

WRITTEN BY SPORTSMEN FOR SPORTSMEN

ENCYCLOPEDIA *of* NORTH AMERICAN SPORTING DOGS



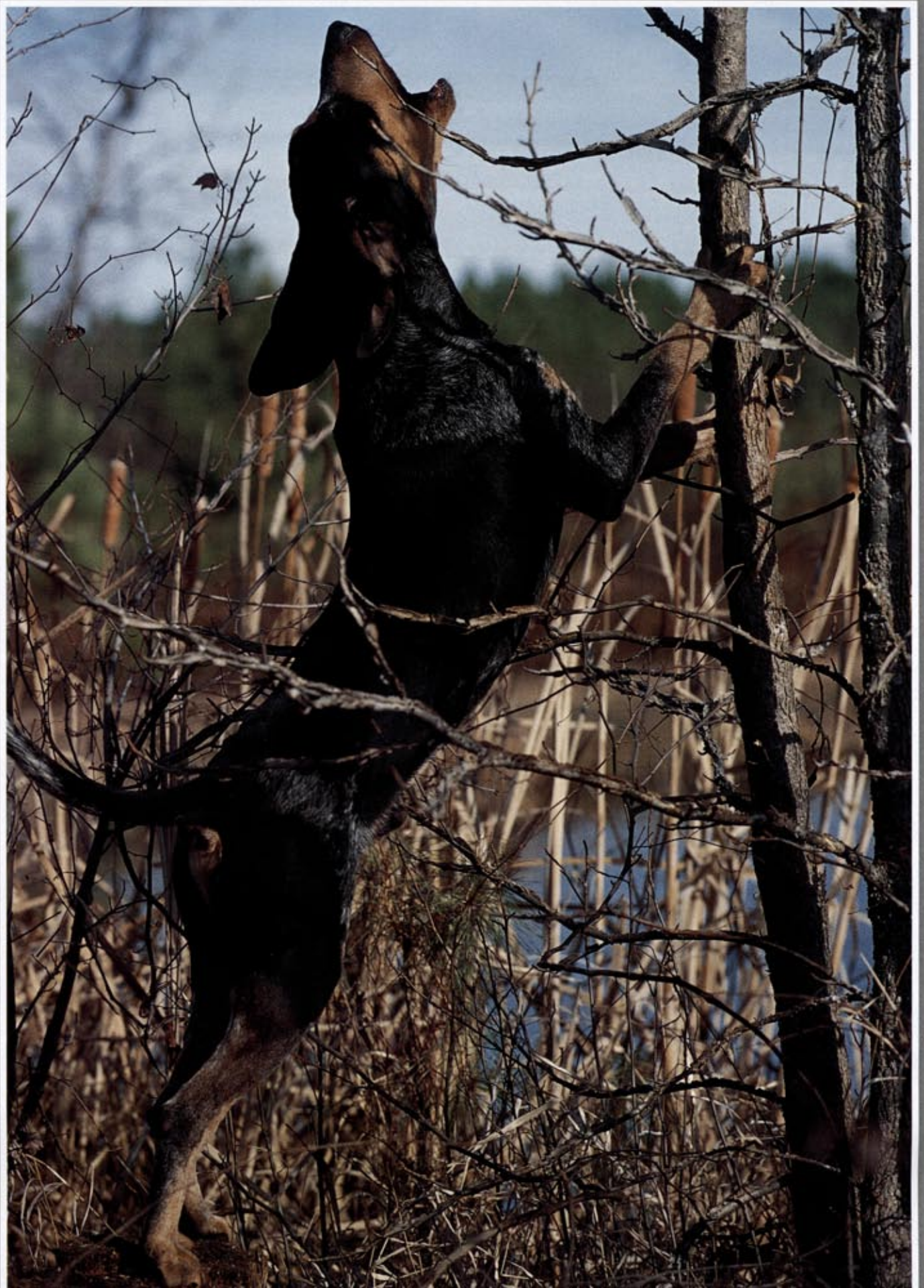
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A griffon pup sight-pointing a training quail.





HUNTING DOGS IN EARLY AMERICA: A BRIEF HISTORY

by Tom Davis

IN 1650, A BRITISH SQUIRE named Robert Brooke sailed across the Atlantic to make a new home in what is now Calvert County, Maryland. He brought with him his wife, their ten children, and no fewer than 28 servants, along with a pack of foxhounds and, presumably, a horse or two. Brooke soon discovered that the native gray foxes of the Maryland tidewater were every bit as challenging and exciting to hunt as their red counterparts of the English hedgerow country, and the American tradition of hunting with dogs for sport — indeed, the American sporting tradition itself — was born.

