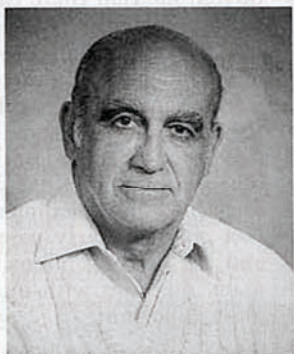


On Breeding Bird Dogs

By ROBERT G. WEHLE

RAY JEFFERS asked me if I would mind giving a dissertation on the Breeding of Field Trial Dogs in conjunction with the Top Shooting Dog Award presentation here at Harrisburg. I really don't feel I'm qualified for such an important assignment. However, I'm not going to be like Charles Whittingham, the famous "Hall of Fame" horse trainer. When a reporter asked him about a trainer that had worked for him for some time and suddenly became quite successful on his own, Charlie Whittingham said, "Well, I taught him all he knows about horses" and with a twinkle in his eye, he said "...but I didn't tell him all that I know".



ROBERT G. WEHLE

Well, I'm going to try and tell you everything I know about breeding bird dogs and, believe me, it will not take very long. It might take much longer if I could tell you what I don't know about breeding. After all these years, there are still those great mysteries and great surprises. Dog breeding is an inexact science at best. There are geneticists and animal breeders who know many times more than I do about breeding. What I am going to pass along are observations that I have made over the years.

In starting a breeding program, the most important thing to do is establish an objective or standard. To know exactly what kind of dog you want to end up with, define the bottom line. Then stay on that course and don't deviate for any reason under the sun. Be heartless and without emotion in selecting the animals to use in your program. Louis Pasteur said, "Chance favors the prepared mind". Likewise, in dog breeding, chance favors the prepared breeder.

Most all important animal strains that exist today were established through a gene bank, the result of generations of line breeding or inbreeding. I really don't know the difference except they both involve staying within the family, breeding father-to-daughter, mother-to-son, cousin-to-aunt, etc., just staying within the family as much as you can and still retain all the desirable qualities. All the famous race horses have direct lineage from the fountainheads of the breed. As a matter of fact, every Thoroughbred registered today is a descendant of one of three Arabian sires. So the whole family of Thoroughbreds is an inbred family. Practically every Tennessee Walking Horse in the country today is a direct descendant of either Mary-Go-Boy or Midnight Sun or crosses thereof. All the important dairy cattle strains in the country are the same result—Dunloggin, Carnation, Pabst—all families inbred for generation after generation.

Heterogeneous breeding, which is the breeding of two completely unrelated animals, is like catching lightning in the bottle. Anything in the world can happen! If a good dog results from such a breeding, it is purely an accident. Whereas, in homogeneous breeding, the results can fairly well be depended on, particularly if the gene bank is well established.

A friend of mine prepared a ten-generation pedigree of Elhew Huckleberry. Lexington Jake appears, I believe, twenty or more times. There are 4,094 dogs appearing in this ten generation pedigree all written by hand. If the great preponderance of those are from the same family, the gene bank is going to have a great influence on all future breeding of this family. Since Huckleberry, we have added another eight generations to our breeding program and that brings up an interesting figure. The individuals involved in eighteen generations of breeding are 524,286 dogs. It is interesting but of

little consequence.

Many of the dogs in our kennel today trace to the old Lexington Jake sire maybe 150 to 200 times. This certainly must have some influence and reduces the odds of producing the type of dog we are looking for.

On the subject of pedigrees, it's only the first two or three or possibly four generations that have any direct influence on the progeny. When you get to the fifth generation, for instance, there are 32 dogs represented in that generation. One individual has but a 1/32nd influence on the progeny. This is somewhat different than building a gene bank.

SO often we hear that the male line or the female line is more important. It appears that there are both important male lines and female lines. In the case of Thoroughbreds, the male line of Native Dancer has been carrying on for the last forty years. The current Kentucky Derby winner and Preakness winner are both progenies or offshoots of the Native Dancer line—a strong male line. On the other hand, in pointers, Nell's Rambling On is a strong female line. She is referred to as a blue hen. It is incredible the great dogs that have come out of that female. Over the years, we have had some blue hens in our kennel. You could breed them to a fence post and end up with some nice puppies.

