

IN & AROUND HORSE COUNTRY, 60 ALEXANDRIA PIKE, WARRENTON, VA 20186

IN & AROUND

HORSE COUNTRY



VOLUME XXIII / NUMBER 3 • THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE VIRGINIA STEEPLECHASE ASSOCIATION • APRIL/MAY 2012



Presort Std
US Postage
PAID
Permit #163
Dulles, VA

Change Service Requested

BEAGLING

A Beagling Odyssey

By John J. Carle, II, ex-MFH



The Orlean Foot Beagles in travel mode.



Billy Bobbitt, Ramsay Barrett.



Glenbarr and Orlean packs.



Glenbarr and Orlean beagles find the line.



Glenbarr and Orlean beagles drawing covert.



Betsy Park, MB, MBH, Sandanona Hare Hounds; Canada Clark.

Sitting before a roaring fire, a wintry mix beating on the roof and a wicked wind spreading gossip 'round the eaves, I'm as warmed by memories of my first visit to Beaux Eden Plantation in Fort Valley, Georgia, as by the amber glow from the fireplace. This trip, just completed, was the realization of plans made last year but aborted by the flu and eight inches of snow. I had been invited by Ramsay Barrett of Marshall, Virginia, and Georgia boy Joe Hester, the event's architects and organizers, to judge the third annual Southern Classic Pack Trials.

Ramsay and I set off to hunt our way to Georgia, his ancient but trusty Dodge Dakota packed with luggage and liquid necessities; seven couple of his Orlean Foot Beagles were companionably crammed into the dogbox in back. Our first stop was the Clark Farm near Lexington, Virginia, a favorite venue for beaglers countrywide. Donald and Canada Clark are renowned for their hospitality and the good sport that their rolling pastures and thick coverts provide. Several years ago the NBC Spring Beagle Trials were held here when rabbits were scarce at Aldie. At "the red gate" (now blue!) we met Billy Bobbitt with seven couple of his lovely Glenbarr Beagles, and immediately unboxed for a go at the big, stout rabbits living the good life here. The first hour was pure chaos as Ramsay's Beagles, having missed several days' hunting, blew off steam. The Glenbarr pack, highly offended, crowded 'round their huntsman and watched with utter disdain. However, when the Orlean lads bumped a rabbit to its feet, everything changed, both lots melding into a cohesive unit, hunting beautifully together and pushing their quarry with great drive and superb cry. Several strong rabbits filled the afternoon with excitement and exercise. As the sun listed to westward, we loaded Ramsay's pack, bade our hosts adieu, and set off for Larry and Debby Bright's farm in Floyd, Virginia.

Armed with a GPS, good directions, and even better luck, we managed to find the Bright Farm, which is secreted among the rolling hills as securely as any moonshiner's still. Indeed, the bottom of one extremely deep ditch on the farm is lined with the rusting wrecks of a local whiskey-runner's cars. The Brights' farm is home to Angus cattle, Tamworth hogs, free-range chickens, and one of the National Beagle Club's premier packs, the Octorara. We enjoyed a lovely evening in the Brights' fascinating solar-heated, post-and-beam house that Larry designed and built, where we feasted like kings. Everything was homegrown: dinner's chicken, the eggs and smoked bacon at breakfast, and the honey slathered on Debby-baked bread. Early Wednesday morning Larry emptied his kennel and gave us a brilliant morning's sport across steep hill-sides and swampy bottomland, bordered by overgrown fencerows and dotted with briary tangles, which housed a plethora of long-eared marathon runners. After a delicious lunch, we loaded Ramsay's truck and set sail for Fort Valley, Georgia, south of Macon.

The long drive went quickly, with only a couple of bobbles – including an impromptu dash across the Interstate's median to an exit ramp we'd somehow missed – and we arrived safely at the gates of Beaux Eden Plantation just after dark. Beaux Eden is a deer and quail hunting preserve, its fourteen hundred acres enclosed by a ten-foot, woven wire fence. Everywhere there are extensive food plots that support massive whitetails and myriad rabbits. On the meandering drive to the kennels, once home to the former manager's "hawg dawgs," we gaped at 30 or more complacently grazing bucks, all with racks of astounding proportions. After bedding down the kennels, Ramsay unloaded the bitches, who immediately raced away after a rabbit! This fellow dashed into the adjacent woods that are as dense as an Amazonian jungle, and here the ladies had a high old time for 40 minutes until we could persuade them to stop. Needless to say, the doghounds were kept under tight scrutiny. We purloined rooms in the rambling lodge the first night but had to vacate early to our assigned quarters in the spacious apartment over the stable.

