

“There is nothing like a dream to create the future. Utopia today, flesh and blood tomorrow”.

Victor Hugo Les Miserables, 1862

The high plastered ceilings with burgeoning candelabra emanated a soft light that cast long shadows revealing an urgent group bent in straight arm chairs. The façade is decorated with effervescent paintings of hunting scenes from the Galway Blazers while the mask of a fox sneers down from his perch over the main tall door to this formal sitting room. The shutters on the long windows remained open though the logs crackled on the fire to compensate for the cold outside. Hansberry’s in Athenry has been the prominent meeting place for the Connaught field trial club since its establishment in 1962. The revival of the brace stakes in Ireland, once seen as the blue riband of pointer and setter trialling is being discussed. Perceived to be the highest skill in dog training one handler must manage a brace of dogs that hunt independently but also compliment and honour each other. The merits of the ideal brace were debated strongly long into that night.

Of course that was many years ago and finally after an aborted start due to the inclemency of a perfect storm in October 2008 the dream became a reality this February.

The brace stake renowned as the most prestigious of stakes is the litmus test defining the skill of a trainer and a handler. Occasionally an excellent dog can be owned but to produce two such and to have them work in tandem, controlling their competitiveness and yet not inferior to each other is a rare boast. Yet all over the country every shooting season men hunt with or remember an excellent brace of setting dogs.



Mr. N. O’Sullivan’s Lios Mhuire Keano and F.T.Ch Lios Mhuire Swift

This morning could not be any different! The hedgerows thronged with bird life sang impetuously as the train of cars and trailers entered the moor. The frayed grass on the verges almost looked lush while the crimson flowers of the gorse bushes added to the sweet perfunctory senses. The uneven path swayed the vehicles in unison such that they looked choreographed by an invisible wind. The occasional gargle of a cock grouse shattered the serenity of this place while the first insects hummed in the shade of thick hedges triumphantly announcing the arrival of spring. At the draw, the grouse began to call across the bog as if they were heckling the participants. Being the first brace trial since 1976, the most eminent of judges for the day Messrs. Paddy Collins and Jim Crotty set out quite clearly their standards and expectations.

There was a deep hush, save for the occasional low growl of a dog, as the concepts of dogs crossing each other in front of the handler and the clever addendum of one dog in the brace to wear a collar to identify him. This would be to highlight a dog racking up more than the prerequisite three unproductive points, thereby eliminating that dog. The trial run and judged under Irish Kennel club rules had the obvious condition- that one dog eliminated for a fault would eliminate the brace. Mr. Paddy Collins then extenuated that they were looking for a natural brace; that is dogs that backed each other without much handling interference.

It was an exceptionally strong field with eight field trial champions ("F.T.Ch") going to post with two brace made up entirely of field trial champions. The sun began to permeate the fresh breeze and while the wind was not warm we knew it heralded the beginning of a new year. As first brace out, I walked the grassy path to where Mr. Eamon Mahony, Steward of the Beat instructed. All of Mr. Mahony's work was verbalised instantly for as we took position, a raucous cock grouse exploded into flight and glided before dropping down again. "You are about to make history," Mr. Jim Crotty smiled. I certainly was not overly confident and damned my luck being drawn first. So I set off F.T.Ch Creg Jake initially before slipping F.T.Ch Remkilens T-Ebba to my right. Typical Jake went up the middle of the beat and pointed. T-Ebba flashing from the right hurtled behind him before sanguinely stopping. I stayed with T-Ebba who was backing and asked Jake to produce. The bird ran and ran as is typical with the birds on these moors. I realised how blessed I was that the dog was never slow working out birds and lose enough not to require me beside him. Eventually after a really nice workout he produced a pheasant where he was steady to wing and shot. It was such a buzz and I was really proud of him as the gallery had a great view. It was the perfect start to the trial.

Next brace was Mr. Vincent Flannelly's red & white setter brace of F.T.Ch Craigrua Aran and Craigrua Rastas. With Apollo like stride, Vincent walked into the distance while his powerful dogs covered virtually the entire moor at speed. It was a master class and the gallery followed intently willing this fabulous pair of dogs a point on birds. The judges in great spirit ran this pair for almost half an hour.



