

LAST SEASON



By Tom Word



Sam Payne got the diagnosis a week after serving as a pallbearer for his employer, Roger Biddle, owner of Mossy Swamp Plantation. Sam had a year, more or less, his doctor said. The good news was he'd feel good and remain strong until near the end of his time, and the end would be sudden.

Sam was thankful for that. After the initial shock, he did not feel cheated by his fate. He'd always dreaded ending up in a nursing home, and now he knew that wouldn't likely happen. In a week of reflection, he made his plan.

His employer had left him \$100,000 and any he could chose of the horses and bird dogs on Mossy Swamp, plus the truck he was driving and a horse trailer. Mossy Swamp would be sold—Roger Biddle's daughters had no interest in owning a classic Georgia Yankee plantation, but plenty of interest in the money it would bring. And despite the world's financial crisis, Mossy Swamp should bring plenty.

He chose four of Mossy Swamp's walkers. There was only one dog Sam Payne wanted. Mossy Swamp Bill had won the National Derby Championship for Sam and Mr. Biddle in January. Had Mr. Biddle lived, Bill would have been sold. Sam's understanding with Biddle allowed him to develop and campaign only one derby each year, and that only in one prairie contest held near his summer training grounds and a few winter piney-woods derby stakes.

Sam Payne had campaigned "for the public" before taking the job as Mossy Swamp's manager and dog trainer ten years ago. He hadn't missed the "down-the-road" life, though he'd often found it hard to tolerate some of Biddle's shooting guests. Raised on a South Georgia working farm by his father, a dirt farmer, and his mother, a school teacher, his values were centered on hard work, self respect, and personal dignity, though he'd not lived up to his parents' ideals in his youth. He'd been rebellious and stupid well into his thirties. But then the grindstone of experience had taken hold. He'd quit liquor and settled into a solid working life, though not before his wife had left him. She'd done the right thing, he now admitted.

Sam Payne was sixty now, his only child, a daughter, was forty, and his only grandchild, a boy named for him, was now twenty. That grandson, Sammy Two he was called, and the pointer Bill had together shaped his plan for the last year of his life.

Sammy Two would be released from prison July 1 after serving a year and a day for cocaine distribution. He'd not been a dealer, or so he said, but the amount of the drug in his car when they stopped him classed him as such. Sam's plan was to take Sammy and Mossy Swamp Bill down the road. He didn't tell Sammy's mother or grandmother of his illness when he told them of his plan; they had worries enough. They endorsed his plan, for they had no alternative for Sammy.

It was 104° when Sam picked up Sammy Two at the prison farm south of Jackson. He'd visited the lad a week before to tell him of the plan. He didn't tell Sammy about his illness, just that he had a job for him for the best part of a year. He'd be Sam's apprentice as a dog trainer and field-trial scout. Sammy had been to North Dakota with Sam the summer after he'd finished high school, knew the prairie routine. He'd been homesick that summer, pining away for his puppy-love girlfriend. He'd run away the second week of August, used the wages he'd saved for a bus ticket



home. When he reached Atlanta, he discovered the girlfriend had found a new boyfriend. Things had gone down hill for him ever since. He'd flunked out of community college, gone to work as an auto mechanic for a Chevrolet dealer where he made good money and developed bad habits. He'd been working there when the Saturday night traffic checkpoint landed him on the prison farm.

Sam had on the trailer the four horses and ten coming derbies belonging to South Georgia plantations and destined for their wagon-dog strings, plus Bill. A worried Sam parked the rig in the one shady spot available and hurried to the exit gate where Sammy waited. The lad was clad in fresh Jeans and a white T-shirt, his hair cut white-sidewall, boot-camp style. He managed a grin and a "Hello, Pop," and Sam returned it.

"Let's get moving before the animals suffer any more in this heat," Sam said. He had a block of ice in each dog compartment, and battery-run fans moving air vainly over the horses, but to little effect. Before they made it out of the parking lot, he'd decided to stop at Luke Weaver's farm at Jackson and wait for the heat wave to break.

He reached Luke on his cell phone on the first try, and Luke said "Sure, come on, I'll meet you at the farm." A half-hour later, they led the lathered horses off the trailer and released them in pasture where they loped for water, then shade. They put the dogs out on tie-out chains in a pasture-edge tree line, then poured water on them. Sam felt a huge sense of relief.

They sat in Luke's living room and talked of the old days, covering in an hour three decades of shared memories. Memories of bird dog, good and bad, humans, saints and rascals.

Carol Weaver called them to supper of fried bream from Alabama just out of the freezer, plus corn on the cob fresh off the stalk. Sammy ate three plates full, his first home-cooked meal in a year.

A front brought thunderstorms from the west in the night, and at 4 a.m., the heat wave briefly broken, Sam and Sammy Two resumed the trek north. Luke had given them a pup to work. The rush hour around Atlanta was just gathering steam when they made it out the north end, bound up the interstate toward Chattanooga.

