

STANDING ALONE



Wehle & The Elhew Pointers

Story and photos by Tom Davis



There were 10 pointers on the tie-out chain, and no two of them were alike. They came in every shape, size, and color; it was a regular variety pack of pointers. There were handsome dogs and homely ones, high-strung chargers and laid-back snoozers. Some came from champion stock, others were the products of backyard breeding. Not that looks or ancestry mattered a whit to the man who owned them, a diehard, take-no-prisoners quail hunter. He couldn't have named their sires and dams on a bet. They were solid, reliable gun dogs, dogs that put birds in his gamebag, and there the discussion ended.

A hole had been left at one end of the chain for my own pointer, a liver-and-white two-year old named Traveler. When I let him out of the truck, my host went wild. "Damn!," he exclaimed, rapturously. "That is a *nice* lookin' pointer! Mmmm-mm. Man, you can tell those Elhew dogs from a mile away..."

That's the way it is with Elhew pointers. They stand out from the crowd. You can instantly put your finger on some of the reasons why: the sky-kissing, ramrod-straight tails, the classic, chiseled heads, the balanced proportions, the smooth, lofty way of going, the intense, high-stationed attitude on point. In the field or in repose, their physical appearance rivets your attention. The common run of pointer suffers grievously by comparison. It is almost as if the Elhew dogs are not merely a distinct strain, but a completely different breed. But there is something else that distinguishes the Elhew pointers, something less tangible. It is that ineffable aura the French call *je ne sais quoi*. They simply exude class. Their soulful intelligence is part of it, as is their boundless enthusiasm. The ancient fire for hunting burns hot within them. You can feel it in their company. It warms your own skin, and penetrates to the heart. And there is yet one more ingredient that sets the Elhew dogs apart: the irrepressible spirit of the man responsible for creating them. Robert G. Wehle.



Bob Wehle whoas one of his young favorites, Elhew Big Blaze, before sending him into the bird field.

In the 57 years since a then-16-year-old Bob Wehle bred his first litter of pointers from Jem of Fearn, a bitch his father, Louis, had imported from the grouse moors of Scotland, and Frank of Sunnyslawn, a prominent New England field trial winner, he has never wavered in his determination not only to produce dogs that please the most discriminating sportsmen, but breed true to type, generation after generation. He has devoted his life to this quest—although he found time along the way to be, among other things, a breeder of dairy cattle, Tennessee walkers, and thoroughbred race horses, an

executive in the Genessee Brewing Company, an environmental activist, a best-selling author, an art collector, and one of the premier sporting sculptors of the era. Regarding this last avocation, Wehle recently opened Lime Rock Gallery in Sackets Harbor, New York, where his bronzes are available for sale. It goes without saying that his favorite subjects are his own pointers; he compares the process of fashioning a sculpture to that of developing a puppy. “You start with this unformed gob,” he says in his soft, low, resonant voice, “you mold and shape it as best you can, and you see what emerges. It’s the most exciting thing in the world.”

The vision of bird dog excellence that has driven Wehle for more than half-a-century has nothing to do with bagging more game. It has everything to do with breeding pointers capable of the kind of rarefied performance that makes the actual shooting of birds secondary—if not entirely superfluous. “The essence of the sport,” Wehle has always insisted, “is not the killing of game, but the pursuit of it. It’s the enjoyment of watching a finely bred, carefully honed pointer perform his artful skills, proudly displaying the grand qualities he has inherited across the centuries.” In a very real sense, the Elhew pointer is the ultimate

expression of this philosophy. It is bred to be the kind of stylish, tenacious, biddable, eager-to-please companion that makes the pursuit of game as pleasurable and profoundly fulfilling as it can possibly be. "To do it well," Wehle wrote in his famous book, *Wing & Shot*, "is truly an art!"

Bob Wehle and his pointers have been doing it so well, for so long, that the Elhew prefix—that's Wehle, spelled backward—has become virtually synonymous with excellence. The Elhew strain is often described as "the Purdey" or "the Rolls-Royce" of bird dogs. Bill Tarrant, the veteran *Field & Stream* columnist, has gone so far as to proclaim the Elhew pointers "the finest string of gun dogs the world has ever seen." It is one of those claims that is difficult to prove—but no one has stepped forward to dispute it.

