

The Best of the Best: Sean Derrig's Pursuit of Perfection

by Tom Davis

At first light, Sean Derrig grabs five gangly older pointer puppies from his sprawling kennel compound, fires up the four-wheeler, and turns them loose to tour the 500-acre property near Tiskilwa, in north-central Illinois, that he's developed into a showplace for training field trial dogs. He's singled these pups out from the eight or so litters he breeds every year at his Erin Kennels – "Home of Champions," proclaims the sign at the entrance gate. As they ramble the fields, hedgerows, and creek bottoms, he's watching their every move, scrutinizing them to see if they measure up, evaluating their gait and style and drive and desire and handling response and the dozen other qualities that, considered as a whole, will tell him if they have what it takes to become the latest of the 30-some champions he's owned and handled since his first one, Cassie's Gold, won the National Amateur Prairie Chicken Shooting Dog Championship in 1991.

That's not a misprint: In a little more than 16 years, Sean Derrig has put field trial championships – Open and Amateur, Derby, Shooting Dog, and All-Age – on approximately 30 different dogs. (He doesn't know the exact number, but as he tallies them up and ticks off their names – "Cassie's Gold, Findlay's Miss Sadie, Peacher's Fiddling Ace, Erin's Speed Queen..." – he figures that's pretty close.) It's doubtful that anyone, amateur or professional, has "made" as many champions on the horseback field trial circuit during this same period of time; for that matter, it's doubtful that anyone, with the possible exception of the professional George Tracy, has championed 30 dogs in any 16-year period. These 30 champions have earned more than 70 titles all told, along with a roughly equal number of runners-up, dozens of other significant placements, and multiple Dog of the Year awards.

The crowning achievement, however, came last summer. That's when Derrig's greatest dog, Erin's Southern Justice – a phenomenal performer whose career was cut short by a devastating shoulder injury – was elected to the Field Trial Hall of Fame.

Did I mention that Derrig's just 44 years old? Calling this an impressive record is like calling Scarlett Johansson an attractive woman – a world-class understatement, in other words. Sean Derrig and the pointers of Erin Kennels are the equivalents of Auerbach's Colties, Lombardi's Packers, or the Yankees of Ruth and Gehrig: not just a team, but an impeccably prepared, supremely confident machine.

You know what they say: It ain't braggin' if you can back it up.

Derrig returns to the kennels minus one of the original five pups. "That's not bad," he says, climbing down from the four-wheeler. "Sometimes I only come back with two." He knows the pup will straggle in eventually (it does), and with the entire property surrounded by a dog-proof fence, he doesn't worry that it'll run off or get clobbered by a vehicle.

He strides briskly to the enormous horse barn – you learn that Derrig does nothing on a small scale – where he bridles and saddles a stout palomino, knots and tapes its tail, and ties it to the gleaming black walk-in trailer that, pulled by a gleaming black Chevy 4500, serves as home for his dogs and horses when they're "going down the road" – the term trialers use for traveling the circuit. To the guy driving a beater pickup and towing a rust-spangled one-horse trailer, the sight of Derrig wheeling in to the trial grounds *might* be a little intimidating.

Then he brings out two dogs from the kennels. The lithe, black-ticked one is four-time Champion Erin's Tin Soldier; the muscular, orange-headed one is two-time Champion Erin's Bad River. Derrig straps a combination e-collar/tracking collar on each of them (one strap, two receivers), turns them loose, and nimbly mounts his parked-out gelding.

The race is on. Both dogs are powerhouses. Tin Soldier (Pete) is silky-smooth, with a long, effortless, ground-devouring stride;

Bad River (Joe) is equally fast but punchier, the kind that throws dirt when his hindquarters uncoil. They set a torrid pace, flying down the long, birdy edges until there is no more edge to take, then bending to hold the front, far-flung corsairs guided by the beacon of Derrig's song.

"Handle" in All-Age dogs is a fluid concept; think of turning an aircraft carrier and you've got the general idea. Derrig, however, insists that his pointers comply when he calls on them. He's had some over the years that would give him the you-know-what – "Black-hearted so-and-so's," he calls them, revealing his Irish roots – a few of which he even made champions of; but these days he doesn't have to put up with such nonsense. He's wooed his gene pool, and his breeding program built around his Hall-of-Famer Southern Justice now consistently produces dogs that satisfy the classic definition of a great field trial competitor as one that "runs off... but not quite."

At the risk of belaboring the sports analogies, what they say about football at Southern Cal and basketball at Duke and North Carolina is true about Erin Kennels: They don't rebuild, they *reload*.

Derrig stresses bird-finding ability and character on game, too, and it's soon obvious that both dogs have everything you could ask for in these respects. And more: When Derrig flushes a pheasant and fires his pistol in front of Tin Soldier, the dog remains a statue, his style and intensity unwavering. His tail, held at 12 o'clock as you'd expect, doesn't so much as flicker, even when Derrig grabs him by the collar to take him on.

