

# Come Run With Me

by Jeannie Wagner

Hanging low in the early morning sky, the October Sun rises over the horizon, her rays warm the crisp fall air. A swirling mist forms over the nearby lake and low-lying cloud engulfs the ground. The mist rises higher, emanating from the lake and the frosty grass. The sun pokes her head above the misty cloud determined to bring clear skies to the day ahead.

In the shadows of the morning mist, three figures are moving towards the edge of the meadow. They stop by the lake, the horse, the dog and their trusted companion and friend. The figure stoops down, reins held in hand, and pats the head of the dog. The Irish adoringly looks up; his tail wags in appreciation of the affectionate pat. Big gray, the Tennessee Walker, is barely visible - the mist engulfs him. He lowers his head down to sniff the dog, who returns the gesture with a quick lick on the horse's nose. The horse whinnies, shakes his head and then bumps the back of his friend. Realizing negligence, friend reaches up and scratches the horse's ears. The trio left camp early to come out to the place where the day's competition would take place. They wanted time alone, away from the campgrounds, to hone their friendship and commitment to the teamwork that would be required of them today.

The sun creeps higher in the sky and the mist quickly dissipates. The full panorama of the fall palette explodes into view. Bold golds, hues of reds and yellows, burnished browns and blaze orange are set against the dark green pines and meadow grasses. It's early fall, the peak of the season before the dull gray of winter sets in. Except for a breeze gently stirring the rustling leaves, the morning is quiet. The trio moves forward. The silence is broken only by the crunch of fallen leaves that crush beneath their feet. The pungent smell of the leaves permeates the air. Time has come for the trio to go to the starting line.

Back in the campgrounds, everyone is swinging into action. Animals are fed, and horses are saddled. Each handler checks his gear, water canteens, roading harness, long lines, and rain gear are securely tied on to the saddles. Whistles, blank guns, outback coats, chaps, hats and gloves are donned. Excitement rises and expectations grow, as the start of the day's competition is eminent.

Another set of companions gear up and move towards the starting place. Behind them come the spectators, who are eager to watch the hunt, and the judges, who will determine the winner of today's competition.

The Irish Setter stands ready, his mahogany coat gleams in the morning sun. His bracemate today is a black and tan. The Gordon Setter is tough competition. The two setters look to each other. Silent communication passes between them - they acknowledge each other as today's competitor. They are not strangers to each other; these two have run and hunt together before. Each one knows the other's ability to find game. The bracing of this particular pair of dogs has attracted a large group of spectators who are eager to see who will be the better dog. They are an even match, and

have often placed one over the other. Expectations are high.

The line marshal calls out "Brace one, handlers on the line five minutes to breakaway".

The dogs both stand tall; they quiver with anticipation. The horses grow impatient and paw the ground. The big gray knows the importance of his job, helping his companions in the hunt. He will be ever watchful of the red dog as he hunts the fields. The handlers once more check over their gear. Water canteens, one for the dog one for the handler, the morning is cool but it will warm up quickly. Cinch strap checked for tightness. Blank guns checked for ammunition and put back in the holsters. Chaps adjusted. The saddle leather creaks as they mount up. The Marshall announces the dogs and their handlers to the Judges and gallery.

The Judges ask "Do you have a scout today?" The handlers name their scouts. With a tip of the hat the handlers express good luck. The judges ask again, "ARE YOU READY HANDLERS?" the nod is yes. Whistles blow - they are off - the competition begins.

The Irish breaks off to the left, the Gordon to the right. They are equal in speed. Tails cracking, their animated gait moves them quickly across the terrain. They work the open fields in unison and then drive forward towards the nearby hedgerow. The Irish reaches it first, but the Gordon is not far behind. They work up the line, catching scent on the wind as it drifts through the hedgerow towards them. Irish's tail whips faster as he indicates with his body language that game is near by. His head snaps around, and he freezes in motion. A shift in the direction of the breeze; he had passed by the birds. His body turned nearly in half as he stops head held high and tail ridged above his back. He stands tall staunchly holding the birds in place. The Gordon, just seconds behind him, stops also. He too stands tall honoring the point of his bracemate. The two dogs are silhouetted against the fire red foliage of a sumac thicket. The feathering of the their silken hair waves gently in the crisp fall breeze. The horses see that their respective dogs have stopped on game and approach with eagerness. They pitch one ear forward towards the dogs and the other back to hear any commands from their rider. As they gently pull in on the reins, the handlers speak, "Easy now" to their steeds; they do not want to approach too fast and send the birds into flight.

Reaching the dogs, the handlers dismount, hand off the horses to their scouts, and wait for the judges. The field marshal stops the gallery at a respectful distance away so as not to disrupt the dogs or flush the birds. This find belongs to the Irish; his handler moves forward silently to place himself to the front of the dog. Calmly the handler pushes back the side of the outback coat to free up access to the blank gun. Handler of the Gordon walks quietly to the side of his charge. A nod to the other handler indicates they are ready. Quiet befalls the group. The only sounds heard are the soft nickering of the horses, as all await the flush of the game.

