



ENGLISH SETTER ON RUFFED GROUSE HUNT BY DALE SPARTAS

*Two disparate
species share the hunt.*

By MICHAEL FURTMAN

The Gifts of Gun Dogs

I SUPPOSE IT IS POSSIBLE I COULD HUNT well without a gun dog, but I doubt it.

Have you ever followed a spaniel through the tangles of a woodcock covert, watched it drawn to the hidden bird like iron filings to a magnet? Seen a pointer so rigid in attention that an earthquake

would warrant but a glance in your direction?

Have you sat in awe as a retriever fetched a mallard in mire that would swallow a truck? Seen it later nail a bluebill so far out in storm-tossed seas that dog and duck were but black specks on slate-gray water?

If you have, then you know what it is to hunt well.

Surely, not every retrieve or point or flush is stellar. But when a gun dog's talent and instinct shine, the moments shared between human and animal are among the most cherished. Think of that bond: two disparate species inclined to share an experience as primordial as life itself—the hunt. Think of the hunting dogs' gifts. Their skills humble us. They are our interpreters. They smell what we



cannot smell, hear what we cannot hear, read in the wind and track the course of a panoply of events at which we can only guess. And then, with perked ears, fired eyes, and ecstatic body language, they tell us all they've discovered. It is an amazing union.

There is, in our first touch of a squirming pup, the promise of that union, of bright autumn mornings in frosted fields following the dog that follows the track of the pheasant.

There is, in that teen dog, the clown that nips the puffs from

YELLOW LABRADOR RETRIEVER IN WATERFOWL RETRIEVE BY DENVER BRYAN



GOLDEN RETRIEVER WITH WOOD DUCK DRAKE BY BILL MARCHEL



ENGLISH POINTER ON POINT BY DENVER BRYAN



ENGLISH SETTER MID-JUMP BY DALE SPARTAS



BLACK LABRADOR RETRIEVER PUPPY BY DENVER BRYAN

dandelions, torn between play and the hunt. The student who suddenly grasps the lesson that we or game birds teach, maturing before our proud eyes.

There are, in that prime-of-life dog, fully ripened skills bolstered by physical abilities untarnished by time. These are the years we hunters dreamed of as we cradled our napping pup.

And there is, in that old dog, a heart's ambition unwavering, though hips and eyes are weak. These are the bittersweet hunts, the dog unaware that each flush or retrieve may be its last, but the sadness of that prospect welling up in our own eyes.

Despite the pain of this final loss, I would have it no other way. Without the end, there would be no jester puppies, no robust youth. Who would greet me in the darkness as the alarm clock goes off at zero-dark-thirty? Who else would so happily sit with me in a frigid duck blind and relish mashed sandwiches as if they were filet mignon? Who would so gladly ride in my pickup, electrified at the prospect of going hunting somewhere—anywhere—with me? And who else would see me as a hero?

Only Gypsy, my unflappable queen, and the dog of my

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BLACK LABRADOR RETRIEVER BY DALE SPARTAS

youth. And Rascal, the unquenchable clown, my sadly missed friend of the flyway. Or Widgeon, the serious one, who may be the best dog yet.

Hunting dogs are joy unfettered, optimism unbound, faith undying. In the end then, though their skills in the hunt are not forgotten, these are their greatest gifts.

I suppose I might be able to hunt well without my dog, but I won't. □

CHOCOLATE LABRADOR RETRIEVER PUPPIES BY DENVER BRYAN



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CHOCOLATE LABRADOR RETRIEVER BY DENVER BRYAN

GOLDEN RETRIEVER BY DENVER BRYAN

