

Some time has passed since we've stood on a cold, frosty morning, as tense with anticipation as the two pointers who wait like coiled springs for the whistle signal that will send them in search of the prize we both seek: a covey of wild bobwhite quail. It is this search, and this prize, that bonds us, drives us and even defines us.

Technically, the object of the dogs' search is not the bird per se but its scent. It's a fine distinction, perhaps, but quail hunting, more than any other form of hunting I know of, is an exercise in making fine distinctions: about dogs, about guns, about hunting partners, about who we are and what we value as sportsmen. This elevates quail hunting above most other fieldsports, in my view. At the risk of sticking my neck out, I believe it makes it more artful.

The artistry of the dogs dwarfs our own, of course. While their focus is singular and tight, their incomparable noses ignoring any scent but that of the sought after quarry, ours is broader and more fluid, bringing into the frame of our consciousness a lifetime of memories. Unified by a feeling of joy so intense it plays almost like a musical score, these images, perceptions and sensations unspool to our earliest beginnings as a hunter.

Remember when you were young and the chance to spend a day outdoors was reward enough? How many happy days traipsing afield are we allowed in one lifetime? And how many of those days does it take to make a bird hunter?

Through our lives we have changed: from being thrilled simply to be out to going afield wound tight with expectations; from hunting only with a buddy to hunting with a buddy and a dog. At first, this dog was usually a cast-off from someone else's kennel. Still, its presence as part of the team increased both our odds for success and the richness of the experience.

I suspect that Delmar Smith was right when he said that in the life of every dog man, there's a dog that *makes* him. Mine was a pointer named Brisket, formally Rick's Lonestar Brisket, a son of the famous field trial champion Pork Roll and destined to become famous himself—albeit in the small circle of people lucky enough to hunt with him. They came to call Brisket my “hip pocket dog,” his bird-finding ability being so uncanny it was as if he always carried a quail in his hip pocket that he could pull out and point when things got slow.

What I learned from Brisket was how *little* I knew, how barely I'd scratched the surface in my understanding of the habits and behavior of the bobwhite quail. His nose became my window on the bobwhite's world; his spirit, tenacity and sheer, God-given ability to dig up birds under any conditions were an inspiration. And a challenge: I needed a lot of work to be worthy of Brisket's company.

Brisket opened my eyes to the realization that as hunters of wild birds behind great dogs, our role is to bear witness to their greatness and confirm their genius with our guns. As Ortega put it in *Meditations on Hunting*, "Man, when confronted with his evanescent instinct in failing to uncover the elusive game, turned to another animal for help...and made a partner of the dog, on whose instincts he came to rely."

This brings up something else I've learned from Brisket and the other dogs, pointers and Labs both, whose company I've been privileged to share: If their instincts are sound, the best thing I can do as a trainer is take them hunting—and stay out of their way. The birds will teach them everything truly important they need to know. It's like being a coach who assembles a team of highly skilled athletes or a CEO who surrounds himself with good people: You give them a little structure and the right tools, and then you let them do their jobs.

There's an old adage that every bird hunter gets one great dog in his lifetime, but my experience puts the lie to that. I suppose it's partly a reflection of the amount of time I've spent afield chasing birds (and the importance I attach to this pursuit), but since Brisket I've been blessed to have great dogs in my kennel with regularity. More than I deserved, to be sure. After Brisket came Sport, then Ellie, then Frickie, a free spirit whose love of hunting was infectious and whose bird-finding ability was second-to-none.

A girl named Spike was next in my personal Hall of Fame. One season she pointed ten coveys in an hour's time on three separate occasions! You run out of superlatives to describe performances like that. Spike was one of those dogs to whom fences and heavy cover were inconveniences, not impediments, and range to her was an abstract concept. When my hunting buddies commented on this, my stock reply was "Spike has a very low tolerance for country that doesn't hold birds."

