish setter and his mother had been the product of a black setter and lemon-and-white female setter is an important point of irony, as you will see later in the story.

Joe Jr. was mostly red and registered as an Irish setter and had prevailed over a number of blue bloods in those early days of trialing. He was the obvious choice to represent the native side of the debate. While the aristocratic British blue blood, Gladstone, had run in the ribbons a number of



times as well and was expected by his rooters to prevail, for those who felt that to be truly great a setter needed to be “to the manor born” and predominantly white in color.

From the beginning, there were problems with this “dual match.”

It had originally been scheduled to run for three days with the simple criteria that the dog with the most birds pointed at the end of the third day won; but Gladstone had recently broken his tail, and his owner, P.H. Bryson of Tennessee, asked that the match be shortened to two days. All were in agreement on that point, but none were ever satisfied with the eventual outcome. Each side had posted \$500 to make for a considerable purse for the times, and at the end of the first day Joe Jr. had a slight advantage of 34 birds or coveys pointed to 30 for Gladstone.

Early the second morning, Gladstone, with his tail still wrapped in a makeshift cast, surged to a two-point lead only to have Joe Jr. make a comeback to be one point ahead at the lunch break of the second day. However, the game native setter came shakily in to the break practically on three legs. Joe Jr. seemed to have injured his shoulder and some doubted he would answer the call when the afternoon running commenced. The dog not only answered the bell, his shoulder seemed to improve the more he ran, and he went on a bird-finding spree that gave him the win with 61 finds over the two days, to 52 by Gladstone.

Dawn

Many realized at the time that all that had been proven in this great dual match pitting blue blood against native was that Gladstone and Joe Jr. were two very tough competitors that could dig out a lot of birds. There was no consideration for speed, pattern, or style, all things that would become important as field trials developed further.



The event also quashed the idea that a dual match was the answer to anything. The history of field trialing in America only records one other similar event, and that was between Grousedale and Lit held at Grand Junction, Tennessee, in 1883. This match only served to prove that Mother Nature could dole out conditions in Eastern Tennessee in December when both dogs and handlers would have been better off spending their time in front of a fire. The details of that match really don't fit here so, suffice it to say that the native Lit came in the afternoon of the second day and had more sense than the people involved by refusing to go out again in the cold, wet, and icy conditions, giving Grousedale the win by default.

Blue bloods and natives continued to compete against each other in regular field trials, but the establishment of registries in the United States and the growing success of the blue bloods and their "pure breed" descendants somewhat quieted the waters of this great debate. English, Irish, Gordon, and native were seen less in competition against one another and often only came head-to-head in the show

ring. In the early days, there had often been a bench component to field trials, but over time they diverged as breed clubs for the show ring exerted an influence for attributes in dogs that showed well but often did nothing to enhance, and at times even detracted from, the ability of these dogs to perform in the field.

The Irish setter may have seen the greatest impact from this movement to big dogs with flowing coats, long drooping ears, and a top-line that sloped to the hindquarters. From the days of Joe Jr. to the middle of the 20th century, the Irish setter had been all but lost to the uplands and to field trials. There were of course exceptions. Smada Byrd, the heralded Irish setter of outdoor writer Horace Lytle, ran up a string of victories in the 1920s and was often featured in the writings of Lytle, creating a new interest in the red Irish setters as field dogs. But unfortunately, despite attempts to continue hunting lines and the importation of new red blood from both Ireland and England, the Irish setter continued down the path to obscurity in the mainstream of American field trials. One other exception, Rufus McTybe O'Cloisters, carried the colors for the red dogs in the late 1940s and put an exclamation point on his career by beating all but one of the best-of-the-best among the white dogs in 1950 when he earned runner-up honors in the National Amateur Pheasant Championship.



Rufus's strong career precipitated Horace Lytle's red setter shot-around-the-world in December 1950 when, as Gun Dog editor of *Sports Afield*, he suggested that the Irish setter was a "goner as a bird dog unless someone seriously undertook its salvation." And, according to Lytle, the path to salvation was through an infusion of English setter blood.

Lytle's clarion call was echoed by others of the time. Later that same year, Henry P. Davis wrote an article entitled "Are They Ruining Our Dogs?" in which he postulated that the American Kennel Club-sanctioned Irish Setter Club of America was ruining the breed by their attempts to enhance the beauty of the dogs in the show ring with no consideration for their performance in the field. Henry Betten (writing for *The American Field*), Nash Buckingham, and other illuminati of the time jumped on the bandwagon that Lytle and Davis had started. Joe Jr. (the native Irish setter) was held up as the perfect example of what could be accomplished with judicious crossbreeding among the various setter types. Others went back even further to argue that the Irish setter had been the antecedent of the English setters and that the blue blood lines of Laverack and Llewellyn had even more recent infusions of the blarney stone in them before they were imported to America.

Lytle had proclaimed the crusade that was needed to save the Irish setter and suggested that the offspring of the 1946 National Champion Mississippi Zev (one of only three setters to win the National in the post WWII era) would be the perfect cross for those who wanted to restore the red dogs to their former glory. Soon a handful of loyal acolytes would rally to the red dog banner.