## COME RUN WITH ME, CONTINUED...



Blank gun now in hand, the Irish setter's handler moves quickly into the sumac thicket. Branches snap as the cover is being thrashed. Success: a covey of bobwhite's burst from within the thicket. Four, five no eight birds lift up into the air. Both dogs remain standing tall. Only their heads move to indicate the flight of the birds. "Bang." The silence is broken by the retort the blank gun. All is in good order. The handlers approach the dogs with a word of praise, "good dog." They gently collar the dogs and move them away from the hedgerow. They stand them once again on "Whoa" and remount the horses. A blast of the whistle signals the dogs, the hunt is on.

Excitement grows within the gallery. Nods of approval and words of praise and appreciation are spoken. What a spectacular pair of dogs to watch. The Gordon stretches to the left as the course takes a turn down a multiflora hedge line. His yellow marking collar is all that is visible as his dark coat blends in against the dark gray woody thicket. The scout is sent to watch the other side of the thick rose hedge. He reaches the end of the long hedgerow swings around and stops. A covey that was out feeding in the field rises around him. No chance to catch scent in the shifting wind.

Working on the other side of the field, the Irish is unaware of the Gordon's find. Two of the bobwhites split away from the flushed group and fly over his head. He stops, marking the flight of the birds. Both dogs are credited with a stop to flush. The two stop to flushes are in good order. "Bang! - Bang!" the handlers fire a blank, each in turn, and once again they mount and send the dogs on.

The handler of the Black and Tan gives a quick glance at the stopwatch to see how much time is left. "10 minutes left." Time is running out, and the Gordon still needs a solid find of his own. Far down the final hedgerow of the course, the black and tan slams on point. He is staunch and standing tall, his handler calls point. The big red dog is working down the same line and is going towards him. The gallery gasps in anticipation. Will he see the other dog on point? Will he stop and honor? His handler stays calm, confident there is nothing to worry about. The Irish sees his bracemate and locks up in a stylish back. Both dogs are well ahead of the handlers. It will take time to reach them. Will they hold? Will the birds flush wild before the handlers can get there? The handlers meet up and move forward together. They keep their horses steady, moving forward at a crisp walking gait. No words are spoken, only the sound of creaking leather as they ride along and the crunching leaves and twigs snapping under the horse's feet disturb the silence.

They reach the bottom of the rolling hill - a small steam

must be crossed; the crossing is narrow forcing the handlers and the gallery to go single file. The cold water splashes up under the horse's bellies as they forge over the stream. The handlers are grateful for the chaps that protect them. The dogs are now out of sight: they won't see them again until they reach the other side. As they come up over the rise, all can see that both dogs are still standing. A gasp emits from the gallery. Magnificent "What a sight!" The two stand firm, heads and tails are high and ridged as they await the arrival of their companions. Once again the handlers work together. A nod from the red dog's handler indicates readiness. The Gordon's handler leaps into the multiflora hedge. The outback coat and chaps provide protection from the thorny bushes. The bramble is extremely thick and the only hope of obtaining a flush will be by beating the outside of the thicket. After a second attempt, a small covey of four lifts up and flies over the heads of the gallery. What a great find and excellent bird work. "Bang!" The blank gun is fired, and the hunt begins again.

It has been a grueling hour; in spite of the fatigue they are now feeling, the dogs burst forward in a race to the finish. Both are running and hunting hard when time is called at sixty minutes. What a spectacular brace. The standard to beat has been set, and the bar is high. The rest of the dogs in competition this day will have a their jobs cut out for them if they are to top this performance.

The handlers call the dogs in and gather them up on lead. The Irish knows he has done well; in his excitement he jumps up and kisses the nose of his horse then turns and lavishes kisses on his handler. The trio is happy with the morning's run. The handlers shake hands and congratulate each other on a job well done. They head back into camp, eager to share the story of their hunt with all. After caring for their charges, they join the gallery to watch the performances of the other dogs. They will wait, in anticipation, for the end of the day and the judge's announcement of placements and today's winner.

This story is not an actual event but the culmination of experiences of over 35 years of hunting, trialing Irish Setters and judging pointing breed trials. The dogs in the story are based on my Irish Setter FC/AFC Cody and my dear friend Susan De Silvers' Gordon Setter DCH/AFC Hobie, both of whom have gone over the rainbow bridge.

The story will take you on an exciting trip as you follow a brace of dogs in a Setter Championship. Sit back in the saddle and enjoy your ride in the gallery. At the end it will be up to you decide who won the brace and perhaps the Championship. ♣