There have been some great sire lines in our pointer breed—Warhoop Jake, Red Water Rex, Lexington Jake and, most currently, Guard Rail. Guard Rail has to be one of the great sires of the breed. It's strange, all sire lines do not continue on. Some break off the first or second generation; others go on for several generations. We've had two or three over the years. We started with Lexington Jake and that carried out through Elhew's Lucky Strike, Marksman, Jungle and Huckleberry and then it kind of waned until we picked up Red Water Rex and started a whole new sire line. In the meantime, we tried outcross after outcross and finally hit on Hook's Bounty Hunter and we got another great sire line.

In selecting breeding stock and setting up your standard, the primary prerequisite of any good strain of dogs is intelligence. There is no substitute for intelligence. Earl Crangle has been so successful in the major circuit with his dogs. He always felt that if he just had a top-notch shooting dog that had the great intelligence, he could make any kind of dog from there on, which he did several times. Beyond intelligence are all the great natural attributes that our breed has inherited over the years—the great instincts to point and back, the tenacity

and the great hunting qualities. As well established as these inherent qualities are, it's necessary to constantly keep reinforcing them with careful selective breeding. Even intelligence can be bred out of a dog, as has been demonstrated by the breeding of show dogs today where they have given so much consideration to appearance and conformation and neglected the dog's intelligence. Today, breeds like the Irish Setter, while their coats are beautiful and they appear so pretty in the show ring, have lost their hunting instinct and are certainly not a very intelligent dog.

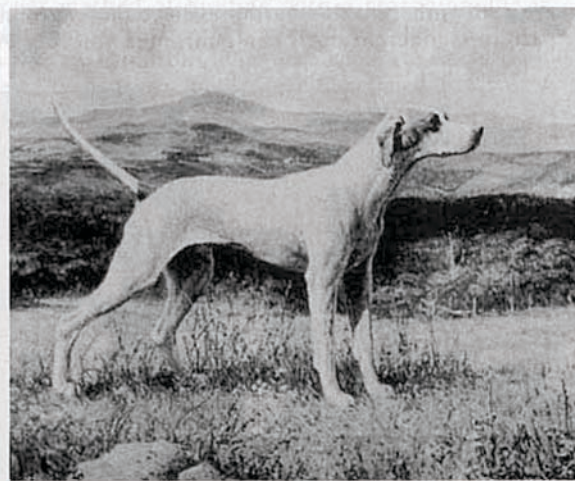
Conformation wise, probably the most important thing is the gait. The gait is what gives the dog endurance. So many dogs hit the ground hard, labor with their gaits where some seem to flit over the ground in an effortless fashion. They are able to run hour after hour without expending great energy. Naturally, this lends to their endurance. Other important conformation characteristics are the general appearance, feet and limbs (their feet are so important) and a nice coat. I like a nice short, silky-soft coat while there are dogs with a heavy coarse, houndtype hair which I find quite unattractive. Tails are so important today. We need to stay with the short, straight, bee-sting type tail. This is another



RED WATER REX

er case where fad has taken over and tails are going in every direction. The eyes of a dog are so important. The eyes seem to transmit so much. It's like looking into a person's face. You can really read a dog's personality by looking into his eyes. It contributes so much to his general appearance. And, of course, everybody loves a lovely head on a pointer. One of the great characteristics of the pointer breed are their beautiful heads.

It's so important not to be carried away with the glamour of national champions. Much rather breed to a younger dog that you know how he developed and what he looked like as a young puppy than to breed to an older dog that had been trained out of his bad traits even though he won a national championship. He still could have started out with a lot of bad habits that you really don't want to inherit. Don't be carried away with numbers as far as the sires are concerned. The mere fact that a sire produced so many winners with so many wins is not terribly important unless you know how many bitches he was bred to. Way back, there were dogs like Spunky Creek Boy that I think bred half the bitches in the country and he came up with this great production score. But it really was meaningless because it should have been indexed. What percentage did he produce? I would much rather have a young sire that sired one litter with three or four good dogs in it than I would to breed to a sire with maybe 150 winners out of maybe 300 litters. This is a good reason for testing young dogs early. If we see a young dog that we really like, we breed to him the first year to sample him, hoping to get a litter to get