Sammy Two's driver's license had been revoked, but Sam, with Ben ("Long") Reach's help, had it restored on a restricted basis so Sammy could take shifts behind the wheel on their journey. Long had also secured permission from the Parole Board for Sammy to leave Georgia to work for Sam.

Sam had spent enough of his inheritance from Roger Biddle to put new tires on the trailer and truck, plus a new set of bearings and new wiring in the trailer. His worst memories of his days on the circuit were of trailer lights failing on rainy nights on the road.

They made Mott, North Dakota, three days later and set up housekeeping in a rented one-room section-road schoolhouse built in 1904, later converted to living quarters for harvest workers. The farmer whose lands they would work on came over to say hello and invite them to a cookout on Saturday night.

Training season wouldn't open until July 15, so they spent the first two weeks yard working and roading the derbies. "Watch what I do and do the same with yours," was all the instruction Sam gave Sammy after dividing the wagon-dog prospects evenly between them. Sam watched how Sammy worked and realized the youngster had an easy way and a natural rapport with the pups.



He didn't get mad, didn't vary the routine, spoke softly. He seemed to genuinely like his pupils, the best sign of all.

Sammy was quiet the first three weeks. Then his spirits seemed to lift once they turned the dogs loose at dawn before the horses. Work and routine, the fresh air of the prairie, did the job for Sammy as it had every summer for Sam over three decades. But in their rest time Sam saw that Sammy had a deep inner sadness, born no-doubt of self loathing. Sam vowed to cure that, if he had enough time.

Sam's hope was that Sammy could find himself in their year together, outdoors, on horseback, with a bird dog bearing the seeds of greatness.

What a great bird dog could mean to a young man's life was something Sam had long contemplated. What would James Avent have been without Sioux, Er Shelley without Pioneer, Ed Farrior without Jay R's Boy, Chesley Harris without Candy Kidd, Jack Harper without The Texas Ranger? Every bird-dog pro worth the name had a dog early that made his reputation, established his credentials in the first rank. Sometimes the dog's reputation outlasted the man's, as the man came up short due to whiskey or drugs or a weakness for women already spoken for.

Sam had never before had such a first-rank dog—not until Bill. But Mossy Swamp Bill might be the dog he could leave as a worthy legacy to his grandson.



A month after their arrival at Mott, Sam and Sammy had settled into a steady routine. They worked five and a half days a week from dawn to dusk, with a long midday break when they ate their main meal and took a nap. Sam was teaching his grandson more than dog-craft, cooking as well. It was a style of cooking he'd learned from his mother, Old-South-style cooking. Green beans cooked long seasoned with bacon grease. Corn bread in a black iron skillet, not sweet, vegetable soup simmered long, seasoned by soup bones and their marrow. Chicken slow-fried crisp in a black-iron skillet or barbecued on the propane grill. Saturday nights they had steak on the grill. Sundays they fished.

Mossy Swamp Bill's work had been only roading until now. He slept in the schoolhouse with the two men. Always a sociable dog, he was calm as an old dog. He rode in the cab when either man drove the truck on an errand, and he went fishing on Sundays, jumping from boat into water when he needed to cool off, then circling and coming close to be lifted back in the boat once he'd cooled himself.

When they turned Bill loose for his first workout, the pointer did not disappoint. In thirty minutes he found pheasants three times and sharptails once, his last find. He broke on the first, chasing twenty yards, but a sharp "whoa" from Sam stopped him. Then Sam picked him up, carried him back to the spot where he'd stood and had him stand there three minutes while Sam looked at him in silence. He did not break again in that workout or two others, one Wednesday, one Saturday morning.



The next week they ran him with one of the more mature derbies. He showed composure when the derby failed to back, to Sam's satisfaction. Then when the derby had a find, Bill failed to back.

"That's where we've got our work ahead of us," Sam said. Using pigeons and a pop-up plywood dog, they began giving Bill short on-foot backing lessons after his three-a-week horseback workouts. When time came to go to Columbus for the two trials run back-to-back there, Bill was backing reliably with good style, though Sam could tell he didn't much care for it. It seemed to Sam that he felt bad he hadn't found the birds each time he backed.

Sam had spent the second month giving Sammy tips on scouting. It was a subtle art. Sammy seemed to have excellent distance vision, certain to be a help to him in scouting. Finding a dog on point was a challenge for him. Sam told him: "Walker Lee, Mr. George Moreland's scout, told me something a long time ago that's stuck in my head.. 'Look for something' shouldn't be there when you're lookin' for a dog maybe on point' Walker Lee said."