From Elhew Marksman's triumph in the 1956 National Amateur Pheasant Championship through Elhew Skipjack's victory at the 1992 Colorado Open Shooting Dog Championship, the list of championships, futurities, and other stakes of national significance won by the Elhew dogs includes events in every part of the country, on every species of game. The longevity and scope of this record are utterly unparalleled—and new chapters are being written every year. Many of the outstanding dogs that contributed to it rank among the household names of pointerdom: Elhew Jungle, who won the first three runnings of the National Pheasant Shooting Dog Championship; Jungle's son Huckleberry, who won that same championship on two occasions; Elhew Lucy Brown, Elhew Holly, and Elhew Flying Dutchman, all winners of the Grand National Grouse Championship (Wehle co-owned these dogs with his great friend, Dick Shear); Elhew Dancing Gypsy, National Open Shooting Dog Champion and Top Shooting Dog of

the Year award recipient... these are just a few of the legends to bear the Elhew Kennels standard.

And while the field trial accomplishments are a matter of public record, what really can't be quantified is the enjoyment that thousands of Elhew-bred gun dogs have brought to the men and women who shoot over them. The objective of many pointer kennels is the production of field trial winners—period. The cast-offs, the animals that don't quite cut it in competition, are sold as "gun dog prospects." In stark contrast, Bob Wehle's goal has always been to breed "complete" bird dogs, dogs that, given the proper training and environment, can be developed into horseback field trial

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performers, high-class foot hunting companions, or both. When he plans a mating, it is not with the thought of producing a specific type of dog, for example, a "grouse dog" or a "quail dog." It is with the thought of producing dogs that possess the instinct, desire, physical wherewithal and, above all, the *intelligence* to become whatever the owner wants." My friend Earl Crangle always said

that if you start with a highly intelligent dog, you can put any kind of pattern you want on it," Wehle notes. "I believe that's true. Intelligent dogs also have the ability to adapt to different kinds of cover. They'll cast to distant objectives or quarter closely, depending on the conditions."

To be sure, Wehle is ecstatic when someone buys a pup and develops it into a field trial champion, the way Dr. David Calcagni of Boston did with Elhew Gamemaster. On successive weekends last fall, Gamemaster won the Northeastern Grouse Championship and the North American Woodcock Championship. But he is just as pleased when a sportsman who has possibly never even attended a field trial writes to say that his Elhew pup has matured into the finest gun dog he's ever owned, maybe the finest he's ever seen. The common denominator among the owners of Elhew-bred dogs, some 95 percent of whom are shoe-leather bird hunters, is enthusiasm. Again and again, they tell Wehle things like, "I can't believe you let this pup go," or, "This one must have slipped by you." These comments never fail to put a smile on Wehle's face and an added sparkle in brown eyes that already have a perpetual twinkle. "Isn't that great?" he'll say, before adding, "I guess even a blind pig like me comes up with an acorn once in a while."

Blind pig, indeed. But even Wehle seems surprised at the amazingly consistent quality of the litters he is raising these days. Never, in the long and splendid history of Elhew Kennels, has the process of selecting future breeding stock been more agonizing. "I must be out of my mind," Wehle said recently. "I've got 15 young dogs in training, and I really don't know which ones to keep. They all have so many fine qualities, you know?"

Still, it's a happy kind of agony, and it comes down to making the

narrowest distinctions, splitting hairs, and splitting them again. This pup is a shade fleetier of foot, or a bit lighter on the ground, or a touch more intense on point, or a tad more inclined to run to the front... the differences are at best negligible, if not wholly imperceptible to anyone but a man of Wehle's vast experience and keen, critical eye.

There is an old adage among astute dog men that goes, "Pick the litter, not the puppy." Well, at Elhew Kennels, you don't even have to pick the litter. The strain breeds as pure as water from a mountain spring: Each and every litter is uniformly superb. Flick a wing in front of any Elhew pup, and he'll point as if he's been doing it for years; take him for a walk, and you'll see the boldness, the curiosity, the animation, the natural inclination to stay in front. When someone recently asked me my advice on picking a puppy, I said, "Go to Elhew Kennels, stand in the puppy pen, close your eyes, reach down, and grab the first pup you lay your hands on."

