

Huckleberry Hank's Hidden Hole

By Tom Word

Hank was his decade's dog to hate: the one so consistent he drove the opposition wild. Whenever his handler, Barney Grimm, turned him loose in an all-age stake, the other handlers held their breaths, knowing Hank was likely to roll out to the front, hunt the cone at just enough range, find enough birds, and point them with adequate style, good location, and perfect manners. His was the age-old formula to take purse money out of other handler's pockets, handlers whose dogs had done good jobs that would win most days. Needless to say, opposing handlers grew to hate Ole Hank and wish him soon old if not sooner dead. Barney Grimm's smug attitude didn't help a bit.

Wally Green was especially bitter. He had a dog the same age as Hank, a pointer named Luke's Lovely Lady. Like Hank, Lady was pure consistency. What riled Wally was that Lady had been named runner-up to Hank in a half-dozen championships and second to his first in four all-age stakes. Again and again Wally would be certain Lady had a win, only to have Hank come along later and edge her out. Barney made it worse when he got to saying, "How's your second-place bitch?" whenever he encountered Wally.

Season followed season, and Wally's anger grew. Finding a way to beat Huckleberry Hank became an obsession. Wally knew Hank had to have a hole somewhere—all bird dogs did. Then he noticed something that aroused his suspicions. Three times in the current season Hank and Lady had been drawn together. Each time Barney scratched Hank just before the brace was to run. Each

time he had a different excuse—an injury or an illness that miraculously cured itself before the next trial.

Wally was a compulsive sort, a keeper of records. He kept the draw sheets from all his trials, making margin notes on all the performances in his tiny neat hand. After Hank's third scratch, Wally took an idle Sunday to study those draw sheets, going all the way back to the season when Hank and Lady had been derbies.

At first he saw nothing remarkable in his notes except Hank's uncanny consistency. But on a third reading he picked up something that got him thinking. There appeared to be a pattern in the times Hank was scratched.

On Monday Wally called the *Field* and asked for the *Stud Book* Department. In five minutes of questions and answers, Wally confirmed his suspicions. That night he attended the drawing for the Old South Championship on Mossy Swamp Plantation. Hank and Lady were not drawn together. Hank was instead drawn to go down in the opening brace with a solid white pointer named Hell House Harry, a first-year dog in the string of Wally's scouting partner, Bum Phillips.

When the drawing ended, Wally called Bum outside the clubhouse for a conversation.

"What if I could tell you a sure-fire way to get Barney to scratch Ole Hank," Wally opened.

"How would I do that?" Bum asked.

"Just bring Harry by my trailer tomorrow morning before you road him to the breakaway," Wally said.

Bum had Harry at Wally's trailer in plenty of time. Wally went in his tackroom and emerged with a spray can of hoof- black. As Bum watched in amazement, Wally painted two large black saddle marks on Harry's white sides.

"Now road him on over to the breakaway and see what happens," Wally said, and swung into the saddle of his morning mount to follow.

As usual, Barney Grimm arrived five minutes late for the breakaway. Hank bounced ahead in his roading harness. In front of the judges, Wally knelt with Harry, prepared to release him on the judges' nod. Then Barney saw the black marks on Harry, and his jaw dropped.

Barney rode slowly to the waiting judges and said, "Gentlemen, I apologize for being late. I'm afraid I've got to scratch Hank—on the way over here, he started to limp—I thought he was over his bruised shoulder, but it looks like he ain't."

The judges nodded understanding, the senior judge said, "Let him go," and Wally released Harry for an hour's lone hunting. Barney Grimm sadly turned his mount back to the barn, Hank still confined in his roading harness, not understanding why he hadn't been released.

As Wally had detected, Hank had a hate for all black and white dogs. Luke's Lovely Lady was one, and that was why Barney had scratched Hank when he was drawn with her, as he had with every black and white brace mate since his derby year.

Before the hour was over, thanks to cell phones and the internet, all the field-trial world knew Huckleberry Hank's hidden hole and how to knock Hank out of any stake. There was no rule against it, Bernie told Barney on his cell phone when it got to be 9 a.m. in Chicago.

Hank's hatred of all black-marked dogs came from when he was a six-month-old pup. A black and white brood bitch with a newborn litter had slipped out of her run and attacked him in the puppy lot, leaving a memory as indelible as the hoof-black on Hell House Harry.

Barney's next cell-phone call was to Hank's owner. "Mr. Sam, we've got to retire Hank. His hole we been hide'n ain't a secret no more."