Joe Hester, the event's co-founder, does all the on-site preparations, a phenomenal amount of work and beautifully done, everything choreographed to perfection. He coordinates with plan-

tation manager J. B. Broadnax and his assistant, Chad Sullivan; arranges lodging and kenneling; and this year he provided gift subscriptions to *Sporting Classics* magazine and bags of Sportmix dogfood for the winners, as well as free T-shirts and baseball caps. And, during the trials, his Briarmount Beagles made a strong showing. Joe and his hounds met us on Thursday morning, and Ramsay put his bitches into the mix for another tryst with the Beaux Eden longears. With Joe's brilliant old campaigner "Fat & Ugly" leading the way, we had an exhilarating morning slogging through swamps and battling briars as hound music rang down the allées of pecan trees. Following lunch and an excursion to Walmart, the Orlean doghounds hit the kennel-tangle for some exceptional running. This covert is so thick a beagle has to crawl, and people can only thread through the outer fringes; but how the rabbits love it, leaving its confines only under extreme duress.

By late afternoon, with a steady rain just beginning, the other competitors – twelve packs strong – had arrived and kenneled their hounds. It was then that I met my co-judge, David O'Keefe. Now Dave, an experienced AKC field trial judge, had judged both earlier events here and apparently considered this his bailiwick. Dave always judges on foot and, in the thick covert at Beaux Eden, had a real advantage over a mounted colleague. When he heard I was judging on foot (on Larry Bright's recommendation), he fairly bristled like a junkyard dog. We circled each other, hackles up, for a bit, but soon realized we were on the same page. From then on our relationship mellowed, and we became a solid team. Thanks, Dave. You taught me a lot about judging field trials. The welcoming party at the lodge featured delicious casseroles and spirit-lifting spirits, which made for a most convivial evening.

Orlean had the unenviable task of being first pack down to open the three-couple competition in the 7 a.m. gloaming. Following an overexcited, disunited start on a quick find, hounds settled and ran well together, with blistering drive. However, their drive proved to be more than conditions would tolerate, and they lost cohesiveness, becoming somewhat scattered at the end. During this first run I realized the worth of Larry's advice to judge afoot: the covert is just too dense to get to the action mounted, and trails are few. Although, while dodging stump holes, fire ant nests, armadillo dens, and the clutches of assorted briars, I quite often suffered what writer Rick Bass so aptly calls "the humiliation of ungainliness," I only once needed a horse.

"Bill's Pack" was second down, and what a clinic his hounds put on. Long, lanky, laconic Bill Buthane's Beagles are gundogs, not pack-broken, yet more biddable to voice alone than many recognized packs are with a cadre of whippers-in. Drawing near where the Orlean were lifted, they belabored nightlines for a bit, casting widely, but not independently. Scent seemed a bit low when first they jumped a rabbit, but these hounds have the most accurate of noses, work very closely, and honor each other unerringly. Despite a slow start, they never dwelled, getting ever forward, their pursuit relentless, their pace increasing, and their lovely cry rising in volume and intensity. They so quickly solved any momentary bothers that they couldn't be called checks, closing the gap on their pilot until the intense pressure forced her to leave the enclosure and cross River Road. A couple of hounds tried to climb the fence, others crawled under, but all were soon on and pushed the rabbit back through the fence. Bill, his legs as long as those of the sandhill cranes that wheeled overhead, filling the sky with their eerie, croaking cry, raced to his pack, ushering all to safety. Settled back on the line, they were again driving when time ran out. Bill's was, by far, the best run of the first day.

The rest of the day's three-couple performances were a very mixed bag: those packs upon whom the Goddess Diana smiled had decent hunts, but when she frowned, packs faltered badly.

Hills Bridge was one of the lucky packs. They encountered poor scenting conditions under which to hunt their first rabbits, but their sheer intensity kept them moving ahead until they jumped one willing to run – and run they did! This pack is known for its drive – they fly – yet they overrun sometimes, though usually briefly, for, carrying a broad head, they can correct quickly.

