



# YOU CAN'T HAVE **Just One**

By TOM KEER



Anything done in moderation shows a lack of interest, and as a result I have come to own multiple bird dogs. To the spouses of my dogless hunting pals I routinely proclaim, "Bird dogs are like potato chips, you can't just have one." The silence following that proclamation is deafening, and the barrage that comes when the silence ends rages like a wildfire.

Many debates center primarily around the numerous costs associated with multiple dogs. That position is true and indefensible. It doesn't matter if the dog was free, or if I save a few dollars by vaccinating the pups myself – food and vet bills stack up. One time I traded an old fishing rod for a setter, and a friend gave me extra collars and a kennel he no longer used. It didn't matter, if someone were running a balance sheet, I'd lose. There is no winning that debate, so it's best to concede in a dignified fashion and move on.

Grouse and woodcock hunters are fueled by passion. How else do we justify getting ripped to shreds by briars and branches in pursuit of the birds we love? We take our hunting seriously, we introduce only our best friends to our classified, top secret coverts, and our gun cabinets and gear rooms reflect

this intensity. Owning more dogs is a natural extension of our madness. We're happy when it's bird season, happier when we shoot well, and happiest when the dogs we worked all off-season perform like the champions we know they are.

I justify owning more dogs in a lot of different ways. Putting down a fresh or rested dog in every covert livens up even the emptiest of coverts. A fresh dog gives me the confidence that I'm putting my best foot forward. Alert and energetic dogs working a covert brightens moods. If a covert is bare, no worries, pup will get to hunt in another covert later in the day.

I'll find my Golden Fleece when I have a kennel large enough to match an individual dog to a quarry and covert. I figure this approach will require at least six more dogs. My kennel will have an English pointer or a German shorthair to run big in the quail fields, close-hunting English setters for tight grouse and woodcock coverts, a springer for pheasant out West, and so on. Now that I think of it, six may not be enough after all....

Sometimes I'll use temperature as my guideline. I say that



I need a shorter-haired dog to cool more quickly in the September woodcock coverts I hunt in Canada. I need a longer-haired dog for late season grouse when there is snow on the ground. The most frequently asked question is almost always, "Can't you hunt with just one dog?" I could. But why would I want to?

Yes, bird dogs are *indeed* like potato chips and I can't just have one. While I like diversity in my fried spuds, I am building towards diversity in my dogs. My ultimate goal is to have the flexibility to run a variety of combinations. Someday I'll add a new flushing dog to my pointing dog mix and run a pointer/flusher combination. What would be better than running a pair of Englishmen on quail, a pointer to find them and a cocker to flush them? Or how about running a brace of setters, one that covers ground and one that hunts close? In that capacity, no part of a covert will be neglected.

I avoid discussions that involve measurement at all costs. Common examples of these measurements are: time for dog care and training, space requirements, and food, vet, and gear bills. I point out measurements should be restricted to lifeless objects. Air conditioners are measured in BTUs, outboards in horsepower, and light bulbs in wattage. Like dog handlers and trainers who came before me, our stick charts our dogs subjectively and emotionally. Our yardsticks quantify drive, bird sense and biddability.

Even other dog lovers, those who favor non-sporting breeds, have a difficult time appreciating a first point or first retrieve. Though they might understand and share in our happiness when a dog learns a lesson, as when a pooch that once busted birds learns to stand as staunch as a statue.

It's a good policy to avoid mayhem as much as possible, a precipe I'm

walking at the moment. My mid-term plan is to breed one dog, to keep a male and, in two years, to breed him with another of my female dogs. I have to think about that one some more, for while it'll be OK for most of the year, there are the twice annual heat cycles.

wagging tail do the talking.

Unless you're a professional, a multitude of animals of any kind is fanatical, which is just the way we like it. The simple fact is that having a lot of dogs around just feels good. Their return to us is in love, devotion, commitment and



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The sweet sounds of pleasant barking that, to my untrained ear, resemble the Vienna Boys' Choir, will turn out sour notes, at best. They say that love is blind, but what about deaf to the cacophony and racket? A male dog might open that blind eye, only time will tell.

The best way to win the "too many dogs" argument is to say nothing. Simply hand over a puppy for inspection. Let its soft fur, bright eyes and

faith. Some perform perfectly, others require work, while still others frustrate the hell out of us.

At the end of the day it shouldn't be that much of a stretch to know why bird hunters want to be surrounded by bird dogs. We're far more like dogs than folks might think. "In times of joy, all of us wished we possessed a tail we could wag," W.H. Auden said.

He's right, you know. ■