Sammy thought about that the rest of the day and that night. Next morning he figured out what Walker Lee had meant. "Point" Sam heard Sammy calling from way off—he'd found Bill in a heavy clump of CRP cover beyond an alfalfa field. The dog had a clutch of sharptails. "I seen first just the tip of his tail," Sammy said with a grin. "That Walker Lee was smart"



Finally, time for the North Dakota trials at Columbus arrived. Sam and Sammy sent the wagon-dog pupils home with a plantation dog trainer who'd come up to work with them for the month of August. He was glad to have the revenue to supplement his modest salary. Sam was pleased to note that Sammy's half of the pupils were as well broke as his half, maybe a little better. He chose for Sammy the prospects he'd judged most likely to break out sound.

The summer's work had done wonders for Sammy physically—he was fit and suntanned. Whether the thing he most needed—self-respect—had started to come, Sam was unsure. Success breaking the dogs in his care should be a start.

With only one dog in their string to campaign, Sam had a plan to offer Sammy's services to others along the way. He'd called around to see who might need help. Owners liked to come to Columbus to see their dogs perform, and that created a demand for help tending their mounts. Nearly all the handlers offered Sammy work roading their dogs via four-wheeler. Sam hoped that after they saw Sammy scout, they might offer him the job of scouting for them. Sammy had in him the makings of a good scout, Sam believed, and he could learn much in a season of scouting for hire down the circuit.

Sam had taught Sammy another useful skill during the summer. He'd taught the basics of horse shoeing. Sammy could handle an emergency shoe replacement with confidence he'd not lame the horse, a skill every handler needed now and then.

They took the western route to Columbus, driving up the Enchanted Highway (Route 8) to I-94, then driving west to Dickinson and from there north on 22 to 23 and back on 8 again,



crossing the Missouri at the start of Lake Sakakawea, then on north to the Highline (Route 5) before turning west for Columbus.

When they reached Columbus on September 10, they found the Koppelsloen homestead filled with trialers' rigs, dually trucks and horse-dog trailers. The pipe corrals were near filled with horses; tie-out chains held strings of pointers and a few setters. After they'd settled their dogs and horses, Sam introduced Sammy to handlers and owners, judges, and club officers. The mood of all seemed upbeat. The hot summer was over, competition about to resume. An urge to compete was the one thing the diverse group, drawn from all over North America, had in common.

Sam then showed Sammy the red barn, built by John Koppelsloen in 1910 and leaning east from a century of near constant wind, and the house, built in 1919 after the continent's best agricultural year ever. John's wheat crop had financed the handsome two-story Sears & Roebuck house, with its steep roof and gables and a welcoming front porch facing south. In the gables were painted the universal symbol of homesteader hope, the rising sun. After almost nine decades, the painted sunrays had not fully faded, due to the dryness of prairie air. "Nothing rots or rusts up here," Sam said.

Sam explained how John Koppelsloen had arrived here in April 1901 with a team and a wagon loaded with seed and a few balsa boards to frame a sod house. John was alone, but in August his wife arrived, heavy with child and with two toddlers at her side. Six more would be born on the homestead for a total of nine. By the time his wife arrived, he'd dug a well (the same that watered stock today) and built the sod house where the family would survive through minus 40°F weeks on end and the baby would be born. "Tough . . . these Norwegian homesteaders were tough, no other words for it," Sam said. "How about crazy?" Sammy said with a grin.

On the drive in they'd passed a one-room school house, its glass windows out, but still standing, and across the section road from it, a burial ground dotted with granite stones. Sam explained that a church had been built by the homesteader community at the spot, and now stood with a collection of similar churches collected at Lake George, a village to the south just over the ridge that marked the continental divide—ground water north of the ridge flowed to Hudson's Bay, and south of it into the Missouri River and eventually into the Gulf of Mexico via the Mississippi. On the drive here, they'd passed large fields of sunflowers and canola and to the west thousands of acres of table-flat harvested wheat lands. Around the homestead the land varied from softly rolling to flat, with crop fields interspersed among pasture and hay fields. In the distance oil-well sites, marked by tanks and steel horse heads, dotted the horizon.

The area had been prospected for dog training by Texan Gary Pinalto, twice winner of the National Championship. Now a half dozen pros trained in the area. Some of their owners had bought houses in Columbus, real bargains because of the exodus of permanent residents to Minot in summer and Arizona in winter.



My name is Mossy Swamp Bill, and I am a pointer. A special sort of pointer, a field-trial pointer, all-age category. That means I'm a dog that "runs off—but not quite," as an old timer named Uncle Dave Rose supposedly said a hundred plus years ago.

I'm in a string—I am the string—of a handler named Mr. Sam. He travels with a scout who's his grandson, Sammy he calls him. We're now way up north in North Dakota—at Columbus, up against the Canadian border with Montana just to the west. It's a glorious place this time of year—September. It's big country, not many people, lots of game birds—sharptails and Huns, pheasants, potholes full of nervous ducks and geese getting ready to fly south for the winter.

We're about to start a field trial, and I intend to win the Open All-Age stake. I love to compete, especially up here. This summer was dull for me until a couple weeks ago. I just got roaded off the four wheeler and slept in the school house at night. Then Mr. Sam and Sammy finally turned me loose to find birds in a workout, and I was back in business like last season. That was my first—what they call the Derby season—and they say I did real good. At the end I won the National Derby Championship, the only 90-minute stake for Derbies (that's two-year-olds).



