

THE RUSSIAN SETTER

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'BASTO' A RUSSIAN SETTER

In October 1823 this illustration of a rough-haired dog retrieving a pheasant appeared on the cover of *The Sporting Magazine*. It was drawn by W. Smith and the following description of the dog is given:

'Basto: is of Russian parents, which were highly valued in this country (UK) and their offspring has in no way disgraced the character of these setters. He is distinguished in the lower parts of Surrey and in Sussex as an excellent finder, and of very delicate mouth. Basto brings his game, and has scarcely ever been known to lose a wounded bird in either corn, furze, or water, which he takes and hunts with the same ease as a smooth-haired pointer hunts a stubble. Basto, like all sporting dogs of Russian blood, is slow, but he often picks up birds, hares and pheasants, that a fast-hunting pointer has passed in the field. He is about eight years old and the property of T. Gilliland, Esq.'

References to the Russian Setters were relatively common in 19th century English sporting literature, but they are often so highly polarized and contradictory that it is hard to form an accurate picture of what they were really like. In terms of appearance, John Henry Walsh, also known as Stonehenge wrote:

'The actual form of the Russian Setter is almost entirely concealed by a long woolly coat, which is matted together in the most extraordinary manner. He has the bearded muzzle of the Deerhound and Scotch Terrier, but the hair is of a more woolly nature, and appears to be between that of a Poodle and the water spaniel.

Robert Leighton, in his *New Book of the Dog*, says of the Russian Setter that:

'There are two varieties of the breed and, curiously enough, they are distinguished from each other by the difference in their colour. The dark-coloured ones are deep liver and are curly-coated. The light coloured ones are fawn, with sometimes white toes and white on the chest; sometimes the white extends to a collar on the neck. These latter are straight-coated, not curly like the dark ones.'

Some descriptions read as if they were written by men who had never laid eyes on a Russian Setter. In *Biographical Sketches and Authentic Anecdotes of Dogs*, Thomas Brown provides a summary of the breed that is clearly no more than bits and pieces taken from descriptions of other pointing breeds. He even seems to confuse Russia with Spain, claiming that the Russian Setter had a cleft nose and was called the "Doublenosed Pointer" and claimed that :

'There is one peculiarity about him, which is, that his nose is so deeply cleft that it appears to be split in two, on which account he is termed in Russia the Doublenosed Pointer. His scent is said to be superior to that of the smooth dogs. This cleft nose is found to be inconvenient when he is beating in cover, as the face is apt to be torn where the brushwood is thick.'

Other descriptions are of more reliable source such as Edward Laverack, who literally wrote the *Book of Setters*. He stated that:

'These dogs are but little known in this country (UK). The late Joseph Lang's I have repeatedly seen. Two of them were brought down by Mr. Arnold of London to my shooting quarters, Dunmaglass. He had given thirty guineas a-piece for them as puppies, and had them very carefully broken by an English keeper. They were not at all good specimens of the class, and, as working dogs, comparatively useless. So disgusted was he with them before he left, that he shot one, and gave the other away. I have never seen but one pure specimen, which was in the possession of the late Lord Grantly, at Rannoch Barracks, head of Loch Rannoch, Perthshire. This dog was a magnificent type of the Russian setter, buried in coat of a very long floss silky texture, indeed he had by far the greatest profusion of coat of any dog I every saw.

They were good but most determined, wilful, and obstinate dogs, requiring an immense deal of breaking, and only kept in order and subjection by a large quantity of work and whip; not particularly amiable in temper, but very high-couraged and handsome, an enormous quantity of long silky white hair, and a little weak lemon colour about the head, ears, and body; and their eyes completely concealed by hair.

'Old Calabar' got a brace of these puppies, had them well broken, and took them to France; but, after shooting to them two seasons, and being disgusted with their wilfulness and savage dispositions (they would take no whip). Sold them to a French nobleman for a thousand francs (40/- shillings) and considered he had got well out of them.'



