

Gundogs

By Tom Davis



Let's consider, for a moment, the qualities that characterize the ideal gift. Given the subject of this column, we'll begin with the assumption that it should appeal to the particular interests of people who own, train, hunt, handle and otherwise fool around with gundogs. Beyond that, I'd argue that the best gifts are typically things that you'd love to have but might not think of buying for yourself; things that you *want* but, strictly speaking, probably don't *need*.

It should be something a little out of the ordinary, too; something in which a certain level of skill and craftsmanship is invested; something that will spark the ineffable internal glow known as pride of ownership.

In other words, it should be something a lot like the braided whistle lanyards that Larry Smith painstakingly handcrafts, one-at-a-time, in his Dallas workshop.

You may have seen braided lanyards in some of the catalogues. They're perfectly fine – but comparing them to Smith's "Knotsmith" lanyards is like comparing a plastic ukulele to a Stradivarius. Drawing on the traditions of the Spanish-American gauchos and vaqueros, who were braiding their own rawhide quirts, lariats and assorted other tack long before the first Texas cowboy punched a dogie, Smith creates lanyards that are truly works of art. The knots alone – pineapple knots, Spanish knots, Turk's head knots – are objects of wonder.

Make no mistake, though: These lanyards are functional as well as beautiful. Smith uses hard-finished kangaroo leather laces – a four-lace braid on his T1 model, eight laces (over a tough nylon core) on his more elaborate T2 and T3 styles –

For the holiday season, here are a few 'ideal' gifts for those who own, train, hunt, handle or otherwise fool around with gundogs.



Handcrafted of hard-finished kangaroo leather, Larry Smith's lanyards are functional as well as beautiful.

and the result is as tight as Venus Williams' cornrows. Personally, I'm partial to the T3, which doubles as a lead thanks to a 1/2-inch brass bolt snap that allows you to unfasten the lanyard from your neck and clip it onto your dog's collar.

Regardless of the style you choose, you can essentially design your own lanyard by specifying such options as flush counters, contrasting "accent" braids, duck call loops, the list goes on. Now for the bad news: Because each lanyard is a custom-order proposition –

and because Smith has a pile of orders waiting to be filled – the chances of getting one in time for Christmas are roughly the same as the chances that your Enron shares will ever be worth more than the paper they're printed on.

The good news is that you can purchase a gift certificate and thereby reserve a place in "the queue," as Smith calls it. For prices, product descriptions and ordering information, visit www.knotsmith.com or call Larry Smith at 214-893-9003.

Here's a thought: Make the grand gesture, and slip that Knotsmith gift certificate into the Deluxe leather-bound edition of *Jenny Willow*, Mike Gaddis' unforgettable story of a champion English setter, the people touched – and even transformed – by her greatness, and the all-but-vanished credo of honor, courage and selflessness they, and she, exemplify (\$70, from *Sporting Classics*, 800-849-1004; www.sportingclassics.net).

If you're like me, you'll find reading *Jenny Willow* to be not just a rewarding experience, but an overwhelming one. Another book I found overwhelming, albeit for different reasons, is *Fields of Glory* by Everett M. Skehan (\$100, American Field Publishing Co., 312-663-9797, www.americanfield.com). The first volume of a projected trilogy on the history of American pointing dog field trials, *Fields of Glory* covers the period 1874-1930. Synthesizing this quantity of information, which was scattered among dozens of rare books and countless musty periodicals (which helps explain the steep pricetag), is a remarkable achievement in itself. But Skehan goes beyond the mere recitation of facts to paint a richly-textured portrait of the iconic dogs and legendary personalities whose names

continue to resonate, and whose deeds – La Besita’s miraculous win of the 1915 National Championship, for example – are invoked by the faithful in hushed and reverent tones.