On this afternoon they worked most of their own checks with minimal assistance from Huntsman Miki Crane, MB, and were picked up running.

Octorara had even more difficult conditions in the late morning, as skies cleared, the sun warmed the air and the wind picked up. Drawing blank for 35 of their 50 minutes, these fiercely determined hounds finally had two huge rabbits away at speed. Settling on one, they ran it slowly but unerringly westward through open woods, thick brush and a swampy bottom, ending on a sweeping uphill circle as time was called.

One interesting, though unsuccessful, pack was the combined Winsome/Hare-Raiser from Gainesville, Florida. Owned by veterinarian Jan Weiher and neighbor Carol McEvoy, these hounds show on the AKC circuit (bench only), do agility competition, and are housepets. They are lovely to look at and obedient, but as yet have little clue as to how to hunt, although they are evidently vastly improved from last year and are learning to ignore riot. Both women hunt them at the same time, which is interesting. They plan to build a training enclosure and are determined to develop a true hunting pack. I'd not bet against them!

Courtney and Joe Hester, with a bevy of busy ladies, again provided an extravagant meal for the famished visitors, featuring an extraordinary mixed barbecue. Most people retired early, knowing Saturday had a full schedule.

Clear skies, crackling frost, and a north wind greeted the Rumar pack. When I heard the name, I somehow expected a turbaned Huntsman; however, the pack takes its name from Ruth and Marvin McCallum, and has no Middle Eastern connections. Marvin's hounds are black and tan, as wide as they are tall, and as dedicated to their calling as any beagles anywhere. They found a line immediately and began working it with a diligence that defied the rather poor conditions, going methodically forward for several hundred twisting yards until they bumped up a rabbit. Into high gear they shifted, quickly convincing Peter to vacate the enclosure. Responding willingly to the urgency in Marvin's voice, they raced back and soon had another rabbit up and away as fast as his long legs could carry him. Amazingly, even though the lead hounds were looking at the rabbit, they didn't lift their heads or abandon the scent, never overrunning it and foiling every ruse until they were once again stymied by the fence. Drawing back, they put up yet another, a real speedster, who hit the woods westward toward where the day had started. In a huge, sweeping circle he ran, the pack's cry now maniacal as they closed the gap. Old Cottontail raced to the fence, but, sporting fellow that he was, he ran parallel, down past the raucous kennels, then doubled through open, recently-thinned pines and back to the dense woods again. Time was called then – and were these beagles reluctant to stop! It had been one of the best performances by a beagle pack I've ever seen, and left no doubt as to who won the blue rosette.

The five-couple packs began immediately, and it was soon evident that scenting conditions were fluctuating wildly. Following an exciting but somewhat inconsistent go by Orlean – “loosey-goosey” Dave O'Keefe called it – the Ardrossan, with Joint Master Fran Jacobs carrying the horn, were quickly on a rabbit that Ramsay Barrett's pack had left. With a fierce, high-pitched cry, this mostly bitch pack pushed their diminutive quarry through the fence near a corner, wiggled under, and drove it back into the enclosure at the edge of the bamboo and kudzu hell near the kennels. Although they struggled to penetrate the dense thicket, their pursuit was relentless, continuing until the echoing cacophony from the kennels became deafening, and in confusion their heads came up. Lifted to a view by Whipper-In Bob Matje, the pack was away in a flash through more open woods, circling the quail pens before working back to the kennel tangle. Close to their rabbit, they pressured it enough to seek refuge down an armadillo hole. After marking well, they jumped another and rattled it 'round sharply, their warcy bolting four rabbits into the open just as time was called.

Fortune frowned until early afternoon, especially upon Bill Buthane and Marvin McCallum, who, combining their hounds as Rumar, had a total blank. But when the Wingate pack, hunted with quiet aplomb by Joe Wingate, took the field, the excitement factor escalated wildly. Another gundog pack, but with a style very different from Bill's and Marvin's, these hounds fly like falcons, their cry a fierce scream. Miki Crane, who turned hounds to Joe, owes much of the success of her Hills Bridge pack to Wingate blood. Jumping in open cutover, they ran wide loops around a towering brushpile, seemingly glued to their rabbit, but came to a

sudden, inexplicable and unsolvable loss. Joe shrugged and moved on, his hounds drawing very widely, but ever responsive to their Huntsman's voice. The rapport was lovely to watch. Again they found dramatically: a great, leggy, hare-like cottontail barreled out of the brush in full view and was lucky to save its scut. Weaving through laps and blowdowns, it gained brief respite, then crossed a wide food plot to a long, dense briar patch. Even though flying at warp speed, the pack turned with their pilot as one, narrowing the gap and getting so perilously close that only the fence provided an escape route. Called back, they came immediately to Joe's voice and drew on through a patch of grain sorghum, where they were busily working as time ran out.

