

GUNDOGS

MAGNIFICENT MINERVA

JON KEAN ON HOW A HIGHLAND POINTER
COMPLETED A UNIQUE DOUBLE.



HOW DOES ONE measure success in sport? In winning the 5,000 and 10,000m races at successive world championships, Mo Farah's extraordinary performances in Beijing, represented true greatness.

Similarly, in the pointer and setter field trial world we have recently witnessed another incredible feat which will take some beating. Let me explain the historical background. Back in 1997, pointer man Richard MacNicol handled the late Lord Leverhulme's black and white pointer bitch Field Trial Champion Sutherland Sadie (FTCh Here We Go at Traigmhor X FTCh Whispering Breeze) to win the Irish Championships for pointers and setters on the Dublin mountains. The following year, Sutherland Sadie triumphed in the Kennel Club Champion Stake for pointers and setters at the Earl of Mansfield's Logiealmond Estate in Perthshire. This achievement made the pointer an International Field Trial Champion. Never in the history of pointer and setter field trials had anyone gained back-to-back victories in the British and Irish Pointer and Setter Championships with the same dog.

Seventeen years later, we now have another historic double. Handling Tressady Estate owner Monsieur Laurent Hild's two-year-old black and white pointer bitch, Gerensary Minerva (Italian import Lucaniae Charro X FTCh Kissing Kate of Gerensary) Richard won the Champion Stake at the Duke of Roxburghe's Byrecleugh Estate in the Scottish Borders. Then Minerva clinched the Irish Championships in August this year. An unbelievable record! What is even more remarkable this year is the fact that Minerva won five of the 10 open stakes held during the summer grouse circuit in the UK.

Traditionally, the Irish Championship is always an →

GUNDOGS



extremely tough event to win because you need a dog with real running power and one which will do so with drive and pace. This year, the Championship – judged by Ray O’Dwyer, Jim Crotty and Kieran Walsh – was staged on the Wicklow Mountain National Park, by kind permission of the National Parks and Wildlife Service.

A delighted Monsieur Hild told me: “Yes, Richard did a wonderful job and Neave (her kennel name) is an incredible pointer. It is very special for everybody involved and there is nothing better than looking at a pointer running on the moors. We are working very hard at Tressady Estate to put it on the map from a sporting estate point of view and the pointer kennel is one of the goals.

“I was not born with pointing dogs but fell in love with

pointers, and to have Richard as a trainer and handler is a gift.”

Championship Judge Jim Crotty, with over 30 years’ involvement in the sport, takes up the story: “The overall standard over the two days of the Irish Championship was as high a standard as judges would look for. On the first day, 75 per cent of the dogs gave an excellent performance in running wide with first class quartering (hunting). However, some of these dogs failed to handle grouse which were very plentiful on the day. At the end of the first day, we decided to bring back 21 dogs for the second day, eight of these had excellent finds. As judges, we felt that Richard MacNicol’s pointer bitch and Paul Thompson’s Irish red setter bitch were our two top dogs.

“Conditions on both days were perfect for trialling. There

was a nice breeze and dogs had every opportunity to run very wide. Twenty-two out of the 25 brace had grouse on their run.”

Jim Crotty explained that in the first round Richard’s pointer had excellent quartering with literally no handling by him. Nearing the end of her run she started to draw out in a very stylish manner, slowed down and eventually pointed. When asked, she worked in and produced two grouse.

Jim said: “It was an excellent find. In the second round, the ground was more challenging as the pointer had to work up and down the side of a hill. She showed to me her true ability as she worked this ground demonstrating her power and also her style. She did this consistently and came on point. When asked, she worked in and produced four grouse. Another excellent find. Having judged all the dogs on the day, Richard’s pointer and Paul Thompson’s Irish setter were our two top dogs. The running, quartering and style of Richard’s pointer stood out and was as perfect a performance as I have seen.”

The final word must surely go to Richard. How does he compare two special pointer bitches, Sadie and Minerva? He says: “Sadie was electric on her game. Very rarely did she false point. I would say Minerva has the bigger engine. She’s a bigger bitch than Sadie, and makes it look easy when she’s hunting. When the going gets tough, Minerva comes into her own. Tough ground doesn’t faze her.”

You heard it here first.

Richard has made up 13 Field Trial Champions, two of which are International Champions, including 11 pointers, one English setter and one Irish setter. He has won the British Champion Stake five times and the Irish Championship twice.

Richard has been a Kennel Club judge for 30 years and an A Panel judge for 25 years.

A LIFETIME IN THE SPORT

Until recently, Richard MacNicol (61) was senior lecturer and programme leader in gamekeeping at North Highland College, University of the Highlands and Islands. He has been involved in gamekeeping and fieldsports all his life and his passion for this was ignited as a child at Badanloch Estate in Sutherland where he spent his summer holidays. After a seasonal ghillie’s position at Viscount Leverhulme’s Badanloch Estate in 1970–1971 there were no opportunities for full-time employment in the Highlands. However, Richard’s determination to become a gamekeeper led to employment on a large private pheasant shoot in Hampshire, where 7,000 birds were reared. This was a huge learning experience for him and a very different culture to that in the north of Scotland. Returning to the Highlands was always the aim for Richard, and he was asked to return to Badanloch as underkeeper in 1972. Six years later, at the age of 24, he was promoted to headkeeper – a position he held for 18 years. Richard started working for the college on a part-time basis in 1990 with his employer’s permission. In 1996, when a full-time position arose at the college, he decided to leave Badanloch and take up this new position. Over the years, he has built up the renowned Gerensary Pointers and has made up many Field Trial Champions which are now of great importance to the breed’s current bloodlines.

Earlier this year, Richard, from Caithness, retired from the college and took up a new position as gundog trainer for Monsieur Laurent Hild at Tressady Estate in the Highlands, with the emphasis on training working pointers.