First among them was Ned LeGrande of Pennsylvania, who went out on his own to see if the words of Lytle and the others rang true. He attended an Irish setter breed field trial and noted just how far the regal red dogs had fallen in terms of field performance. LeGrande contacted Lytle and Betten and then struck a deal with Bill Brown, the long time editor of *The American Field*, which oversees



the bird dog registry known as the *Field Dog Stud Book (FDSB)*. The agreement was that LeGrande and anyone he got to follow his lead could openly outcross Irish setters to their white English cousins and then after three generations the progeny of those outcrosses could be registered as pure-bred Irish setters again. The rules were stricter, but in many ways the path was no different from what the Campbells had accomplished with the breeding of Joe Jr.

One of the first of these crosses was Lytle's son of Mississippi Zev, Ilesley Chip, to one of LeGrande's Willow Wind bitches – the registered Irish setter, Biddie. But LeGrande knew he couldn't do all the heavy lifting on his own.

LeGrande recruited Irish setter fanciers from around the country to the cause of restoring the breed to proficiency in the upland hunting fields and in head-to-head competition with the top English setters and pointers of the day. Rusty Bayard, Arch Church, Herm David, Dave Hassinger, and others flocked to the red crusade and a movement began. However, the faithful almost immediately ran into a major stumbling block. The Irish Setter Club of America (ISCA) would not sign on to the idea of out-crossing Irish setters and would eventually rescind reciprocity that allowed the *FDSB* out-crossed

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Irish setters to be registered with the American Kennel Club. The majority of members and especially the leadership of the club were happy with the direction the show Irish setters were going and did not want the changes that would result.

Undaunted by the lack of support from the ISCA, LeGrande and his recruits went forward with their plan and in fact took it one step further. In 1951, the newly energized red setter folks decided to form their own organization known as the National Red Setter Field Trial Club (NRSFTC) to promote the breeding of red dogs that would eventually be able to compete on a level playing field with FDSB English setters and pointers. The organizers of the NRSFTC proclaimed their quest, "The Purest Challenge in Sportsdom." They then proceeded to march forward in pursuit of their goals.

LeGrande took out ads in sporting publications and through word-of-mouth to trainers around the country that he was looking for Irish setters that still maintained their bird dog attributes. Many dogs came and went to Willow Wind Kennels in Pennsylvania during those early years as LeGrande tried and rejected dogs and breedings. Slowly, progress was being made, and one find in particular helped move the crusade further toward its goal: There was a small red bitch by the name of Askew's Carolina Lady that was a purebred Irish setter. Back in 1946, Earl Bond of Minnesota bred a litter of Irish setters and sold a male puppy to J.T. Burt of North Carolina. Bond had a little runt female in the litter and offered her to Burt for an additional \$25. Burt agreed and had the dogs shipped to him.

Both were so man-shy, neither Burt nor his hunting partner could do anything with them, and the female was offered to Kessler Askew, a neighbor who was known to

enjoy working with problem dogs. According to Askew's own account, in the first four months that Lady was with him, he turned her loose twice: the first time it took three days to get her back, the second time four days. In October of her first year, he took her out again as he worked other dogs and tied her to his belt so she couldn't slip away. Askew watched the other dog hunt a peanut field and slam into point on a covey. Forgetting about Lady, he headed for the pointer and when he was about 20 yards away was brought up short by the forgotten lead attached to Lady's collar. Startled, he turned to look and found the diminutive red bitch high and tight on both ends in a beautiful back of the pointer. Now with her bird dog light bulb fully illuminated, Lady was willing to stay with Askew if it meant finding birds that she continued to point with all the style anyone could ask for.

Askew's Carolina Lady won her first trial in the fall of 1952 and would go on to earn 22 wins in both open and breed stakes and garnered enough points under the AKC program to earn her Field Championship. The wins were great and helped establish the credibility of the red setters, but it was as a producer that Lady really made her mark. She had been bred once by Askew before moving to Willow Wind where she was bred in succession to LeGrande's most promising sires. In the end, in addition to her 22 wins, she whelped 14 winners that accumulated a total of 145 wins.

In 1972, Askew's Carolina Lady was the first dog of any breed other than English setters and pointers to be elected to the Field Trial Hall of Fame. Among her progeny was a stud dog named Ike Jack Kendrick that racked up a record of 60 wins, the most for an Irish setter up to that time. The dog also proved himself a producer as 35 of his offspring tallied 202 placements in field trials.

LeGrande had proved his point. Through scouring the country for likely prospects, judicious outcrosses to English setters, and a well thought out and active breeding program, the red setter crusaders were achieving their goals. LeGrande was aided by a number of contemporaries and has been followed by many who have continued to improve the red setter lines. The NRSFTC has maintained an active slate of its own events, including a red setter national championship and futurity, to provide a showcase for the red dogs; and many of the owners bring their dogs to the line against the white dogs in *American Field*-sanctioned events and are holding their own in proportion to the number of dogs entered.

The end result has been the successful creation, at least on paper, of a new breed of dogs known as red setters while the AKC-registered Irish setters remain separate. Some have argued that this is a good thing as the red setter is how the dogs were known and are still known in Ireland where they remain actively used for field trials and hunting. Our likes and dislikes are often not a function of the rational part of our brains, but fortunately for those who prefer red bird dogs, those who felt the same way persevered and have come very close to conquering the "The Purest Challenge" as there has been a red dawn to the days of bird dogs and field trials.