LEXINGTON JAKE

[Editor's note. These reflections were prepared for presentation at the SmithKline Beecham Top Shooting Dog Award program in June at Harrisburg, Pa., where the award was presented to Mr. Wehle's Elhew Dancing Gypsy.]

some evaluation of his ability to sire. Marksman sired Jungle when he was thirteen months old. Jungle sired Huckleberry when he was 13-14 months old. Strike sired very young; Magoo sired very young. We just now bred Snakefoot to two bitches and he's only ten months old. By next year, we'll know whether or not he's going to be a sire.

ALL dog breeding is a trade off. We're never going to find the exact dog we're looking for so breeding becomes a question of sacrificing this for that. For instance, in the early days of breeding, we had a terrible problem with the underbite. Marksman had an underbite; Jungle had an underbite. But they were such outstanding dogs it was a choice of whether we go on breeding an underbite or lose the benefit of their ability to sire nice dogs. We eventu-



ELHEW MARKSMAN

ally got the underbite out of the kennels but it took a long time. Would you believe it, we've been crossing back and forth between Hook's Bounty Hunter and Guard Rail and we got a little underbite back again. We'll have it out of the kennel in two or three generations, I'm sure. While on the subject of underbite, it is a recessive gene. The recessive gene has to appear in both the top and bottom side of the pedigree. In other words, the sire has to carry the gene and the dam has to carry the gene. If they each have one gene of the underbite and they're bred together, then 25% of the litter will have an underbite. The quickest way to eliminate an underbite, or any recessive gene, is to bring in a dog without it. That is one reason why we brought Red Water Rex into this strain — because he had a perfect bite as did his sire and dam. Breeding the recessive gene is both positive and negative. You can make it work to your advantage if you use it carefully. For instance, if the desirable quality happens to be a recessive gene, put it on both sides of your pedigree and you'll be guaranteed of getting some results. Twenty-five (25) percent is the usual rule.

Breeding young dogs seems to be of some advantage. It has been well demonstrated in cattle breeding that young bulls seem to be able to produce better than older bulls. We have always used very young sires in our line breeding program and I believe it is an advantage. The same way with young bitches. We breed bitches many times in their first heat period.

We made some quick reference to reinforcing those great natural qualities in the dogs. This is so important. We take them for granted but they can be bred out of our animals just as easy as not. It is so important to constantly strive for those early pointing dogs or dogs that point and back naturally, instinctively at a very young age. As we have already mentioned, many of the show breeds have been very successful in breeding out these natural instincts. And it really didn't take very many generations to do it.

There is a phenomenon in breeding that is forever present. That is what is generally referred to as the drag of the race, a tendency toward mediocrity. If dogs were allowed to breed without man's interven-

tion, they would soon revert back to their common ancestry. This phenomenon is present at every breeding. That is why it's so terribly important to constantly breed the most outstanding dogs you can and never breed mediocre dogs.

In selecting breeding stock, some of the things to avoid in the way of performance is the tendency to trail. This, I'm sure, is an inherited quality and should be avoided at all costs. The lack of pointing and backing instinct should be avoided. Softness in a dog, in their personality, is something to avoid. A lack of endurance, a lack of heart, determination, unstable personality, belligerency (a great thing to avoid in breeding dogs), unwillingness to please are other things to avoid. Dogs should be cooperative. They should have warm, pleasing personalities. Some of the conformation qualities to avoid include ugly looking heads, bad bites, bad eyes and tails. It's just amazing the tails that are appearing on the pointers today. And the worse of it is that some of them are being surgically altered. What a breach of ethics this is! What a detriment it is to our breed. What does it contribute? I don't understand the wisdom of it.