Fox hunting became a favored pastime of the colonial gentry, beginning in Virginia, Maryland, and the Carolinas and spreading with America's landed aristocracy north to upstate New York, south to Georgia, and inland to Ohio, Kentucky, and Tennessee. George Washington had his own pack of foxhounds by the time he turned twenty (1752), and

when his duties permitted it he rode to his hounds three times a week in clamorous pursuit of "Reynard."

The esteem in which hounds were held by the southern gentlemen-sportsmen of Washington's era — men of "cavalier extraction," as the great New England writer William Harnden Foster put it — is illustrated by a charming anecdote concerning a dog owned by General Howe, the British Revolutionary War commander. In 1777, with the two opposing armies camped not far from one another in the vicinity of Pennibacker's Mill, Pennsylvania, a "sporting dog" belonging to Howe (then as now, it wore a collar with its master's name etched on a metal plate) found its way behind the colonial lines and, as dogs will, began begging for food. Washington took pains to see that the dog was safely returned, and an appreciative General Howe responded with "a letter in the warmest terms."



Wild Duck Shooting: "A Good Day's Sport," 1854
from the Currier & Ives Collection of the Museum of the City of New York

While hounds of English origin dominated the early American hunting dog "scene" (such as it was) — and while the British Isles would continue to be the primary source for American canine bloodstock until well into the 20th century — there were a handful of importations from elsewhere in Europe. At about the same time that the young George Washington was assembling his kennel at Mount Vernon, a man named Jonathon Plott emigrated from his native Germany and settled in the mountains of western North Carolina. He was accompanied by several hounds bred to hunt wild boar, but with no boar in the area then (they came later, in the form of domesticated hogs gone AWOL that in the span of a few generations in the wild reverted to tusk-brandishing razorbacks), Plott found that black bears were an eminently acceptable substitute.

Today, the Plott hound is the state dog of North Carolina — and it's still considered the bear dog non-pareil. And while the historical record is sketchy — as it tends to be for virtually all breeds prior to the advent of organized studbooks and kennel clubs in the late-1800s — it's believed that relatively few

crosses to "outside" blood have been made in the 250-some years since the hollows of the Appalachian Mountains echoed to the music of the original Plotts when they cut the smoking scent trail of their first bruin.

A few "French hounds" found their way to America as well in the 18th century, including five that were presented to Washington by General Lafayette himself in 1785, and whose voices were described as ringing "like the bells of Moscow." Used in France chiefly to hunt deer and boar, they were noted for being exceptionally cold-nosed — that is, having the ability to detect and follow an old, "cold" scent trail, not just a fresh, "hot" one. The modern bluetick coonhound is thought to be descended from crosses between English-American foxhounds and these early French imports.

But then, virtually all of the large scenthounds that remain useful hunting breeds in America are descended from foxhounds — although, again, tracing every branch of the family tree is at best an exercise in informed speculation. (The qualifier "large" is meant to exclude the beagle, the keen little hare-hunter that

began to be imported from Great Britain in large numbers following the Civil War; if anything, the beagle was a progenitor of the foxhound, not a descendent of it.) For example, the redbone ostensibly owes its distinctive coloration to bloodhound forebears, while the modern Treeing Walker is said to derive from a cross circa 1857 between “Virginia strain” foxhounds (also the rootstock of the black-and-tan coonhound) and a dog of “unknown origin” named Tennessee Lead.

Still, the histories of many of the American hound breeds remain murky; the coonhounds, in particular, were typically bred in isolated, rural areas of the South and Midwest by lean, hard, fiercely prideful backwoodsmen who put little stock in “paper” or the dandified notions of slack-fleshed city-dwellers. What mattered was that their dogs could run a coon (or a boar, or a bear, or a lion, or whatever) and sound good doing it, with a ringing bawl on trail and a hard chop on tree (won’t do to keep no turkey-mouthed hound, now!); that they didn’t fuss with “trash”; and that they came back, eventually.

The ancestry of the American foxhound, on the other hand, is somewhat better-documented, a reflec-

tion of the comparative affluence of the land-holding sportsmen who comprised its primary constituency. According to the authors of *The Sporting Life: A Passion for Hunting and Fishing*, foxhounds directly descended from the pack of Robert Brooke continue to make their merry-tailed way over Maryland’s green pastures, giving joyful tongue as the scent of their quarry stirs the ancient fires.