Russian (behind) English and Irish Setter

Reading through the old literature, it is clear that the terms “Russian Setter” and “Russian Pointer” were used to describe any rough-coated pointing dog in Britain at the time. Similar, if not identical dogs were called *Smousbaarden* in the Netherlands, Griffons in France and Polish or Hungarian Water Dogs in Germany. Before the 1800s, none of them were ‘pure’ or independent breeds. They just represented a type of dog that was found just about everywhere sportsman took to the field. A rough coat was their most distinctive feature and it was probably the reason men in Britain called the dogs “Russian”. It was commonly believed that people from the frozen eastern regions, and their dogs, were rather hairy and unkempt. In an article from *The Farmer’s Magazine* in 1836, we can see just how politically incorrect many of the writers were at the time”

‘We may perhaps have seen a dozen of these brutes, which, like the people whence they derived their grossly misapplied appellation, are very uncouth, very rough, imperturbably stupid, and, by way of continuing the similarity to the greatest possible extent, will generally be found infected with loathsome vermin.’

Thomas Burgeland Johnson’s description of what he called the “Russian Pointer” in the 1819 issue of *The Shooter’s Companion* was equally negative when he stated:

‘Whether he be originally Russian is very doubtful, but he is evidently the ugliest strain of the water-spaniel species; and like all dogs of this kind, is remarkable for penetrating thickets and bramble bushes, runs very awkwardly, his nose close to the ground (if not muzzle-pegged), and frequently springs his game. He may be taught to set, and so may a terrier, or any dog that will run and hunt, and even pigs. If we are to believe the story of Sir Henry Mildmay’s black sow, but to compare him with the animals which

have formed the subjects of the two preceding chapters (setters and pointers). would be outrageous; nevertheless, I am not prepared to say, that out of a hundred of these animals, one tolerable could not be found; but I should think it madness to recommend the Russian Pointer to sportsmen, unless for the purpose of pursuing the coot or the water-hen.!



A Russian Setter cross?

Mixing Russian Setters with other breeds is sometimes mentioned. The result of crosses “....between the Russian setter and the smooth pointer” are given in (the book) *Dogs of the British Islands*

‘....I must admit that the Russian and pointer cross has produced dogs that for work could not well be surpassed. I may, perhaps, have been fortunate in the specimens seen, but do not speak from one or two, but many. In appearance, however, they are not to be compared to the thorough-bred pointer or setter, though more elegantly shaped than the Russian. There is another peculiarity in this breed worthy of notice. You may go back to the Russian with favourable results. I shot over a brace so bred on the moors last season that would be hard to beat for range, keenness of scent and sagacity.’



A Russian Setter slightly crossed with English blood

In the 1884 Classified Section of the French sporting newspaper Le Chenil was the following advertisement:

A vendre : setter russe rouge , âgé de onze mois , obéissant , arrêtant bien, bon nez, irait bien à l'eau, facile à dresser . Prix : 55 francs , ----- S'adresser à M.L.Vince , Hesse House , Hadleigh, Suffolk

The English translation of this ad reads "For sale, Red Russian Setter, 11 months old, obedient, points well, good nose, works well in water, easy to train. Price: 55 Francs. Contact M. L. Vince, Hesse House Hadleigh, Suffolk."

,References to Russian Setters in America are scarce, but there are a few and one in particular is quite well known: the first Korthals Griffon to be registered with the American Kennel Club, a bitch, imported from France, was listed as a "Russian Setter (Griffon)". In The Complete manual for Young Sportsmen, Henry William Berber (AKA Grant Forester) wrote that Russian Setters were:

.....rarely or never met with in this country. Could they be procured, I think of all sporting dogs they are the most adapted for ordinary American shooting and the best of all for beginners. They have less style, and do not range so high as the English or Irish dogs, but that is no disadvantage for America, where there is so much covert shooting.'

The Russian Setter never really achieved the status of an independent breed of pointing dog. I must have been just as difficult to stabilize as any other strain of griffon and without a British Eduard Korthals or Emmanuel Boulet to champion it's cause and perfect its breeding, the Russian Setter soon faded from the scene.

Editors Note (Dec 2016) Today the Russian Setter is an “extinct” breed, but it is not inconceivable that genetic remnants of the breed remain in other European hunt, point and retrieve gundogs recognized by world governing bodies. One thinks of the Spinone Italiano and the German Wirehaired Pointer.



SPINONE (SPINONE ITALIANO)

R. White with orange markings

L. White with brown chestnut markings (the colour of a Friar's frock preferred).



GERMAN WIRE-HAIRED POINTER

Liver & white or black & white