

# TINK'S TALE

A Texas quail hunter keeps the faith – and wins the “setter lottery.” **BY TOM DAVIS**





*Our job as bird hunters is to bear witness to our dogs' artistry, and confirm their genius with our guns.—Rick Snipes*

average but in retrospect began to take on the luster of remembered greatness—all the charts and graphs, all the censuses and reports have told the same bleakly despairing story: a bobwhite quail population in free-fall. As the drought burned on, and as the birds began to seem less like natural, normal parts of the Rolling Plains ecosystem than refugees struggling dazedly to survive in a post-apocalyptic wasteland, many hunters threw in the towel.

Or, if they didn't, they hung on at a minimal level, keeping just a dog or two (when in years past they would have kept a kennelful) and not even toying with the idea of starting any new puppies. It would have made as much sense, on the face of it, as drilling a new well in a played-out oilfield.

But that's the thing about faith: It's not supposed to make sense—or even pretend to. It's defiant by definition, stubborn on principle. It flies in the face of logic, bucks the current of mainstream opinion, runs counter to the prevailing grain.

**A**mong West Texas quail hunters, none has kept the faith more steadfastly than Rick Snipes, who runs just enough Black Angus cattle ("Walking fire," he calls them) on his Stonewall County ranch to manage the habitat for the birds that are the reason he *owns* the ranch. And now that the drought has finally broken, now that the rains have made the deserts bloom, and now that the quail have staged a comeback that even the oldest, grayest, squintiest-eyed bird hunters have never seen the like of, that faith is being rewarded—spectacularly.

You see, when other hunters were letting their kennels go fallow, Rick Snipes was continuing to till the soil, sourcing new bird dog talent from the finest bloodlines in America and giving that talent the water and sunlight it needed to grow and flower. The upshot is that he currently has six dogs—six!—that any discerning quail hunter would commit a minor felony to own, dogs that find and handle birds like

**F**or even the truest of true believers in the religion called West Texas quail hunting, the 2010s have been a Job-like test of faith. The afflictions have been unremitting. There has been parching drought and searing heat—fire without rain—for year upon hellish year. There has been pestilence, too, in the form of a parasitic eyeworm whose existence was known, but whose capacity to devastate quail populations on a landscape scale (and to do so with frightening speed) was discovered only after the lethal damage had been done.

Since the 2008-09 season—which at the time was considered on the low side of





nobody's business and, just as importantly, do it all with indisputable class.

"I never turn my dogs loose," Rick once told me, "without uttering a small prayer of thanks for the field-trial breeders, owners, and trainers. It's because of them that bird hunters like me are able to run the stylish and talented dogs that we do."

Five of Rick's elite six-pack, not surprisingly, are pointers—the default bird dog of West Texas, the breed that takes up the overwhelming majority of the space on the trailers, trucks, and quail rigs that (happily) are once again becoming common sights on blacktops and backroads from Albany to Amarillo.

You've heard the expression, "Horses for courses?" Well, the pointer, by dint of its drive, desire, speed, stamina, and overall toughness, has proven to be the ideal fit for the stern demands of West Texas quail hunting—demands imposed not only by the birds themselves but by the big, harshly unforgiving country they inhabit. The game simply requires "a lot of dog," and the pointer, more than any other breed, embodies that description.

Running a distant second in that part of the world is the English setter. It's a funny thing, but some sportsmen just seem to have good luck finding setters that can cut it in Texas—and some don't. Snipes was always in the latter category; he'd tried a few longhairs over the years, but for various reasons they never suited him. He became known as a "pointer man," although it wasn't so much a label he embraced as one that others applied to him. Rick's not what you'd call a

buttoned-down person, and when a dog's really putting on a show, it doesn't matter whether it wears its hair long or short: Rick'll be the guy in the front row leading the cheers.

So when a friend told him about a litter to be sired by Shadow Oak Bo—the dog that in 2013 became the first setter in 43 years to win the National Field Trial Championship—it wasn't a hard sell to convince him to plunk his money down. Still, he kept his expectations modest. As he said to me (only half in jest), "I'm playing the setter lottery."

**T**oday, a little more than two years after the dog he calls Tink—short for Tinker Bell—was . . .  
*Whoa, Hoss! Tinker Bell.*

"I wanted a name that would conjure a little magic," Rick laughs.

The magic materialized. About two years after Tink was whelped at the kennel of Field Trial Hall-of-Famer John Rex Gates and his wife, Diane, in Bolivar, Tennessee (about the time Bo was winning his second consecutive National, in fact), it's clear that Rick hit the jackpot.

Tink may be the youngest dog in Rick's stellar string, but you'd need an instrument capable of making microscopically fine distinctions—an instrument comparable to Tink's nose, in other words—to measure what she gives up to her older, more experienced kennelmates. The focus, the intensity, the composure: They'd be noteworthy in a dog of any age, but in a two-year-old they're remarkable.