That may sound tongue-in-cheek, but it isn't. The only variable in the equation is that you'll have to put your name on the waiting list, because supply has a hard time meeting demand, the \$1,500 price tag notwithstanding. In fact, Wehle did something this past winter he's never done before: bred several litters with the intent of selling *all* the pups. What you have to understand is that while Elhew Kennels is a business, its fundamental reason for existing is to facilitate Wehle's grail-like quest for the perfect pointer.

"I realized early on," he muses, "that if I could breed 15 litters in a single year, I'd make the same amount of progress as the person who breeds one litter a year for 15 years. It's simple mathematics." His normal procedure is to evaluate every litter, and keep the handful of pups—perhaps 2 percent of the



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year's "crop"—that appear to have the best potential for not just maintaining the quality of the strain, but enhancing it. Only by breeding the *creme de la creme*, Wehle stresses, can "the drag of the race"—the general tendency towards mediocrity—be defeated. Certainly, compromises occasionally have to be made; as Wehle likes to say, "It's hard to get all the coons up the same tree."

For example, two of the kennel's greatest performers and sires, Marksman and Jungle, had underbites. But they were so overwhelmingly blessed in every other respect that Wehle decided to keep them, and breed out the fault through the judicious selection of dams. Another compromise occurred circa 1970, when Wehle went outside the Elhew "family" to infuse the blood of National Champion Red Water Rex into the kennel. The strain's physical stature and refinement of head was somewhat diminished, but its tenacity and resoluteness on point improved dramatically. Wehle's assessment is that the Rex blood made a tremendous contribution.

The remainder of Elhew Kennels' annual harvest, obviously, is sold. This income, coupled with that from stud fees and the sale of the odd brood matron or started dog, makes the operation economically self-sustaining. Wehle is frankly uncomfortable with the kennel's "commercial" aspect, but he shrugs, "I don't know how else to do it." You get the impression that he would like nothing better than to be able to give a puppy to whomever wants and deserves one. The part of a puppy transaction that pleases him is not the check, but the confirmation that the new owner fully appreciates the incredible heritage and potential this pudgy little bundle embodies, and that it will receive the best possible care and training.

Not surprisingly, Wehle has achieved a sort of "guru" status among aspiring pointer breeders. He's flattered that they seek his counsel but, in typically unassuming fashion, he protests that he doesn't understand why. "I don't know anything about breeding," he says, shaking his head bemusedly. "I really don't." As proof, he offers the case of the Elhew Gimli-Hook's Bounty

Hunter mating, the kennel's most important "nick" of the last 20 years. While Wehle and the entire Elhew program are identified with the practice of linebreeding—breeding within an established genetic family to "fix" desirable characteristics and produce dogs that consistently breed true to type—he has continually experimented with outcrosses in the hope that "new blood" might add something to the strain. "It's like trying to catch lightning in a bottle," Wehle admits. But if you spend enough time standing in electrical storms, you're bound to get lucky. It happened in 1970 when he bred to

campaign by Dr. Alvin Nitchman. Strike, in turn, has proved to be one of the most prepotent sires Wehle ever produced—and he transmits this prepotency to his own sons. The result is that Wehle now has his strongest male line since the days of Marksman and Jungle.

The tragic side to this story is that Gimli, one of the five or six "blue hen" females Wehle has had—females that produce superior pups no matter who they're bred to—died of a uterine infection when the litter was only a few weeks old. Realizing what he had in Strike and Gypsy, Wehle attempted to genetically

hands. "It's certainly a mystery to me. That's why I don't think I know anything about breeding."

If there is a genuine secret to the success of the Elhew breeding program, it is that Wehle has so adamantly stuck to the course he originally set, despite the changeable currents and heavy weathers of bird dog fashion. For instance, he has been criticized in some quarters for breeding dogs that don't have enough "run" to compete on the all-age circuit. This is a criticism he's content to live with, because he's bewildered by the overemphasis that contemporary field trials—his

beloved shooting dog stakes included—place on extreme range.