EVERY breeding program should include the complete dog. By the complete dog I mean not only his performance and his personality and his disposition but his conformation as well. It is such a mistake to breed for special qualities. There seems to be a great fad for the running dog now. I think it's a manifestation of the macho syndrome practiced by the young Turks, "my dog can run further than your dog". This doesn't make a lot of sense to me — to sacrifice these other great qualities for range alone. Conformation and hunting ability, pointing instinct — all these great things are being sacrificed for a dog that can run the furthest. This is what happened to our show dogs who bred only for conformation or coat alone. If the dog is bred properly with a full amount of intelligence, he can be trained to run either a shooting dog race or an all-age race. As I already mentioned, Earl Crangle could train a dog to run any kind of race he wanted if the dog was smart enough. Many trainers are able to do this. Incidentally, speaking of range, Earl Crangle saw Elhew Dancing Gypsy win the Alabama Shooting Dog Championship. He rode her brace. He told me afterwards, had she lived in the time of Louisiana Hayride, Hillbright Susanna, Tarheelia's Lucky Strike, she could have won any of those all-age championships because that was the type of range and the type of dog they were looking for then.

One of the important things in breeding is to be able to separate the inherent from the environmental qualities in the young dog. This is why it is so terribly important to study the puppies — to determine what exactly its inherent qualities are — both good and bad. It's amazing all of the qualities which are really inherent. It's hard to believe that a ground pattern is inherent but I can guarantee you it is. At



ELHEW SNAKEFOOT

one time, we owned a dog called Elhew Scotland. From a puppy on, that dog ran in the arc and no place else. He was the most front running dog I ever saw and it was all natural. It was not manmade. By the same token, we have seen dogs that are helter-skelter running in every direction.

I once visited with a breeder from Scotland and he told me that there the dogs were required to run almost a gridiron type pattern because of the nature of the cover and all. He assured me that there were left handed dogs and right handed dogs. In other words, some dogs would work their pattern more to the right side and some more to the left side. I find this easy to believe. But this is just one of the many inherent qualities that you should be looking for in selecting your breeding stock from your puppy crop. Not only the early pointing and the early backing and the hunting intensity and all, but there are so many qualities with intelligence being, by far, the most important.

In the spring, Bill Richards and I were checking some of our young puppies for their backing instinct. We were using pigeons and either one of us would put a dog on point on a pigeon and the other bring a puppy in. In almost every instant, the puppy backed great distances away. As soon as he cast his eyes on the pointing dog, he or she backed — with one exception. That happened to be a little female that was first generation outcross. This is just one of the many inherent qualities that should constantly be evaluated in young dogs when selecting potential breeding stock.

One last thought on breeding and that is the importance of the strong families. Just recently we had the Kentucky Derby and the Preakness and almost every horse that ran those races had a perfectly logical reason for being there. Their pedigree indicated their quality. It is very rare that a classic horse develops out of anything short of an extremely strong, well bred family. I believe that is basically true with dogs. One of our young favorites in our kennel now is Snakefoot. He's but a youngster but showing great potential. In three starts in Derby competition, he's earned two firsts and a second. By the same token, he probably has the nicest pedigree we have. I would guess he traces over 200 times to Lexington Jake and other great dogs like Red Water Rex, Air Pilot and Warhoop Jake. This is the result of his strong gene bank. This doesn't necessarily mean that breeding is a sure thing for it's far from that. It's still full of great mysteries and surprises. I presume that regardless of how refined a breeding program can be developed, it will still contain these great mysteries.

I'm going to leave you with one last thought and that has to do with our relationship with our dogs. It's incredible how important any expression of affection is to them. Even a pat on the head can be so meaningful to them. They crave your warmth and approval so much. It's also so important to understand their feelings. There's no way they can express their own discomfort. They can't cry out, "I'm cold", or "I'm too hot", "I'm terribly uncomfortable", or "I'm hungry" or "thirsty" or "the earmites and fleas are driving me crazy" or "the mange is so painful to me". Yet, they still manage to wag their tails and look at you as though you are the most important thing in their lives.

This relationship you have with your dog has many of the same components of a successful human relationship. There's a mutual respect and admiration, a warmth and devotion, care and protection. As a matter of fact, a canine relationship runs a full gamut of emotions experienced by many of us — the warmth and the tenderness and the hurt and the disappointment, the sorrow at the final departure. These reflections may merely be the manifestation of the aging process but also may explain why, throughout my life, I have so championed our dogs. I wish you all great success with your training and your campaigning and the breeding of your dogs.