Mr. V. Flannelly with one of his two brace of red & white setters

Mr. Noel O Sullivan's Irish red setter brace of F.T.Ch Lios Mhuire Swift and Lios Mhuire Keano also gave a smooth, stylish run. Swift took a lovely point on a snipe and was backed very stylishly by Keano. The pair repeated the trick a little later with the dogs this time pointing in reverse order. I must say I was quite impressed at the level of skill displayed by the handlers.

Mr. Neil Ryan's beautiful English setter brace of My Rings of Felim and Lovely Princess of Felim had a quick point and back. A probable running bird caused a few unproductive points for Princess while Rings continued to run strongly.

Mr. Tom Dunne's brace of English setters, F.T.Ch New Edition and Goldshield Breeze were next up. New Edition gave an outstanding display of fast, exact quartering. He had a trademark find on a snipe while his daughter backed dutifully. There is no prettier breed of dogs on point than English setters.

Mr. Edward Flannelly's red & white setter champions of Silent Seeker of Shannombally and Craigrua Kent started out at breathtaking pace; however a running pheasant that refused to stay stationary eliminated this exciting brace too prematurely for a disappointed gallery.

Mr. Vincent Flannelly's second red & white setter brace of Craigrua Kobie and Pallasgreen Halloway had a long run, through arduous, heavy ground. However Kobie proved too strong for his brace mate.

Mr. Patsy McCarthy's mixed brace of pointer Corrigmor Duke and red setter John's Red Sky had some energetic quartering before a running grouse destroyed their

chances. The red setter expertly seemed to have a good find on the grouse but true to form the grouse kept running. Unfortunately the pointer on the perimeter of the beat had located a pheasant. Several unsuccessful attempts to get the grouse to rise and still the pointer manfully stayed to his post. Time moved on and the pointer cleverly tried to pressure the bird to stay but seemingly to little avail. The young setter, who behaved perfectly on an impossible bird, was leaded and the grouse got up at a great distance away. The pheasant then skipped leaving a dejected pointer who had held for a considerable amount of time.

Mr. Ray O'Dwyer's Irish setters (handled by Edward Flannelly of Shannonbally Kennels), Sheantullagh Grieg and Sheantullagh Fran ran like arrows with heads facing skyward. Grieg in particular took a lot of ground and displayed plenty of disdain for some of the heavier ground. With a find and natural back, the slick handling of Mr. Flannelly embellished this performance. He truly is a craftsman of his trade as like a conductor he managed the tempo of two hard running individuals with minimum fuss and little distraction to either.



Mr. Edward Flannelly (handling Mr. O'Dwyer's) Sheantullagh Grieg and Sheantullagh Fran

Mr. John Quirke's English setter brace of F.T.Ch Toryview Dazzler and Heegards T. Katya were a very stylish brace. Katya immediately had an outstanding find on a snipe and was backed by the Dazzler. When put down again, after a couple of beautiful fast casts, Dazzler pointed and this time Katya backed most dramatically. The dog moved in and the bird burst into flight before dipping unexpectedly and to the horror of the gallery the Dazzler took chase. This was disappointing as these are an excellent brace of dogs and it was unfortunate that they had not longer to settle. The other brace of mention is Mr. P.J. Peoples English setter brace of Ardera Goldie and Tullycroman Jakes Surprise. With hands beside his back, Mr. P.J. People's cut a confident figure as, both dogs galloped hard but with very straight running lines. A

point and a back at a great distance encompassed with the relaxed demeanour of the handler provided a very professional performance.

The trial adjourned for lunch as the remaining clouds dispersed revealing an extraordinary high pale blue sky. The gallery of interested spectators dispersed among the competitors and for a while, a sense of relaxation filled the air. The gun for the day was the athletic Mr. Tom Hayes, whose enthusiasm for the sport outstripped that of any of the competitors. The judges called the spectators and competitors together again and outlined that while there were excellent performances that the trial would be won by the brace which worked in harmony. Handlers were to risk more and allow dogs in behind the pointing dog for a back. Safety would not win this brace stake.

Further spectators arrived and with six brace back in the second round, this time the excitement was tangible. People talked in low voices, competitors stood separate to the gallery coaxing their dogs while everyone watched in concentration the events unfold.

First brace out was Mr. P.J. Peoples with his English setter brace and immediately another grouse burst into flight. The dogs had not been released but immediately came on point and another quite lovely back. A snipe broke away and both dogs were flawless. On release again, the alternate dog pointed with high tail while again his brace mate stood well back as Mr. P.J. Peoples worked out the forward dog. Copy book quartering followed this and the judges called time on this brace.