My name is Sammy, and I am a convicted felon. I was convicted of cocaine possession and served a year on a Georgia prison farm. When I was released, my grandfather, Mr. Sam, came for me and brought me here, to North Dakota, to work as his apprentice as a bird-dog trainer. We've spent the summer training at Mott, just north of the South Dakota border in the middle of the state. It's big open farming country with alfalfa and CRP lands that hold pheasants, sharptails, and a few Huns.

I'd been here before with my granddad when I was in high school, so I knew the routine. But this year was different because granddad's long time employer had died, so instead of bringing his plantation wagon dogs to break, we had pups from other plantations and one trial dog that granddad had inherited from his boss, Mossy Swamp Bill, a first-year all-age. We've sent home the wagon dogs, and now we've just got Bill. We've brought him here to Columbus to compete in two back-to-back trials. After that I'm not sure what granddad has got planned.

When I walked out of prison, I was low, man, low. I saw nothing ahead but despair. But somehow the simple day-by-day work, the routine, and the dogs, the teaching them and being taught by them, and being with granddad, seeing him get up every morning and go to work in his steady way, that saved me. Slowly my anxiety and feelings of worthlessness left me. Work for its own sake, knowing it was there to be done, that predawn darkness would turn to sunrise, that the horses would be waiting for their morning feed, how the saddle would feel under my butt when we swung up to ride, peace came from that. It was sort of like magic settled on our little camp, the schoolhouse where homesteaders' kids came to learn their ABC's in 1901 that now was our digs.



They began drifting in to the Columbus Legion Hall for the drawing just before six Saturday evening. They came from every walk of life and economic strata and from all over North America. Field trials were, as always, a mixing bowl of humanity. Among the dog owners arriving were:

- Buck Stump, an independent oil man (wildcatter) from Houston, flush from the recent run-up in crude and West Texas gas finds, but broke four times before in his sixty years (“That’s Texas,” he’d say with a belly laugh when recounting his long up-and-down career);

- Carl Breeze, a commercial real-estate developer from Miami, worth multimillions two years ago, dead broke now, his two dozen shopping centers all up-side-down (their mortgages exceeding their value), but with a cool twenty million bucks protected in his pretty wife’s name, bucks put there when he was solvent and thus beyond the reach of the bankruptcy trustee to be appointed for Carl Breeze next week (but that pretty wife was, unbeknownst to Carl, already contemplating hubby two, her tennis pro, with whom she was currently cavorting in the Caribbean as Carl prepared to watch his bird dogs on the prairie);

- Sully Parter, a Southside Virginia timber baron who’d begun as a land man for Camp Manufacturing out of high school, used his keen mind filled with natural math skills to estimate board feet with uncanny speed. Sully soon left corporate employment to buy for his own account. Sully first used a piper cub, rented by the hour at the Wakefield strip, to spot likely stands. Then he researched court records, looking for old widow owners, got to know them through their preachers, brought them roses and chocolates—Sully was outrageous in his schemes to buy timber on the stump, but his real secret was his patience. Sometimes he’d wait years before pouncing at just the moment an owner was desperately hard up for cash. Sully was seventy now, wily as ever, still on the lookout for good timber the owner of which did not know its worth and for a good pointer pup;

- Randy Hutchins, a small animal vet from St. Louis, who’d figured out twenty years ago the secret of financial success in his chosen possession was location and hiring other vets and a keen accountant to run the numbers. Location was tied to PPA—Poodles Per Acre—Randy’s secret formula. Just as credit card companies used zip codes to target their mass mailing card offers, Randy bought old service station sites near posh neighborhoods and turned them into animal clinics combined with grooming centers. Randy secretly hated poodles and cats and the bleached-headed mommas who brought them in via Mercedes, but he sure liked the dough they put in his bank account;

- Ellen Koonce, an heiress of New England old money traceable to an early 20th Century monopoly and carefully managed for four generations by a Boston law firm that specialized in the tactics celebrated by Dickens in Ebenezer Scrooge. Ellen divided her time between “The Vineyard” (Martha’s), “The Mountain” (Roaring Gap, North Carolina), “The Sound” (Hobe Sound, Jupiter Island, Florida), Provance and Thomasville, Georgia, the seat of her quail plantation and her interest in bird dogs. She’d inherited from and through her dad, a third generation coupon clipper. Ellen was in her prime as a woman, old enough to know how to enjoy herself and her money. She’d recently dropped her second husband with the ease of a snake shedding its skin, thanks to



an air-tight pre-nup drafted by her Boston lawyers. Her great granddaddy's trust had said she had to have a pre-nup from each of her husbands to be eligible for income, creating a Hobson's Choice for an man who desired to live off her money.



