THE BEAGLE: GOOD SPORTING DOG

BY TODD RUSSELL

THE humble rabbit has long been regarded as poor game; "nigger-meat," say the quail shooters in the South. It is a fibel on the cottontail, and he has distinct merits of his own for furnishing sport when the proper means are taken to bring them out. Bob White himself would be but an unattractive thing if the net or the snare were the only means of effecting his capture or if he never took flight and so denied opportunity to the expert wing shot or disappointment to the less skilled. For it is the method of getting game that makes the sport, and according as that method fur-
nishes difficulties which may be overcome by art and skill its use in the pursuit of any game must have high place with the sportsman.

The rabbit sticks to the ground and, so far as the shot gun is concerned, is too easy a mark to entitle him to much consideration. But suppose you leave the shotgun at home and pursue him on foot with hounds, follow his doublings, work out his trail, hole him or catch him. Then you have a sport that needs knowledge in its practice and calls in the highest degree for good wind, limb, and endurance; that leads to hard exercise in the open air, furnishes in the highest degree the excitement of the chase, and that, in addition, calls for one of the things that makes quail shooting the great sport it is, the development and control of dogs.

The beagle is the rabbit dog. He is best adapted by size, pace, nose and tongue for this work. Large hounds, or even those of the harrier type, cannot do the work so well and are more at a loss on quick turns and doublings, to say nothing of their seeming something radically wrong in pursuing bunny with dogs adapted to larger and stronger game. The beagle and the rabbit were made one for the other, and, properly done, there is no better day to be had afield than one with a good pack of these little dogs.

It is a pack you must have. One dog or two or three are not the same thing at all. Take seven or eight of the little fellows, well matched, and go afield on foot and get your game. Then Molly Cottontail will take on a new value in your eyes. To see a pack once, running swiftly, tonguing merrily, picking up the turns, at a loss for a moment, scattering, catching the trail, packing again on the re-discovered scent and finally running with a game to the death, is a treat that will live in the open, will convert you, first into a beagle lover, and second, into an advocate of hard condition in the field.

While it is an athlete’s game to stay even comparatively close with the pack, it is fairly easy to head them and see much of the work and hear all of the music. The rabbit does not go far and runs in circles, and a slight knowledge of the immediate country and some of the habits of the game when pursued will put the sportsman in a favorable place to see what is going on. Then if he wants to shoot, let him do so, but not with the shotgun. Here is the place for the 22-caliber rifle of the repeating variety. See what you can do with it at a jumping target flying down the corn rows or through the sedge. It is a vastly different matter than knocking bottles off a fence with the same weapon. Before your beagles you will have chances enough and plenty of shooting which is as much sport as killing if you kill now and then, and sometime you will stop your first rabbit with the little gun and after that, more. To him who in the field is not the abso-

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lately dead shot that one meets at the camp fire there is a vast satisfaction in the first rabbit killed in this way. Really, once you get the hang of the thing it is not so difficult, but it is very new and different at the start. It is to be remembered in this connection, however, that the 22 carries further than the shotgun and care in its use is to be exercised accordingly.

The pack of beagles should be evenly matched as to size, speed and nose and, if you like, as to color. They present a more attractive appearance when the markings are alike, but color has no effect on field ability. No dog must be too fast for the pack, none too slow. All must move evenly and together, and those that struggle in front or behind must be sacrificed to pack excellence, for it is team work wanted here, not individual brilliancy. It is no easy matter to develop a pack of qualities, but neither is it an easy matter to breed, raise and train a pair of good bird dogs. That is part of the pleasure of doing it. Once established the pack can be interbred and will keep pretty true to its type under proper selection.

In conformation try to have good types. Expression, ear, brush and coat are what are to be looked for here. But let the bench standards go, with these as with other field dogs, in favor of performing ability. A generally similar appearance without too close insistence upon ‘points’ is what is wanted. As to size, fifteen inches at the shoulder is the limit and for general attractiveness the eleven-inch beagle has the advantage over his larger brother.

The individual beagle requires less training than the bird dog, but the training of the pack is another matter and too long a one to take up here. In general the methods followed with fox hounds serve equally well with the smaller dog, and satisfactory pack work comes more from experience and selection of proper individuals of similar performance than from any prescribed training methods. As to numbers, six is enough and twelve more than is needed. It is the custom at beagle trials, now rapidly gaining in popularity in the middle and western states, to run but two dogs at a time, and while this gives a line on individual excellence as to nose, speed and general intelligence, it nevertheless interferes with the development of the pack, which is the most pleasing feature of the work of this dog. Even in pack trials only four dogs are run as a pack, and this too makes toward selection of individuals instead of averages, though it may, in the long run, raise pack standards by pointing out the better breeding stock.

When we come to consider the item of cost, a pack of beagles is cheap to raise and maintain. Puppies can be had for from ten to fifteen dollars. The feeding expense is small, and no great amount of room is required for kenneling. Six of the little
fellows may be raised and kept for about the same amount as can be spent on a pair of good bird dogs.

The great advantage to the sportsman who owns a beagle pack is the abundance and wide distribution of his game. Rabbits may be found in greater or less abundance anywhere and everywhere. An hour’s run from any large city will serve to take the dogs to game, and unless the district be very densely settled much loss time will serve. When game birds are scarce or when the limit has been reached in the day’s shooting, the beagles will afford plenty of sport of a different kind, and you can go back to bird shooting with that sense of variety which so much enhances good sport.

Many men own and use one or two of these dogs and pursue rabbits with them. Usually with the aid of the shotgun. A single dog or a pair can seldom catch a rabbit unaided, for the time consumed in working out the checks is too long. This is where the pack shows its working efficiency and where it is far superior to the pair in results accomplished. There are not a great many packs in the country, but some of the few are very old.

As the sport becomes better known the number of packs will undoubtedly grow and, to the hunter who loves all out of doors, will unfailingly appeal. It offers the proper difficulties and affords the proper jest of pursuit, the always interesting problems of breeding, training and conditioning are present, and it furnishes the opportunity of being out of doors and doing hard work as play that makes for what is best in all sports afield.