By worshipping run as a virtual end in itself, such truly crucial qualities as style, intelligence, and bird sense are devalued. It drives Wehle crazy when what are supposed to be shooting dogs have to be rounded up after each cast as if they were lost calves, with scouts and handlers riding all over the country on heaving, lathered horses. When Wehle judges a



Bill Richards leads a prospect back to its pen after yard training and "bench" work. Visiting Elhew Kennels is like stepping back in time to an enchanted medieval place of unpretentious refinement and grace.

Red Water Rex, and it happened in 1984 when he bred Gimli to Hook's Bounty Hunter, a young champion whose performance at a field trial made Wehle sit a little taller in the saddle.

From this cross came Elhew Dancing Gypsy, the very epitome of the ideal horseback shooting dog, and her brother, multiple champion Elhew Strike, a dog developed and

duplicate the nick. He bred Gimli's dam to Hook's Bounty Hunter. He bred Gimli's full sister to Hook's Bounty Hunter. He bred her daughter to him, a half-sister, cousins, everything he could think of. He got some good pups—but nothing remotely of the same caliber as Strike and Gypsy.

"How do you explain that?" he asks, holding out his big, expressive

trial, he doesn't tolerate such shenanigans—and it has not necessarily made him the world's most popular person. Once, while judging a dog that had required prolonged, excessive scouting to keep it on course, he informed the handler (a man he considered a friend), that if his dog needed the exercise, he was welcome to finish out the hour.

"But," Wehle added, "I'm not going to

be looking at him." The handler blew a gasket, and refused to speak to Wehle for two years.

One all-age dog that Wehle wishes he had bred to more than he did is Guard Rail, a dog he calls "the most important pointer sire of the last 50 years." Mere weeks before Guard Rail's untimely accidental death, Wehle finally bred a bitch to him—and the Elhew strain took another leap forward. It wasn't, strictly speaking, an outcross, as Guard Rail was heavily Elhew-bred on the top side of his pedigree. Through his dam, Nell's Rambling On (a blue hen if there ever was one), he infused the Rebel

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blood into the mix, blood Wehle had long coveted, but was unable to "catch in the bottle." Elhew Brass, victor in the 1987 National Shooting Dog Futurity, was the litter's most noteworthy winner, and in Brass's daughters Wehle has developed a strong female line to complement the Strike male line. And in Brass's littermate, Elhew Kiwi, Wehle has his latest blue hen. "I could breed her to a fence post," he says, "and she'd still produce exceptional pups." The long and short of it is that the kennel's future has never looked brighter.

The one area in which Wehle feels that the Elhew strain has most noticeably improved over the years is trainability. When he thinks back to the struggle of wills he endured in training some of his well-known dogs, he can't help but laugh. "I could train four dogs today," he intones, "in the time it took me to train Marmaduke. And Longrifle! Gosh, he was a hard-headed dog. He fought me every step of the way. Now, because the dogs I've kept for breeding have been the ones who liked me and wanted to please me, they almost train themselves.

"Take Columbo over there," he says, gesturing toward a strapping white-and-orange male cruising the perimeters of his pen (which is about the size of a suburban front yard). "It took Bill Richards (Wehle's Alabama kennel manager and right-hand man) less than a month of formal



Wehle sees Elhew Snakefoot as the ultimate end product of 57 years of breeding: a dog that will take your breath away when he's hied on and stop your heart as he slams on point.

training to develop him into a completely finished shooting dog. And Bill did it without leaving any 'fingerprints.' That's so important. There are a lot of trainers who can make a dog obey commands—but there are very few who take the time to truly develop a dog, and who can do it without leaving any marks. That's what separates trainers like Earl Crangle, Paul Walker, and Gary and Diane Christensen: They don't leave any marks."

