

Small Gift By Neil L. Mace

Karst's Benjamin, a nearly all orange Brittany, came to me as a gift, a small gift from my mother; and he was indeed almost tiny in stature, 19 inches and 39 pounds. He was the most competitive animal I have ever known, he hated, just plain hated, to have a dog in front of him. His desire to be in the lead would have been more beneficial had he been a thoroughbred horse. As a bird dog, this overwhelming, compulsive desire to race had him running over more than one covey. He seemed to think stopping to point was an unnecessary part of field trialing, so he seldom actually hunted, but could he run! Not just fast, but wide. He had what I called the Walter Johnson attitude toward backing, "You can't win a trial standing around watching another dog point." He would never steal a point, but he would blink a back at 400 yards.

If I could get in front of him, he was steady to wing and shot at 18 months old, but it was a caution to get him to stand still long enough to even call point. It seemed he knocked birds not to chase or catch them, but to get them out of his way so he could go find another. So it was not unusual for him to have 2 or 3 bumps without being observed by the judicial party, particularly if they were unfamiliar with him as he would not chase within their sight. Numerous times I have had a judge say, "Well, you are looking good, but you need a bird now, we have seen enough run." I could have honestly responded, "Thanks, but since he has already moved at least 4, I am just hoping he finds one a little nearer to me so we can talk about it," but usually restrained myself. I often thought one reason he ran so big, was to keep from being observed finding a bird, because he would have to stop while I worked the bird and the other dog would get to the front.

At first we thought he had no nose, but were that the case how could he find so many birds? Then we suspected he was trial wise, since he would behave with impeccable manners in training. So we set up fake field trials; complete with horse trailers, gallery, bracemates, and even a tailgate party, prepared to use the TriTronics 5 plug on his little butt, forcing him to be the perfect gentleman, only to have him punch out at a bird at the next trial. Which led us to suspect he was collar wise, so Jim Heckert and Brian Sullivan would hide in trees with a planted bird at the base, while I rode in the opposite direction. Jumping down and correcting him when he had a lapse in manners. This just made him search the tops of the forest for my helpmates before committing his crime and going on his way. It was knock the bird and race off to find another.

A lesser, or perhaps simply more intelligent, man, would have given up on Benji, as he was called, and spent their time with a sure enough bird dog. My only defense for wasting my time and that of the judges, was that he was so exciting on the ground, thrilling even. That, and he would win some, particularly with judges that had not yet learned his habits or when he drew a bye. Plus he was so impressive he became his kennelmate's greatest ally. I have long believed that when he would appeared to have gone birdless, the less suspecting judges might have thought they owed me one, and would put up another of my dogs, that actually did like to hunt for birds, but never ran as wide. Sort of combined the race of one with the bird work of the other, putting up the one that had birds.

Told by experts I trusted, that he needed birds killed for him, I shot and he retrieved a Croaker sack full. We ran the bird bill out of sight. He liked that, a lot, but it never diminished his desire to outrun a dog at the next trial. A better, more knowledgeable trainer, with the utilization of today's tracking collars, might have been able to develop him into one of the great ones. I didn't have the skill or the tools and as time went on, even

lacked the desire. There are lots of bird dogs, but outside of the greyhounds, there are few sure enough race dogs.

I started running him in pointer and setter trials, not because he had dominated the Brittanys, but because the handling and scouting rules are somewhat more relaxed in American Field trials. We had the same results, as I often heard folks say, though immortalized by Doc Nitchman, "You can win with any kind of dog; one that blinks, one that won't point, one that lays down, one that won't back. You can win with them all, except a lost dog."

We were rocking along pretty good, winning some, always tearing up courses, both of us just having fun, when the inevitable happened, As Louis L'mour noted of gunfighters, "No matter how fast you are, there is always someone faster." In an all-breed, long tail trial he hooked up with a big old, long legged pointer that was as competitive as he. They broke away in a cloud of dust at Clair Gross' farm, where you went half a mile before the first turn. Stride for stride they battled for the lead, well, really not stride for stride, as Benji seemed to take three steps for everyone of the pointer's, but they were side by side as they disappeared over the far horizon, before we could send the scouts. Neither hunted a lick, it was all race to the front. 39 pounds against a solid 75, proving the little Brit's weight was made up of at least one half in heart. Twenty minutes later and out of judgment, the scouts returned without the dogs, prompting Bob Youngs to exclaim, "The last I saw of the little SOB he was half a nose in front of the pointer going across yonder field past the big ditch. You want him, you go get him, he damn near killed my horse." This from a man that has been known to say there are no run off dogs, just slow scouts. I got a call from a farmer three days later who lived 6 miles to the north telling me he had my beagle. Thinking there would be less of a reward sought for a rabbit dog, I never explained that the tired, bedraggled dog he had recovered was supposed to be a bird dog.

Any thoughts that the experience might have broken his spirit or at the least, instilled some sense into him were dashed the next week at Coatsville, when somehow he swam the river and showed on top of the mountain that ringed the course. Not liking to turn, he was often lost, and I got mileage out of accepting that he ran outside the planted birds, had suffered a limb find without being found, ran to big for the course, or some other excuse offered by the well meaning gallery.

But I knew the truth, he ran to hear the wind!

A true renegade, he continued his unruly ways until his death. He was qualified for 5 Brittany Open National Championships and ran in 4, never with much distinction beyond his race that never failed to excite. He produced 3 Field Champions from his first breeding, before prospective buyers became wise to his antics. Not wanting to risk harming the breed, I retired him from stud and trialing, and just allowed him to play out his days as a hunting dog, where when put on the ground alone, without competition, he did better than a passable job.

Benji, a small gift of joy.