Next to arrive at the drawing were Bill Dance, an owner from Virginia and his handler, an old timer named Hack Barnes from North Carolina. Their connection with the North Dakota trials held at Columbus went back several years to an incident that had acquired the status of legend as a tall but true tale among trialers...

Carle Bain read the DNA test announcement in the American Field three times before its full import sunk in. His pointer-breeding program was finished, that was for sure. How much worse than that it would prove, he was unsure.

He called his lawyer, Farley Cole, and made an appointment to see him at 4:00. When the secretary asked, "What about?" he said, "A property matter," but refused to be more specific. When at 4:00 he sat down in the captain's chair across the desk from Farley and told him the sordid tale, the lawyer's face filled with rage. Then Farley said, "Get your sorry ass out of here, Carle, and don't come back. Call my secretary when you've selected your new lawyer, and I'll send him—or her—your files. I suggest you select one in another county. If you choose either of the other two in this town, word will seep out on the gossip grapevine, and what's left of your questionable reputation will be gone. I wouldn't care, except your long suffering wife does not deserve that even though you do."

Farley Cole was, like Carle Bain, a pointing-dog field-trial addict. The two had as school boys hunted quail together on the vast ridgy pastures of southeast Kansas; then as young men become fascinated by trialing when the itinerant dog trainers came in early fall to work their strings around Yates City. Carle became a tractor salesman and bought the business from the owner's widow when the owner died young. Over the decade just ended, he'd made a fortune from the business, thanks to the genetic optimism of farmers and the credit and subsidy payments assured them by the government. Farley Cole had done well too, thanks to his specialty of tax planning for farmers who'd prospered mostly through land appreciation. Both men were naturally shrewd and loved a dollar, but in Carle's case, that love knew no bounds. Farley now knew that from what Carle had told him that prompted his firing of Carle as a client.

Carle's problem was this. He owned a pointer female named Kansas Callie that was a blue hen. They said you could breed her to a fence post, and she'd produce half a dozen champions from the litter. She had, in fact, produced ten champions, some all-age and some shooting dog, and she was just six years old. She was registered as being by his Kansas Coaster out of a bitch Farley had raised, Yates City Belle. In fact she was no kin to either—she was stolen property, stolen by a renegade rancher who owed Carle Bain more money than he'd ever be able to pay, stolen on orders from Carle, stolen off the string of a professional dog handler who'd stopped over on a ranch adjoining the dog thief's to work his dogs before going to the Quail Futurity in neighboring



Oklahoma. Carle had seen the bitch compete as a derby in North Dakota and tried to buy her, but her owner wouldn't sell. He had to have her—there was something about the way she moved and the super nose she showed with three sharptail finds on a blistering day. Her name then was Blistering Bess, which Carle found ironic.

So Carle Bain was a dog thief—Farley knew his old companion and client was not above sharp dealing, but a dog thief? That was as low as it got, Farley figured. Whatever befell Carle he deserved, Farley mused.

No one in Kansas had seen the female registered as Kansas Callie since she'd been stolen on orders from Carle Bain. He had her boarded with a vet in a small town in eastern Oklahoma where twice a year she whelped a litter with shipped-in chilled semen from a champion sire Carle selected. After weaning, Carle brought the litters to his Kansas spread to be socialized by the wife of a farmhand who was good at it and was also Carle's girlfriend. When the litter was a year old, Carle sent them north for prairie training, then sold them as coming derbies on Callie's blue-hen reputation and the rumors that circulated among trialers who saw them in prairie workouts or early-fall derby stakes. Callie's pups were in fashion, no doubt about it, and Carle Bain had pocketed thousands from selling the stolen female's get. But that would soon be over, Carle now realized. He could not afford to send Callie's saliva to the *American Field* for it could reveal she was not bred as he'd registered her.

What must he do not to be caught? He talked to the vet who was handling the pups who said, "You've got to declare Callie dead. If she's not alive, you don't have to produce her DNA." Carle called around and got conformation the vet was right. He wondered how many blue hens were going to die as a result of the DNA rule.

Rascal that he was, Carle could not bring himself to kill Callie. It was not compassion, but the love of a dollar that led him to sell her to a truck-dog jockey in South Texas (with another set of false papers, of course, this time Callie became Kansas Katie). Then he sent an announcement to the *Field* that Callie was dead, victim of a twisted gut. He got condolence calls from owners of Callie's offspring across the country.

Months passed and Carle began to relax. He missed the extra dollars Callie pups had brought him so regularly, but tractor and combine sales were still strong. Callie's offspring were winning steadily—every issue of the *Field* contained at least one announcement of a Callie pup win.

Then a strange thing happened. A report in the *Field* of a Deep South championship recited that a Callie pup had been found on point on account of its bark. The handler was quoted by the reporter as saying the new champion regularly barked when lost on point. Then similar stories about Callie pups began to pop up on the *Field Trial Pointer Message Board* and other internet sites.