The Elhew strain's evolution in trainability is mirrored by the differences between *Wing & Shot*, Wehle's classic 1964 training text, and his recent, two-volume video "update" of the same name. While the principles and techniques are essentially the same, the corrective measures recommended in the book—and the flushing whip used to administer them—are totally absent from the tape. Instead, the perspective is entirely positive. Restraint with a rope and wire collar is as harsh as Wehle gets; everything else hinges on repetition, praise, and

reinforcement, on letting the marvelous natural qualities emerge and gently molding them to fit the mind's-eye image. Wehle does so many little things that add up to big strides, like flipping pebbles into the grass in front of a pup to increase its intensity on point.

W ehle may, according to the calendar, qualify as "old." For the record, he's 73. But he has the *joie de vivre* of a teenager, an infectious zest for life. Pointers may be his ruling passion, but he loves animals of every ilk. Walking horses, shaggy Scottish Highland cattle, silver foxes—he keeps them all, along with a dazzling array of fowl: gaudy fighting cocks, feisty English bantams, elegant geese, exotic pheasants, wild turkeys, gray and chukar partridge, pure white homing pigeons, and, of course, bobwhite quail. Little wonder that the biannual trips between Wehle's summer place overlooking the eastern shore of Lake Ontario in upstate New York and his winter digs in the "piney woods" of southeastern Alabama resemble, in his words, "gypsy caravans." Literal herds of semi-tame deer wander the grounds of both locales; in Alabama, anglers pull 10-pound largemouth from Wehle's ponds with astonishing regularity.

The kennels themselves are, quite simply, the cleanest, most spacious, most attractive you'll see. No cramped runs for the Elhew pointers: They have expansive pens where they can stretch their legs and soak up the sunlight. The whelping houses and other structures are painted a cheery Gaspé gray, with charming cupolas and window boxes full of flowers. Handsome wooden signs inform you that you are at the right place. Visiting Elhew Kennels, north or south, and being warmly welcomed by Bob and his utterly beguiling wife, Gatra (along with her two attentive terriers, Barnum and Bailey), is like stepping back in time to some enchanted medieval kingdom. You cannot believe that a place of such grace of such easy, unpretentious refinement really exists. It is like walking into a tapestry.

And, before you know it, you're being given the grand tour, and invited to stay for cocktails, supper (Bob and Gatra are both wonderful cooks), and conversation. If you're lucky, Bob will tell you how, at the tender age of 19, he met the immortal William Harnden Foster at a field trial, how Foster encouraged him to breed Elhew Midge to Lexington Jake, and how Lexington Jake became the fountainhead for the entire Elhew strain. Maybe he'll tell you about the time he was running Elhew Muldoon in a puppy stake, before he'd put a handle on the dog, and even

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though he hadn't a clue as to Muldoon's whereabouts, he gestured toward the horizon because he knew the judge was nearsighted—and the judge said, "I got him." Maybe he'll even tell you about his unscheduled stopover in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and how, ever since, Gatra has been threatening to pin a note to his lapel when he's about to go somewhere, a note that reads, "Hi! My name's Bob, and I'm on my way to _____."

But mostly, the talk will be of dogs. Not Marksman and Jungle and Huckleberry, either, because their time has come and gone. No; Wehle is too excited about the future to dwell on the past. The talk is of the young dogs, and of what they might accomplish. There's Skipjack, already a champion, one of the stars of pro Jack Herriage's string; Callie and McCoy, being campaigned by the consummate showman, Larry Moon; Gypsy Rose and Tom Fool and the others under the patient tutelage of Gary and Diane Christensen; Blaze, a big, powerful, cover-busting whirlwind that Bob and Bill Richards are developing "at home."

And there is one other, a dog that, in the fullest sense, is the end product of the work Bob Wehle began 57 years ago. This is a dog that Gary Christensen believes is the best he's "ever blown a whistle over," a dog Wehle acknowledges is "the finest I've ever raised." This is a dog that makes the rest look like they are standing still, a dog that seems to float over the countryside, a dog that runs two hours as easily as two minutes. This is a dog that will raise the hackles on your neck when he's simply on whoa, take your breath away when he's hied on, and stop your heart when he slams into a point. This is a dog that every decision Bob Wehle ever made—which to keep, which to cull, which to breed—was calculated to create.

Remember the name: Elhew Snakefoot.

