

The Gumball Solution

By Tom Word

For forty years, Gilly Sands had marshaled at trials sponsored by the West Kentucky Field Trial Club. He'd served the club during its wild-bird hay days on the Paducah grounds when Mr. Arthur and Mr. J D were the wheel horses and through the later years when Dr. Russell and the Crouse boys pulled the laboring oars of leadership. He sought no special recognition, just did his job, keeping the gallery together and guiding the judges back to the front after a find by the most direct route. He loved field trials and horses and always rode a good one, and he knew the Paducah grounds like the back of his hand. He listened much more than he talked and thereby assured his own popularity among fellow club members and those who came to compete in or watch the club's trials. He especially liked the Invitational, which gave him the chance each Thanksgiving weekend to see the twelve top all-age dogs in action.

Gilly was a student of judges. He kept what he thought of them to himself, aware that gossip about them could only harm the club. But he watched the judges he was assigned to help and formed his own opinions about their qualifications. He was irked by those who chatted when they ought to be watching or by those who did not ride at a constant speed. He knew judging was in the eye of the beholder and that folks saw dog performances differently. In other words, that a move by a dog one man judged a distant cast to a logical objective might be judged by another as too lateral a probe. He liked the Invitational's three-judge approach, with one of the three a professional.

This year's judges for the Invitational were three men from three very different territories. Archie Blake came from Idaho, where as an amateur he trained and handled pointers and setters in the far western events on chukers, pheasants, and quail. Edward France was a rich plantation owner from Georgia and sponsored dogs on the open circuit, watching them mostly in the piney woods country. This year's pro-judge, Bill Neal, hailed from Texas. He'd retired from the circuit and now handled truck dogs on the King Ranch for Purdey-shooting billionaires, a job more lucrative than field-trial handling.

When the Invitational kicked off Saturday morning, Gilly was assigned to help Judge France. As always he watched his judge carefully to see how he approached his job. He was pleased that France seemed well mounted and an able enough rider, though not a jockey by any means. France also watched his assigned dog and did not chat with fellow judges or gallery riders. When his dog's scout called point from a distance, France rode to it at a sensible canter and Gilly followed. The dog stood stylishly at a honeysuckle-clad thicket of saplings. France dispatched Gilly to ride to the opposite side of the thicket to watch for birds. All good form.

The dog was Rasputin, a multi-champion pointer handled by pro Alf Langhorne of Georgia. Alf swung down and flushed, and Gilly heard him yell "Birds", and then came the bang of Alf's blank. Gilly saw no birds, save a sparrow. As they rode back to the front, Alf asked Judge France if he'd seen birds. "Oh, yes. There were two," France replied.

Rasputin was running a big race, but largely lateral. Again at 28 his scout called point, and Judge France rode to cover the find, Gilly dutifully following. Again France asked Gilly to watch the backside, again Alf called flight and fired, and again Judge France confirmed the birds though Gilly saw none despite a clear view of all escape routes. When Alf asked Judge France, he replied "Three flew out low to my right." Now Gilly was suspicious.

Gilly had no fault with Judge France's performance in judging other dogs. But at sundown Saturday, Gilly suspected Judge France was a partisan of Rasputin or his handler, Alf Langhorne, or both. At the cocktail party at the motel, Gilly learned that Alf Langhorne had over the years handled dogs for Judge France.

On Sunday Gilly was again assigned to watch over Judge France. And again France's judicial performance was exemplary—except when following Rasputin. On the first call of point for Rasputin, the dog lay flat on his belly when Alf Langhorne and Judge France, with Gilly just behind them, arrived at the scene, summonsed there by the scout. When Alf saw his dog prostrate, he tweeted his whistle, and in response Rasputin raised up as if lifted by a bumper jack. Gilly thought of the biblical story of Lazarus. Judge France did not order Rasputin up, as Gilly expected (gallery riders arrived too late to see Rasputin lying down). At least the dog had birds and was mannerly when Alf flushed and fired.

Now Gilly was certain Judge France was a blind partisan of Rasputin and Alf Langhorne. Sure enough, when the called-back dogs were announced Sunday evening, Rasputin was among the four chosen.

On Monday morning Gilly was again assigned to escort Judge France. Rasputin was in the second two-hour brace.

Gilly's anger had been rising since the callback dogs were announced. He was one of those few purists in the game, one who would not even register a pup whelped December 31 as born in January. You know the type, God bless them. The moral minority.

Gilly dutifully followed Judge France to the finds of his first brace—first hour assigned dog, which Gilly thought the leading contender for champion. After its first find, France said to Gilly, "He moved a bit too much for my taste." All the dog had done was to turn his head to mark flight. Gilly was furious. The find had been deep and far forward, on a wild covey, and the dog's conduct and style had been exemplary. It was clearly the find of the stake.

Gilly saw a disaster unfolding. France was going to exaggerate the dog's movement on the find to his fellow judges to increase Rasputin's chances of victory. Gilly was sure of it.

Just then Judge France said, "Gilly, I need to take a leak. Can you ride over here with me and hold my horse."

"Sure, Judge, no problem," said Gilly. They stopped at a clump of sweet gum trees. Judge France swung down, unzipped and began to relieve himself. Gilly held the Judge's horse's reins. He was fuming, and then he looked down and saw dozens of sweet gum balls littering the ground.

As Judge France felt blessed relief, Gilly had an epiphany. He bent over and selected a large sharp-tined gumball. Then he slipped it under Judge France's saddle blanket at a point sure to touch the mount's tenderloin when the judge remounted.

When Judge France finished relieving himself, he asked Gilly for a boost up. Gilly happily obliged. The judge came down heavily in the saddle, and the quills of the gumball did their job. The judge's mount bucked like a rodeo bronk.

Judge France landed on his back on the turf. As Gilly heard the wind rush out of his lungs, his conscience gripped him. He prayed the judge was not seriously injured, but at the same time he prayed he was hurt just enough so he would not ride on.

Both prayers were answered. Judge France declined to remount, but was able to walk the hundred yards to the road where the dog wagon passed. He asked Gilly to ride on and tell his two fellow judges he would have to withdraw and leave them to decide the Invitational.

Rasputin was not named Invitational champion or runner-up, to Gilly Sand's satisfaction. The gumball solution had worked.

[Author's note: This bit of fiction is dedicated with gratitude to the faithful marshals of the West Kentucky Field Trial Club who for more than a decade looked after the author and myriad judges each Thanksgiving weekend, including John Russell, Mike and Jim Crouse, Gary Jones and Gary Lester.]