Octorara hit the field at 4:00 p.m. but drew blank for some time. With Larry Bright's distinctive call – “Kee, kee, kee, kee, kee!” – ringing through the woods like the mating call of some exotic jungle bird, his hounds kept at their work with the dedicated intensity and undiluted joy that make beagles such fun to follow. Suddenly, in particularly dense briars, they “got gamey,” and quickly pushed out a tight-sitting rabbit, whose frantic dash flushed a reluctant covey of quail in its wake. The pack ran into a large woods, looped and came back flying, to encounter a bother in the open. Settling quickly, they worked it out and ran in hard bursts with almost no letup through briars, across food plots, open pine strips, and down a sand and clay road. Once again into the woods, they checked briefly at a small pond, but worked it out unaided and made Benjamin Bunny stretch his legs in big loops through the pine strips until, just before time was called, he was forced back to the woods. A quite remarkable run it was, with hounds working all on their own throughout.

So far during the trials, the Bobbitt family seemed cursed: Billy's Glenbarr had so discouraging a blank in the three-couple that old stalwart “Half and Half” retired to the hound truck for a nap; and Mandy's Bedlam five-couple had equally bad luck. However, before taking his pack afield, Billy must have made a sacrifice to the Goddess Diana, for she smiled, albeit briefly. In the early stages of their hunt the Glenbarr struggled, with several rabbits afoot that hounds were unable to hunt. Undiscouraged, they kept trying, and, finally, in the woods where Octorara ended, hounds bolted a rabbit. With the pack fired up, Uncle Wiggy felt the flames on his cottony tail and wasted not a second, dashing across the pine strips, then turning hard right to race parallel to one of the many plantation roads for nearly a half mile. Quickly correcting an overrun, hounds were soon away, their cry a desperate crescendo as they crossed a vast open field to plunge into another long, dense woodland. Flinging their battle cry to the wind, the pack ran a long right-handed circle at such speed that the judges were left “hunting by ear.” A horse, for once, would have been nice! Then suddenly the chorus ceased; hounds had accounted for their quarry to end the day and the trials with a joyful flourish. With the horizon afire in the afterglow of a spectacular sunset, we were a happy group that trudged wearily lodge-ward for a final, exuberant celebration.

And what an extravaganza the Hesters had arranged: a good-sized young pig had been slow-roasting all day, the ladies had prepared a dazzling array of “fixin's,” and liquid refreshment flowed like Niagara. Beaux Eden's owner, affable and gracious “Mr. Steve” Wimple, was on hand, offering an especially warm welcome, appreciated by all. After everyone had reduced “Porky” to bare bones, the unanimous decision was, “Best pig we've ever eaten.” Then, before the carousing grew too raucous, Joe Hester announced the results and made the awards. “The Boys” – Bill and Marvin – took the top two three-couple spots, followed by Hills Bridge and Octorara. In the more closely contested fives, Octorara's fierce resolve and accurate packwork edged Glenbarr's final, high-octane dash, Wingate's whirlwind race, and Ardrossan's understated consistency. Smiling Marvin McCallum saw Rumar's name inscribed on the gleaming new Beaux Eden Trophy presented by Ramsay Barrett for the highest scored run of the trials. For the third year running, the gundog boys stuck it to the pack people! It's a safe bet that their stallion hounds will be busy this spring, as various packs seek new blood.

We parted late, everyone reluctant to see this unique event ended. The warm welcome, laid-back atmosphere, amount of game, and the overall high quality of the hunting make the Southern Classic Pack Trials an event unlike any other, a red-letter date on any beagler's calendar. Let's go to three days next year!



Briarmount “Fat & Ugly” leads the pack.



The Bright farm.



“Mr. Steve” Wimple, owner Beaux Eden Plantation.



Judge Dave O'Keefe.



A Wingate beagle.



Field Master Larry Bright calls the next pack.



Octorara Beagles win the 5 couple class.