One trialer who noticed was Hack Barnes, the handler from whose string Blistering Bess had been snatched. Bess (aka Callie aka Katie) as a derby had also barked when lost on point. Hack called Bess' true owner, and they discussed the suspicions of Hack, which quickly became those of the owner, Bill Dance of Virginia.



Bill Dance still owned the sire and dam of Bess (Callie-Katie). He called a specialist in canine genetics at Virginia Tech's vet school and explained his suspicions. Could DNA samples from Bess' sire and dam prove Kansas Callie offspring were their grandsons or granddaughters? Absolutely, said the professor.

Armed with this information, Bill Dance paid a call on the *American Field*. He was told that if a claimed sire or dam of a dog were dead, no further inquiry of parentage DNA would be considered. While in Chicago, Bill Dance asked to talk with someone in the Stud Book department about registrations and transfers of dogs made by Carle Bain. It didn't take long to find the transfer by Carle Bain of Kansas Katie to Ron Ferguson of Rachael, Texas.

Bill Dance called Ferguson and booked a hunt with him for a month ahead. Then he asked Ferguson if Kansas Katie by any chance barked when lost on point.

"How did you know that?" Ferguson replied.

And that's how Carle Bain was caught. He settled with Bill Dance for a six-figure number before suit was filed, making for the biggest dog-case settlement or award in U.S. dog litigation history. Now Blistering Bess (a.k.a. Kansas Callie and Kansas Katie) is back with Bill Dance, her rightful owner, and Carle Bain is out of the dog-breeding business and field trials. All because of an inheritable trait carried by a few pointers and setters, the intelligence or instinct to summons scout or handler to a point by a bark.



Mossy Swamp Bill drew the first brace in the all-age. His bracemate was a full younger brother, a derby belonging to Ellen Koonce, who owned the plantation adjoining Mossy Swamp. Ellen had tried to hire Sam away from Mossy Swamp's now deceased owner, Roger Biddle, but Sam was loyal to Biddle who had always treated him right. Sam had not told Biddle of Ellen Koonce's offer, not wanting to stir up a feud with a neighbor. Besides, Sam sort of liked Ellen Koonce. She had spirit and style, knew a bird dog and appreciated dog work, and she was a darned good quail and duck shot.

Roger Biddle had given the pup to Ellen Koonce as a weanling. She'd had it with her in Maine its first summer, then sent it in the fall to her plantation adjoining Mossy Swamp. This summer the pup had come north for its derby season with a "for the public" trainer named Kyle Green. Kyle, who was a shooting-dog handler, was high on the derby, which he said showed real all-age promise, and since Ellen was coming up for the trials at Columbus, he entered the derby in both the derby and all-age stakes. It had won the derby stake with Sammy scouting.

"Gentlemen, if you're ready...let em go," the senior judge said, and Mossy Swamp Bill began his race going west toward the church-school-graveyard site, Sam handling, Sammy scouting. Bill's younger brother, which Ellen had named Roger Biddle for the man who had given it to her, gave Bill a footrace for the first hundred yards, then broke off to cast independently to the left front.

By the time they reached the church site, Bill had scored a sharptail find, all in order, and Roger had pointed a hen pheasant, also with manners and style.



Both teams watered their dogs at the road crossing, then turned them loose to hunt through the pasture beyond, which they did with energy and range. Both responded to their handler's call to turn south toward the huge flat wheat field. On its right edge, near a section road, Bill laid down a torrid pace, creating a dust cloud in his wake. Into the pasture again, Sammy found him pointing, this time a pheasant. Meanwhile, Roger had taken the left side through the wheat field at Kyle Green's direction and reached for the front into pasture.

As their hour neared its end, both dogs had put down a performance that could gain them a placement, maybe first (Bill) and second (Roger). Bill had four finds, Roger three, and both had run big, searching races. Time was called just after they topped a ridge heading north at the end of a hay field dotted with round bales. The judges cantered to catch sight of them after time had been called.

Having seen the dogs after time, the judges turned their mounts toward the section road where the dog wagon tracked the field-trial party. Sammy and Roger's scout rode forward to gather their dogs, expecting no difficulty in finding them and thus not bothering to pick up their Garmin signal receivers carried by the judges. When ten minutes passed and Sammy had not returned with Bill, Sam took the receiver unit from the judge and turned it on. It showed Bill on point a half mile ahead. Sam rode for the spot, looking for Sammy. Five minutes later he met Sammy riding back to get the tracker, his horse lathered and blowing.

"He's right over yonder," Sam said, pointing to where the Garmin indicated Bill was pointed. They rode for him. What they found was his collar, and horse tracks that led to a spot on the section road where truck and trailer tracks indicated Bill had been check corded and driven away, along with the horse and rider who'd abducted him. Bill had been stolen, and the discarded Garmin collar was the proof.

When the all-age stake was over three days later, Bill got first, Roger Biddle got second. Police had been alerted right after Bill's disappearance, but Bill was gone without a trace.