"I've never had a dog with the composure at flush and shot that Tin Soldier has," Derrig says as he literally drags the still-rigid pointer away from his stand. "That's the kind of thing that sticks in a judge's mind. Field trials are about showmanship. What you're trying to do in a field trial is make memories, and when a dog stays jacked up like that, the judge is going to remember it."

Another quality that both dogs clearly have in spades is stamina. It's a warm, humid morning – unseasonably so for early October – but this pair hardly seems to draw a deep breath. This has been something of a pleasant

surprise for Derrig; after switching his emphasis from Shooting Dog trials to All-Age trials a couple years ago, he ran his first "endurance" stakes, the Southern Championship in Mississippi and the Free-for-All Championship in Alabama, this past winter. Bad River made the two-hour finals of the Southern, Tin Soldier made the three-hour finals of the Free-for-All; while neither dog placed, both finished strong, with plenty of gas left in the tank.

"That was a real confidence booster," says Derrig. "Now I know what it takes to win a two- or three-hour heat, and I know I have dogs that are capable of doing it."

He knows, too, that what he calls his "ultimate goal" – to qualify and run in the National Championship at Grand Junction, a stake in which all the heats are of three hours' duration – is within his grasp. And when Sean Derrig sees the goal, he gets there. He lets nothing – nothing he has the power or resources to control, at least – get in his way.

Ever since I was a little kid," says Derrig, "I've had a passion for dogs." Although he was born in the States, when Sean was a toddler his parents returned to their native Ireland. He was raised on a small farm in County Mayo, in the west of the Emerald Isle, and he remembers it as an idyllic place to grow up. "You could walk out the door in any direction and go hunting," he recalls.

Jack Russell terriers and border collies were a part of his life from the beginning, and when he got a little older he fell in with a couple older gentlemen from his village who were renowned for their "way" with herding dogs. "They were real good dog men," says Derrig. "I admired them and I learned from them."

Another neighbor owned a pointer, and when Derrig got a little older he'd borrow it in order to "ghilly" for visiting wingshooters, sportsmen who'd come from England, France, and Italy to gun woodcock and snipe on the local moors. "They paid me," he says, "but I'd have done it for nothing. I loved it."

One thing he didn't love was school. By the age of 16 he'd quit and gone to work in a factory. It was abundantly clear to him, however, that Ireland was not the land of opportunity (or at least it wasn't in the late-1970s; today its economy



High style from a pair of champions: Erin's Tin Soldier backed by Erin's Bad River.



Tin Soldier drives toward the next objective.

is one of the most robust in Europe). So when he had a chance to tour the U.S. with his football club – Gaelic football, that is, which combines elements of soccer and rugby and is wildly popular in Ireland – he jumped at it. The way he saw it, it was his ticket to a fresh start.

He had an aunt in Chicago who'd put him up until he got his feet under him, and with \$400 in his pocket and enough determination to move a mountain (a quality reflected in his pointers), he set out to make his fortune. He hired on with a construction crew, bought his first house when he was 18, and when he was in his early 20s struck out on his own as a concrete contractor. Working like the proverbial dog, Derrig built the business into a profitable enterprise.

"I was absolutely driven to succeed," he says. "There were many, many days when I left the house at four in the morning and didn't get back until ten at night."

Now a real estate developer, Derrig owns a number of commercial properties in the Chicago area. Who says the American dream can't come true any more?

Along the way, Derrig amassed the financial wherewithal to get into the field trial game. A natural extension of his "passion for dogs," it led him to acquire the property in Tiskilwa (about a two-and-a-half-hour drive from his home in Bannockburn in the north Chicago suburbs), set up his kennel/stable operation there (he breaks and sells several field trial horses every year), and "go down the road" in a serious way.

"If I can't be the best," says Derrig, "I don't want to do it. I've never picked up a golf club in my life. I wouldn't be happy tapping a little white ball around. That's not fun to me. Whatever I do, I want to be the best at it."

If this guy sounds a bit intense, it's because he is. I've met only one other person in the dog world whose intensity and focus are on the same level as Sean Derrig's: Mike Lardy, a Field Trial Hall of Famer who's won a record seven National Open Retriever Championships and is by acclamation the greatest trainer and handler of field trial retrievers in history. He's also a popular columnist in *PDJ's* sister publication,



Ch. Erin's Bad River nails a pheasant.

The Retriever Journal. I don't think the fact that both men are hugely successful in their respective arenas is any coincidence.

Make no mistake, though: Derrig paid his dues and then some. When you're completely self-taught, the learning curve is awfully steep. He bought his first pointer when he was 18, and the first time he turned her loose it took him half a day to get her back. He did some reading, bought a 50-foot checkcord, and eventually made "a hell of a hunting dog" out of her.

A few years later, Derrig's string had increased to four dogs. Trouble was, in Skokie, where he lived at the time, an ordinance limited city residents to no more than two. Derrig solved – or dodged – this problem by rotating his dogs between an enclosed shed and an outdoor run so that only two were visible at any given time.