It’s important to remember, in this context, that distinct, narrowly-defined breeds and so-called “pure” breeding — concepts that we take for granted today — were not embraced to any significant degree in this country until the late-19th century. Function, not pedigree, drove breeding; while there were a number of “strains” associated with particular sportsmen — the Walker family name was first linked to a strain of hounds in 1742, and the Triggs, which date to the mid-1800s, are still a renowned foxhound strain — the breeds themselves existed only in a fluid, generic sense, defined as much (or more) by what they *did* as by what they looked like, or by what someone chose to call them.

Victorian-era notions of “perfectability” served to



change this, along with the rise of pedigreed dogs as status symbols. This led to the adoption of conformation standards, the establishment of studbooks, and the emergence of the individual breeds as discrete, insular entities. "To promote, encourage, and improve the breeding of a superior class of dogs" was the stated objective when the first registry in the United States, the National American Kennel Club Register, opened for business in 1876.

While scenthounds of one variety or another have been popular with American hunters from the beginning, the "sighthounds" (also known as "gaze-hounds"), dogs of terrific speed and endurance developed to chase (or "course") visible game in open country, were slow to catch on here — with good reason. Few if any areas in the Eastern United States had sufficiently wide horizons or suitable quarry to accommodate this highly specialized style of hunting.

But as settlement expanded westward onto the Great Plains, a handful of sportsmen capitalized on the opportunities these vast, game-filled expanses offered for coursing dogs. (The few contemporary practitioners of coursing are still found there and in the Desert Southwest; greyhounds are the breed of choice, coyotes the preferred quarry.) The most famous — or, depending on your point of view, infamous — of these sportsmen was none other than George Armstrong Custer. Custer adored dogs, hunting dogs in particular; they were in effect the children that he and his devoted wife, Libby, were themselves unable to conceive. And when he was posted to the West following the Civil War — during which his well-publicized exploits had made him a national hero — his gazehounds accompanied him.

Most of Custer's dogs seem to have been large greyhounds and even larger "staghounds," rugged, rough-coated brutes that these days would be identified as Scottish deerhounds. He was almost never without them, and during his various "Indian" campaigns he would frequently leave his column for hours at a time — deserting his command, in effect — galloping off in a cloud of dust to follow the pack as they coursed everything from pronghorn antelope to wolves.

On one such foray in 1867, he was miles from his unit when he accidentally shot and killed his horse while firing at a buffalo bull. (Custer's marksmanship — or lack thereof — remains a hotly debated topic.) Luckily for him — and for his dogs Rover, Lu, Sharp,

Rattler, and Fanny — the Seventh Cavalry found them before the Cheyenne did.

Custer's luck eventually ran out, of course, and many historians believe that when he passed from life into myth at the Battle of the Little Bighorn on June 25, 1876, at least one of his dogs was along. Although its identity has never been conclusively determined, according to some accounts it was a greyhound. If so, there was a certain grisly poetic justice at work: During their "conquest" of the New World in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, the Spanish relied heavily on greyhounds (or large sighthounds of the same basic type) to subdue the Native American resistance.

Indeed, it was these Spanish hounds, not the foxhounds of Robert Brooke, that were the first European hunting dogs in the Americas. But while trained on game, and brought to the New World to help put meat on the table, they soon found a new niche: abetting the conquistadors — whose cruelty was boundless — as deadly instruments of war. As early as 1495, at the Battle of Vega Real on the island of Hispaniola (modern-day Haiti), Christopher Columbus' pack of 20 hounds carried the day for the Spaniards, killing numbers of natives and causing the rest to flee in terror.

And this was only the beginning of the atrocities. "Within a few years," writes Marion Schwartz in *A History of Dogs in the Early Americas*, "public markets sold human body parts for training Spanish dogs to develop a taste for people, and these dogs were pitted against Native Americans for sport." A Spanish missionary reported that "to feed their dogs, they [the conquistadors] ensure that whenever they travel they always have a ready supply of natives, chained and herded like so many calves on the hoof. These they kill and butcher as the need arises."

Enough: As a renowned classicist once remarked of the Roman emperor Caligula (no stranger to atrocities himself), "The less said of him, the better."

In point of fact, however, there were hunting dogs in North America long before the Spanish arrived. About 12,000 years ago, when nomadic peoples crossed the Bering Land Bridge from Asia and began to filter across the heretofore unpopulated continent, dogs accompanied them. And while hard archaeological evidence is lacking, it seems reasonable to suppose that from the beginning these dogs played some role in the hunt.

Hunting was the central act of day-to-day human

THE ENCYCLOPEDIA OF NORTH AMERICAN SPORTING DOGS

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