Sam and Sammy were devastated. What could they do? Then Ellen Koonce came to Sam and said, "I want to put Roger Biddle with you and Sammy. In fact, at Christmas I'm giving him to you (a nice way of saying she'd pay expenses and entry fees on Roger until then). See what you can make of him-and of that young man-the rest of the fall season." Sam had broken down in despair over losing Bill and told Ellen of his illness and his goal to help Sammy.



Through the fall, time moved at the speed of light for Sam as his life ebbed away. Time barely moved for young Sammy. Together they drove down the circuit. They'd spent July and August at Mott, North Dakota, training, then beginning in September they attended trials week by week, migrating south. They had in their short string just one winner, the derby sensation Roger Biddle, younger brother of their stolen Mossy Swamp Bill. Roger had won or placed every time he'd been entered, including the Quail Futurity in Oklahoma. Now he would go down in the best derby stake of them all, the Continental Derby Championship.



Sammy drove up the clay road beneath the live oaks and longleaves, the Spanish moss hanging like cobwebs from their limbs. This was Sam's favorite place on the earth, Dixie Plantation. Its hills and valleys hugged the Aucilla River on the Georgia-Florida line. When Sam had first come here, the Livingston lands lay in both states. Now only the Florida side made up Dixie. But that was enough, and Miss Geraldine had secured it for field trials forever, left it to her charitable foundation to be a nature center and field-trialing Mecca. Since Miss Geraldine's death, it had been just that. Its wild quail crop had been nurtured by the practices advocated by Herbert Stoddard, the forester who studied quail in the neighborhood starting in the 1920s. Fire and disk, ragweed and partridge pea, nature had done the rest.

Before Gerald Livingston, a Wall Street financier, who'd founded a major investment bank, bought Dixie Plantation in bits from starving farmers and land speculators for \$8 an acre in the 1920s, the lands had produced turpentine and cotton. Now it produced timber and quail, a little corn and hay for the stock. Randy Floyd farmed it and groomed it for trials. Joe Milligan and the other foundation trustees oversaw it. The trial community treasured it.

Sam had two missions as he and Sammy eased up the clay road into the heart of Dixie Plantation: to see Roger Biddle crowned Continental Derby Champion and to see Sammy's future assured. He had a plan to accomplish both missions. He prayed his strength would hold out for this week. He could feel it slipping away day by day. He was not in pain, thank goodness, but each morning he had a little less strength. He tried not to let Sammy see it.

He felt elation as they passed the office on the left, then the machine shed on the right, then the fork where the left lane led to the big house and right lane lead to the tack barn and beside it the big barn, with commissary, kennels, and the old dairy barn up the hill and paddocks surrounding the whole curtilage. On the way they passed the cottages occupied by black families that had been on Dixie for generations stretching back to slavery days. "If you're born on Dixie, you can die on Dixie," Miss Geraldine loved to say. It applied to humans and animals alike. Sam smiled when he saw the birdhouses set on poles all around, reminders of Miss Geraldine's love of all God's creatures, especially birds.

Trialers' rigs were parked helter-skelter around the ten-acre curtilage. Bubba Moreland was as usual parked on the left across from the tack barn. Bubba and several of his patrons sat in canvas chairs drinking beer. They waived to Sam who waived back.

Sam was looking for a particular rig he hoped to park near, that of the handler Ben Rakes. He'd been a rival of Sam's for their entire careers. They'd battled on trial grounds all over the continent, year after year, decade after decade. At times they'd been bitter toward one another, but the passing of time had dulled those memories. They were both more mellow now, their values adjusted by the deaths of comrades and the birth of grandchildren.

Sam saw the trademark fire engine red horse trailer and F350 diesel of Ben Rakes on the hill beyond the dairy barn and told Andy to drive there, then back in their trailer next to Ben's. They unloaded the horses and released them into an empty paddock, then put the dogs into kennels and watered and fed them. Ben Rakes was not around, so Sam walked the lot until he found Ben talking



with a trialer Sam didn't know by the truck of a peddler of horse and dog tack near the commissary.

Sam introduced Sammy to Ben and the two old warriors spent a few minutes reminiscing. Then Ben said, "I hear tell you've got quite a derby."

"Yes we do," Sam said, but nothing more. Then Sam led Sammy away.

Roger Biddle was drawn to go in the afternoon of the first day of the Derby Championship. When Sam and Sammy drove from the motel in Monticello to Dixie at dawn, Sam had one hope on his mind—that Ben Rakes' boss and the owner of Holy Smoke Plantation would be at Dixie to see Roger Biddle's performance. Ben Rakes had ten years before giving up handling field-trial dogs "for the public" and "gone private" as working for one owner was called.

Wayne Jackson had made his fortune from a simple invention, a medical device that made open heart surgery safer and more efficient. He'd sold the patent and used part of the proceeds to buy Holy Smoke, a twenty-thousand acre spread between Albany and Thomasville. He hired Ben Rakes as his dog trainer, and two years later promoted him to plantation manager, and since then Ben had held both positions.