Birds and grounds were a problem as well – until Derrig found an ethnic butcher from whom he could buy live pigeons, and a five-acre forest preserve that almost no one visited. Derrig broke his first good field trial dog, Erin's Dash, there. Talk about necessity being the mother of invention. "I did it about the hardest way you can," he says, shaking his head at the memory.

A visit to a field trial at the old Green River grounds in northern Illinois had hooked him – a sport that combined bird dogs and horses was as irresistible to Derrig as a pint of Guinness after a football match – but despite his interest and enthusiasm, no one seriously offered to take the young Irishman under their wing. That's the dirty little secret of field trials: For every person who extends a helping hand, there are 10 who'll happily watch you drown.

"I learned by observation and by doing," Derrig says. "There was no one to teach me; I had to do it all by myself. I remember asking a professional what I should do about a

specific problem I was having, and he said, 'I'd tell you, but you'd be beating me next week if I did.'

"I'm just the opposite: I want to help people. There are guys down here training with me all the time, and I'll put my own agenda aside to give them a hand. I get a lot of satisfaction out of that."

After Tin Soldier and Bad River have finished their workout – and shown Derrig that they're right where he wants them to be for the trio of major pheasant championships coming up in the next few weeks – he kennels them and gets a couple younger dogs that he wants to put on birds. I do a double-take: One of the two has long hair. Can this be the same guy who told me that good field trial setters are like leprechauns – everybody wants one but nobody's ever seen one?

He explains that while he's tried from time-to-time to develop a competitive setter, he's never had one that was able to put it all together. "But this bitch is as strong a bird-finder and as good on her game as any dog in my kennel," he asserts. "Her ground pattern's not where it needs to be yet, but it's getting there."

Driving the latest addition to his fleet – a Japanese micro-truck on which he's mounted a dog box – Derrig heads to the park-like grove of oaks where he has his pheasant pen. The black-ticked setter is exactly as advertised: spine-tinglingly stylish with perfect manners to wing and shot. Next comes a liver-and-white pointer, and while he takes an eager step or two at shot, it's clearly just a matter of time. I'm surprised, then, when Derrig says he plans to sell him.

"He's a nice dog, and he's capable of winning a championship," Derrig says. "But he doesn't have quite enough leg to suit me."

There was a time when he didn't have the luxury of making such fine distinctions. But with the caliber of dogs his breeding program is producing these days, he can be as critical, and as demanding, as he cares to be. In his words, "I'm only interested in the best of the best."

Back at the kennels, Derrig selects several 10-week-old puppies, more-or-less at random, and puts them through a little routine he's devised for instilling poise and style. Setting the pup up on what looks like a scale model of a force-breaking bench, its collar attached by a short chain to an overhead wire, Derrig taps the pup under the chin with a kind of miniature shepherd's crook and, in stunningly short order, has it posing like a calendar model. And he's done it without saying a word. Derrig's a fervent believer in keeping verbal commands to an absolute minimum; one of his maxims – which he credits to his Uncle Hugh – is, "The less said, the easier mended."

While he can't prove it, Derrig's convinced that this exercise pays lasting dividends in terms of enhancing a dog's



Derrig's convinced that working with puppies on the bench enhances their style and composure.

character and composure around game – and in terms of making those indelible memories, the ones a field trial judge can't forget.

Now he grabs his pole-and-wing and turns loose a litter of seven pups. They're also about 10 weeks of age, and their dam is one of the finest dogs Derrig's ever owned, 10-time Champion Erin's Heyu Suzie. So far, though, he's unimpressed.

"I haven't seen anything in this litter that excites me," he says, flicking the wing to attract the pups' attention and get a reading on how much "point" they have. "The two black ones are the best of the bunch, but I don't like them as well as some of the other pups I have. I'll keep them around a little longer, just to be sure, but I'll probably end up giving away the whole litter."

That's s.o.p. for Derrig: Having decided long ago that selling puppies is vastly more hassle than it's worth, he simply gives away the ones that don't make the grade. He has connections with trainers, hunting guides, etc., and with one phone call he can usually find someone who'll gladly take whatever he's offering. When the bar is set as high as Derrig's is, there's no room for sentimentality. But then, according to the famous definition, sentimentality is the "failure of passion" – and Sean Derrig is nothing if not passionate.

At noon, his shirt soaked with sweat, Derrig finally calls a halt to the festivities. By his standards, it's been a light morning.

Me, I could use a Guinness.



Postscript: Shortly following my visit in early October, Sean Derrig won the American Field Pheasant Futurity with Erin's Traveling Soldier, the International Pheasant Championship with Erin's Bad River, and the National Amateur Pheasant Championship with Erin's Tin Soldier (who also took runner-up in the National Open Pheasant Championship). Sadly, these were probably the last major trials that will ever be held at the historic Killdeer Plains Wildlife Area, which the state of Ohio, under pressure from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, is closing as a field trial venue.