A narrower slice of history is the focus of *The Modern Red Setter* (\$40, National Red Setter Field Trial Club; direct orders to Mel Potts, 1675 S. Broad St., Albertville, AL 35950). Written by the late Truman F. Cowles (regrettably, he passed away before the book’s publication), *The*

Modern Red Setter exhaustively chronicles “the purest challenge”: the effort to restore the Irish setter as a useful gundog and competitive field trial performer. By the early 1950s, when this effort began in earnest, decades of breeding for the show ring had robbed the red dogs of their hunting ability. Today, thanks to the unwavering dedication of W.E. “Ned” LeGrande, E.J. Lewis, Roger Boser and many others, they’re back – and better than ever.

No matter what breed you’re partial to, you’re sure to learn something new about it in the *Encyclopedia of North American Sporting Dogs* (\$45, Willow Creek Press, available at bookstores). If it points, flushes, fetches, trails, tracks or trees, it’s included, along with a discussion of its history, temperament, strengths and weaknesses – pretty much all the FAQs. Chapters on the basics of breeding, selecting puppies, health management and training complement the breed profiles, and the authors, by and large, represent the cream of the crop: Steve Smith, Jason Smith, Ben O. Williams, the great (and sorely missed) Robert G. Wehle, et. al. Profusely illustrated and attractively designed, the *Encyclopedia* is destined to become a standard reference work.

Speaking of Ben Williams, you’ll recall that when we visited him recently he was in the throes of starting a training book – and wondering what he was going to say, given that he relies very little on conventional “rote” techniques and instead adopts a more holistic, philosophical view. Well, the way eventually came clear for him (it always does) and the result is *Bird Dog: The Instinctive Training Method* (\$29.50, Willow Creek Press, at bookstores). It’s laced with keen insights into canine psychology, and it demonstrates that if you have the discipline *not* to intervene every time they screw up, the vast majority of well-bred dogs will figure out the important stuff – staunchness on point, backing, etc. – just fine on their own. The Zenlike simplicity and serenity of Ben’s approach make *Bird Dog* a book that every pointing dog owner can profit from.

First published in 1908 in an edition of just 100 copies, Edmund W. Davis’ *Woodcock Shooting* has long been considered among the rarest titles in American sporting literature. Happily, it’s now available in a handsome new edition produced by Wilderness Adventures Press of Belgrade, Montana (\$50, 800-925-3339, www.wildadv.com). Davis’ charmingly evocative musings on this magical bird are a pure delight; other reasons to add this volume to your

library include the lovely etchings by Louisiana artist Brett James Smith and a fascinating Afterword by John Mundt, “Tragedy at Red Camp,” concerning the mysterious circumstances of the author’s death.

While there isn’t a dog to be found in Jack Kulpa’s *True North: Reflections on Fishing and a Life Well Lived* (\$22.95, Derrydale Press, 800-462-6420, www.derrydalepress.com), this collection of 34 stories and essays set in the Lake Superior country deserves all the recognition it can get. It’s that good. In singing prose that invites comparison to Sigurd Olson and Gordon MacQuarrie, Kulpa evokes the mystery, the grandeur and the wonder of the Northwoods. While nominally a fishing book – I’d argue that it’s more about the places fishing takes us, and not just in body – *True North* articulates the intangible longings shared by sportsmen of every stripe. Try this on for size: “Those who look at a hunter and see only violence cannot imagine he may be a man easily wounded by the past.”

That cuts about as close to the heart of it as you can get without inflicting mortal damage.

As you read these books in front of a roaring fire, the dogs curled up nearby in their customary positions, you’ll naturally want a libation close at hand. It just goes with the territory. Here, then, is the never-before-published recipe for a cocktail invented by my friend John McMahon and named for his favorite writer, Robert Ruark:



1½ oz. Plymouth gin
(an English brand that McMahon claims Ruark would have used in the Pink Gins he was so fond of)
½ oz. Cointreau
½ oz. fresh-squeezed orange juice
½ oz. fresh-squeezed lime juice
dash Angostura bitters



Pour all ingredients into a cocktail shaker with ice, shake vigorously and strain into a martini glass. Garnish with a twist of lime.



Enjoy in moderation – a lesson that Ruark, alas, never learned. 🐾