While Wayne Jackson liked field trials well enough, he preferred staying at Holy Smoke Plantation and entertaining friends there with quail hunts. He knew Ben Rakes' heart was in trialing, and so he worked out a deal with Ben that suited them both. Ben could develop a few trial prospects, along with the wagon-dog string. He could compete in the Deep South derby championships (if he had a worthy candidate), and a few piney woods trials. He had no entry in the Continental Derby Championship, and Sam rightly surmised that Ben and his boss were at Dixie today to see Roger Biddle, perhaps with a chance to buy him since they knew Ellen Koonce had given the derby to Sam.

To be certain Ben Rakes was riding when Roger Biddle competed, Sam had asked him to ride front. Now Sam knew Wayne Jackson would be riding with him. The stage was set.

Through the morning Sam coached Sammy on the Dixie grounds, the traps and the opportunities the grounds afforded a dog and its handler and scout. He wished Roger had drawn a later brace so Sammy would have more opportunity to learn the grounds, but that was the luck of the draw and at least the birds should not be as nervous or likely to be moved off the courses as would be the case for later braces. He was pleased to see that the bird crop was up—there were at least two finds (and in two cases three and four) in each of the braces before Roger's.

Roger's brace came at Sam's favorite time to run at Dixie, a little after 4 p.m. Roger sensed birds were feeding and went to his work at once. When his hour ended, he's scored four finds, evenly spaced over his time. Twice Sammy had found him and called point. It was a performance not likely to be beat, Sam knew, and so did Ben Rakes.

The Derby Championship would end Thursday absent weather delays. Sam asked Ben if he could be back at Dixie then in case there was a second series. Ben conferred with Wayne Jackson and then promised to be back Thursday. Having Ben to ride front for Roger was not really why Ben wanted his old rival back.



When Thursday arrived, no dog's performance had challenged Roger's. Sam rode nervously until the last challenger had been picked up (no derby that day was left down a full hour, tacit recognition by the handlers that Roger deserved the title). When a whistle sounded from the commissary after the field-trial party had ridden in for lunch, everyone hurried over to hear the winners announced. Ben Rakes and Wayne Jackson were there when Sam and Sammy arrived.

Joe Milligan had in his hand a slip from the judges. He thanked everyone for coming, thanked the judges and reporter and marshals, then read the name of the runner up and gave its handler a check.

"This year's Continental Derby Champion is Roger Biddle, Sam Payne handler and owner."

Everyone applauded, and then came to Sam to shake his hand and offer compliments on Roger's performance.

"That dog's going to win the National Championship if he stay's healthy," one of the rival handlers said. Ben and Wayne Jackson heard it and looked at one another. Sam saw their exchange of looks and knew he was close to his goal.

The Continental Open All-Age Championship would begin after lunch. Wayne Jackson asked Sam and Sammy to join him and Ben for lunch in the commissary. As they waited in the long line, folks kept coming over to congratulate Sam and Sammy on Roger's win. Finally they made it to the buffet where Wayne bought four lunches, and they filled their plates with soul food—fried chicken, turnip greens, candied sweet potatoes, and peach cobbler and sweet tea. Then they sat, and Sam offered thanks.

Before they were finished, the commissary had emptied as trialers hurried to saddle up for the afternoon running. Sam turned to Sammy and said,

"Son, how about saddling up our afternoon mounts."

"Yes, sir," Sammy responded and hustled out of the commissary.

"Sam, would you be interested in selling Roger Biddle?" Ben Rakes asked.

It was the opening Sam had hoped for.

"Yes, Ben, I would."

And with that Sam made his pitch to Ben and Wayne Jackson. He would sell them Roger Biddle, but what he wanted was for Wayne Jackson to hire Sammy to work at Holy Smoke Plantation.

"He's a good dog man, and he's going to be a good man all around. He's been with me since the first of July, and he has not disappointed me once.

"Ben may have told you he served time for a drug charge. I took him as he got out of prison, and he's been with me since. He's respectful, appreciates animals and his elders, and appreciates a job. He can fix anything, and you know how valuable that is at a place like Holy Smoke. He worked as an automobile mechanic before he got in trouble."

"What's your asking price for Roger?" Ben asked.

"Fifteen thousand dollars," Sam said, "if Sammy gets a job".

"Make that twenty," Wayne Jackson said and pulled out his checkbook.

"Where are you going from here?" Ben asked Sam as Wayne wrote the check.



“Well, Roger is entered in the National Derby Championship and that gets drawn Saturday night. If you’re going to run him, I might drive over there and see him run.”

“How about if you ride over there and run him for us, you and Sammy,” Ben said. Wayne Jackson nodded concurrence.

“Well, that would be a nice way for me to bow out of the game,” Sam said with a grin.



The End