Mr. Vincent Flannelly's Aran and Rastas like the mythical hounds of the Fianna began to destroy the ground covering the entire section of that moor in their beat. Repeatedly they crossed their master in the centre of the beat before finally Aran twisted suddenly and pointed. Rastas galloping the cast beneath froze instantaneously. Mr. Flannelly moved in his faithful champion to produce a bird at a good distance.

Mr. Noel O'Sullivan's brace of red setters after carrying a sublime performance in the first round set about their business in the same fashion. Keano, this time taking up the gauntlet from his illustrious brace mate pointed solidly. A bird was away and Swift backed low, somewhat at fifteen yards distance. They were a brace you would love to shoot over.

Mr. Tom Dunne's New Edition maybe picking up the excitement of the crowd burst into action and proceeded to cover a wide beat in great speed. His brace mate continued to complete her ground until both dogs pointed at the far extremes of the beat. Mr. Dunne walked one way then the opposite having great confidence in their steadiness on point. Another running bird took the gloss of an excellent performance but it ended with Lady backing her sire.

I was next up and T-Ebba stretched well to her optimum speed covering a lot of ground at unnatural pace. Jake settled and both dogs looked well. Jake pointed and T-Ebba swung in behind for a nice back. The run continued with both dogs covering a lot more ground before T-Ebba pointed. Jake was dropped rather than risking the back so close to the end of the run.

The final brace were Ray O'Dwyer's brace of Sheantullagh's. Again Mr. Flannelly allowed both dogs settle before dictating a crisp hard run with both dogs competing hard. It was a fitting end to a very high standard stake.

The award ceremony was held on the edge of the moor and a good crowd gathered to hear the results of the inaugural brace trial. From overhearing several first time spectators most people thought it would be between Mr. Vincent Flannelly's excellent

brace and P.J. Peoples brace of English setters. Mr. Paddy Collins spoke highlighting the excellent standard of the trial and the judges comments will set the precedent for many years to come. He stressed the fact they were judging a brace rather than the individual excellence of the individual dogs but their ability to work together and embellish their own performances. The judges looked for dogs that would naturally back and that were of similar speed. Similar width of quartering was also desirable and a balanced brace where one dog was not dominant always having the fresh ground.



P.J. Peoples with Ardera Goldie and Tullycroman Jakes Surprise

The winner of the inaugural brace trial was P.J. Peoples English setter brace of Ardera Goldie and Tullycroman Jakes Surprise. The deciding factor was their smooth handling of birds where the dogs honoured each other without any intervention. The backing dog was always secure.

Second place was Mr. Vincent Flannelly's F.T.Ch Craigrua Aran and Craigrua Rastas. The judges agreed it had been a close call with first place brace given the exceptional ground covered by this brace.

Third place was Mr. Tom Dunne's English setters, F.T.Ch New Edition and Goldshield Breeze. New Edition gave a really strong performance but somewhat

overshadowed his brace mate but an exceptional performance by this brace nonetheless.

Fourth place were my own F.T.Ch's Creg Jake and Remkilens T-Ebba. The judges admired the excellent find of Jake and his ability to go through all aspects of the production sans his handler. T-Ebba was noted for her great speed and style in quartering.

The Connaught Perpetual cup and the Cruach Bunú trophy (presented by Mr. Vincent Flannelly of Moate) were presented to the winner. Also the specially commissioned commemoration medal was also given to Mr. P.J. Peoples.

The excellent judges received commemorative engraved tankards for their unique contribution to this incredible event.



(4th)H. Brady's F.T.Ch's Creg Jake and Remkilens T-Ebba, (3rd) T. Dunne's Goldshield Lady and F.T.Ch New Edition, (1st)P.J. Peoples Ardera Goldie and Tullycroman Jakes Surprise and (2nd) V. Flannelly's F.T.Ch Craigrua Aran and Craigrua Rastas.

Silence again enveloped this place. The last of the cars had disappeared. A pied wagtail strutted and bobbed on a fence pole before landing on the pile of grit before quickly flashing away across the heath. A blackbird skirted up the path ahead of me, before swivelling into some scraggy hawthorn. A huge gratitude goes to the National Parks and Wildlife Service in the west for their work and for the inestimable commitment of Mr. Eamon Mahony that has established this place as an oasis of life for all to enjoy. It is deeply humbling to imagine that future generations will be able to hear and maybe even see this most elusive of birds, the red grouse.