She's mature beyond her years, yes, but

she also has that rare kind of presence, an almost queenly *hauteur*, that conveys the unmistakable impression that she *knows*—knows that her lineage is royal, knows that much is expected of her, knows that her destiny is to uphold the promise of her blood, and to deliver on it.

Her physical gifts are exceptional. A leggy but strongly built 50-pounder who bears a striking resemblance to her famous sire, she has a long stride that makes her deceptively fast and allows her to cover lots of ground in a hurry. She's not afraid to "run" either, although with the surreal density of birds on Rick's ranch this past season—roughly a quail-and-a-half per acre, according to a helicopter census—the distances between coveys tended to be pretty short. A cast that carried her more than a couple hundred yards from the truck was an unusually wide one.

Tink moves nicely as well, conveying a sense of power and purpose, her head high and her tail swishing merrily with the "cane-cutter" action that, to me, is the way a setter's *supposed* to carry its tail. On point she's stylish and statuesque, her flag typically hoisted between 11 and 12 o'clock—perfect.

The really scary part, though, is that she's already a dynamic bird-finder with a keen sense of how to "stand off" her birds and stay in touch with them when they run—and she's only going to get better.

"It takes birds to make a bird dog," goes the old adage, and the number of quail on the Snipes Ranch in the Year of our Lord 2016 truly beggars the imagination. It's *saturated*.

Even Rick himself, who's toiled for 15 years—discing, grubbing, plowing, planting, burning—to make his 6,000-acre spread as attractive to Mr. and Mrs. Bobwhite as it can possibly be, seems a little stunned by it. As he mused after we'd moved 45 coveys (not a misprint) between 3 p.m. and dusk—to go with the 30-plus we'd flushed that morning—"The only way to fit another quail onto this ranch would be to use a shoehorn."

*On point, Tink is stylish and statuesque, her feathery tail angled between 11 and 12 o'clock. Opposite: Tink holds a tense point as Rick Snipes moves in to kick out a single that has refused to budge.*







Something else that tells me Tink's best days are yet to come is this: The deep bond that she and Rick have forged, and the intense desire to please that manifests itself whether she's working a running covey through a bluestem-stippled pasture or trying to climb into his lap in the kennel yard. This cuts both ways, of course.

In Rick's words, "Lana (his wife) sometimes asks me to explain my selection process for young dogs, and I tell her it's very simple: I keep the ones that make me smile. Well, Tink makes me smile—and she made me smile last year without ever pointing a bird!"

Indeed, despite giving every appearance of being a prodigy, Tink was actually a late-bloomer. In this respect, she conformed to the setter stereotype; running like a deer the moment she had her legs under her, ripping off half-mile casts as casually as you or I might walk from the bedroom to the kitchen, she did it solely for the pleasure of hearing the wind whistle in her ears.

In the spring of 2015, when Tink was a

little over a year old, I asked Rick if she'd at least flash-point when she got a whiff of bird scent.

"Flash-point!" he laughed. "She doesn't even slow down."

But in this, as in so many things, Rick kept the faith. He remained patient, too, not pushing Tink or, for that matter, putting any pressure on her whatsoever. He simply turned her loose and let her run, and run, and run some more—"Hootin' and hollerin' and havin' a big time," as he puts it.

"The thing I didn't do," he says with emphasis, "is chase her. I made sure she found me. I'd track her with the Alpha, she'd be 500, 600, 700 yards away, and I'd stop the truck and wait. In a few minutes she'd miss me and begin working her way back, and when I knew she could see me we'd start up again. She learned to keep track of where I am, and that staying to the front is the best way to do that."

Finally, Tink ran the puppy right out of her. It was almost as if she woke up one morning, gave herself a good shake, and thought: *OK, now that I've gotten that out*

*of my system, I'm ready to buckle down, get to work, and make up for lost time.*

And that's exactly what she did. Rick sent her to North Dakota for "summer camp" with professional trainer Allen Vincent, and she came on like a prairie fire. Vincent's one of those hard-riding, seen-it-all pros who's not easily impressed (especially by dogs with long hair), but Tink blew him out of the saddle. She didn't mature so much as she morphed, transforming herself seemingly overnight from a wild-ass pup who was all run, all the time into a dog whose entire being was laser-focused on finding and pointing birds. Little wonder that when Allen returned her to Rick last fall, he told him that she had the makings of "something special."

After having the privilege of hunting over her on what may be the finest quail ranch in the state of Texas—and damn near pulling a hammy trying to keep up with her long-legged owner as he fast-walked from one thrilling point to the next, confirming her genius with his gun—I'm not so sure she isn't there already. ■