Most recently there was Scarky. In retrospect he may have been the best of them all: invariably to the front, never needing a whistle, and always (or at least it seemed that way) pointing birds. It was as if he knew in advance where the coveys were and simply went from one to the next, connecting the dots on the map that he carried in his brain.

And those are just the pointers. The Labs, Babe and Daisy, made their own lasting marks—and introduced me to the special joy of a dog whose entire being revolves around *you*.

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Having secured the dog's irreplaceable partnership, some of us began to examine ourselves through their eyes. How do we stack up? In what areas are we lacking?

Quail hunting thus gives us cause to examine our skills, our conduct and our motives. Who can deny that to be held in high esteem by his human and canine partners is a large part of the satisfaction that comes from bird hunting? The beauty of quail hunting is that, within the broad parameters granted us by the state, we set our own rules. It is not illegal to ground swat a covey running down a road, but would you hunt with someone who did? Would you shoot a bird that flushed in front of your buddy? (Well, maybe—but only as a teaching aid!)

As George Bird Evans, who revered the ruffed grouse the way I revere the bobwhite quail, put it in *An Affair With Grouse*, "Nowhere more than in the shooting field can a man show himself such an ass, or prove himself such a gentleman." The age-old test of ethics applies every day: What would you do if you thought no one was watching?

Quail hunting, then, is a kind of journey: ethical, spiritual, and in some cases even geographical. I started out hunting scrubby little tracts in South Carolina that were overlooked by the "real" bird hunters—and now I'm privileged to own and live on 6,000 acres of bobwhite heaven in West Texas. This has allowed me to assume a new role as a steward of the land, a role governed and informed by the same ethic I developed over the years as a bird hunter. My sense of responsibility has deepened as well, as I'm reminded on a daily basis that what makes everything else possible is the land. It really is this simple: The land comes first.

Through the seasons, from winter to spring to summer to fall, we make decisions that affect the health of the land, knowing as hunters that the health of the bird and the health of the land are inextricably joined. We spend money managing brush and invasive plants (read: mesquite), and we forego income by moderating grazing and limiting our cattle herd. We use fire to influence plant succession, and we always have an appraising eye open for prime escape cover, nesting habitat, loafing cover and food sources.

At the same time, though, we make a conscious effort to take our cues from Mother Nature's playbook, keep our footprint light, and not *over*-manage. There are no feeders or "grained" areas on our ranch; all the quail food grows there, and the birds have to scratch for it. Our guiding principle in this regard is the maxim Aldo Leopold first articulated in *Game Management*: "The recreational value of a head of game is inverse to the artificiality of its origin."

It's not unlike our philosophy of dog training: Less is more.

After living on the land for over a decade now, we can't walk 100 yards without subconsciously evaluating all the factors that affect our birds. We've come from looking at the country in the black-and-white terms of "grass and brush" to a point where we can name almost every species of vegetation that grows on the place. We know how land practices influence those plants, too. It's a deeper, richer, infinitely more nuanced perspective. And it's another aspect of the journey.

But still, it doesn't rain. And yet again the temperature hits 110 degrees. That greatly anticipated frosty morning looks much farther away than the calendar promises. So what do we do? We keep the faith and turn our attention to the most important management task of all: managing our expectations.

We survive the tough times by rekindling the childlike sense of wonder we had when the bird and the sport were new to us. We rediscover the joy that comes from just being loose in a beautiful part of God's world; we take special pleasure in the company of a good friend and the performances of wonderful dogs. Instead of obsessing over the end result we learn to savor the process, admiring our dogs' graceful strides and cracking tails, the intelligence they display in using the wind and searching the cover, their almost supernatural endurance.

And when they do make game, finding a covey and pointing with that fierce and all but fathomless intensity? We kill a bird—to honor the dogs, to honor the quail, and to be true to ourselves. We observe the holy ritual, closing the circle. And we complete the cycle that, for me and for those who share my passion for the land and for this bird, goes on 365 days a year.

*Rick Snipes*  
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