

The Character of Sabina (1995-2007)

by John Jeanneney

Sabina died in October, 2007, at the age of twelve. We had passed many long nights together, unraveling old, cold scent trails of wounded deer. These were her specialty, and it was for this work and not for her good looks, that she will be remembered. She was evaluated once by a German-Swiss conformation judge who pronounced her "gut". In German show-speak this actually means "unsuitable for breeding". Sabina was in truth too low and chunky to be an agile working dachshund. It was through steely will and focused desire that she overcame these handicaps and excelled.

Sabina herself was the product of an improbable breeding masterminded by my wife, who combines intuition with a formal education in genetics. Sabina's dam Gerta, a highly intelligent German import, had lacked the will to fully apply her gifts to wounded deer tracking when conditions were difficult. Gerta had produced puppies of indifferent working ability until Jolanta found the right stud for her, a tough Czech dog who lived on Vancouver Island off the Canadian coast of British Columbia. It took vision to send Gerta across a continent for a breeding, but the results were so good that we repeated this for a second litter.

Sabina revealed her slow, methodical working style at a very young age. She passed the Deer Search certification test when she was 7 months old with a Prize I, 92 points. This was actually the peak of her test career in tracking. Later in life, as an outstanding natural tracker, she did not concentrate and scored poorly on tests. She lost her enthusiasm for tests upon realizing that

these were not the real thing and therefore nonsense. That was the way she was; there was just one important thing in the world: tracking real wounded deer... and bear.

This zero tolerance for perceived "nonsense" was revealed again in her field trial career. As a young dog she excelled at dachshund field trials held on rabbits. Her close, methodical style and her persistence made her the "winningest" dachshund in the country for 1999. Yet she eventually lost her enthusiasm for field trials. She had learned that field trial braces were picked after short runs. Then what was the point of it all? She continued to run rabbits at home.



These shifts of attitude on unimportant matters did not affect her real professional work one bit. She would stay focused on a difficult wounded deer line for six hours and more. Once she tracked in a snowstorm, bulldozing through six inches of snow for a half mile on a scent line that lay on the ground underneath. She found that deer hidden under a mound of snow that any hunter would have walked right past.

Sabina was a staunch and loyal tracking partner, but she could also be critical. She liked hunters dressed in camo, but she did not suffer fools gladly, even if that fool was her handler. One

time I let myself be talked into taking a wounded deer call when I should have known better. The reported evidence was scanty, yet the zealous deer hunter was so sure that he had "hit him good". On site things looked even worse, very occasional drops of blood on bare ground between drifts of un-melted snow. Sabina, an old dog by this time, never quit working and she floundered through the stretches of deep snow without complaint. All to no avail. But when we got back to the truck, Sabina let me know her feelings. Once stationed on the passenger seat, she raised her upper lip and gave me a soft growl. Of course she was right. I accepted the rebuke, even though I am supposed to be the "pack leader".

Sabina revealed her courage and toughness most completely on a call that we took together late in the deer hunting season of 2004. This time I was the hunter as well as the tracker. December 19 was a cold day in the muzzleloader season, which winds up deer hunting in my part of New York State. I shot the deer in a snow squall that enveloped my tree stand and made it difficult to be sure whether the deer, 100 yards away on a food plot, was a buck or a doe. In this season you can shoot either one.

At the shot the deer threw its head up so that I could see the white antlers silhouetted against the dark tree trunks. From the buck's reaction I was sure that he had been hit, but when I got down out of the tree and went to the hit site there was absolutely no evidence to be seen — no blood, no hair, no bone fragments. Even the tracks in the skiff of snow were being rapidly erased by more wind-driven snow. I circled the hit site at 50 yards and again at a 100. Nothing. If a hunter had called me to describe the whole scenario, I would certainly have refused to drive 30 miles to track his deer. There was nothing to go by.

But this time I was the hunter, and when you are the hunter you hope beyond evidence. I went back to the house, shed my heavy clothes and called Sabina. I planned to take her down to the hit site to check things out. I could not believe that I had missed the deer. I took along my handgun and a six cell tracking light. I did not take anyone else with me, nor did I take a cell phone or a two-way radio. These omissions were a mistake. But I was just going to check things out....

At the hit site, I put the tracking collar and leash on Sabina, and she checked things out. Her body language said "Yes!" and off we went. For nearly a half mile, up through my long and narrow property, I saw tracks but no blood on the thin but deepening layer of snow. Then I saw the deer lying down behind a tree. As I fumbled my handgun out from beneath my buttoned coat and vest, the deer took off. I could see that there was something wrong with a front shoulder, and he did

not move with the energy I would have expected. The deer was seriously hurt, but why no blood?

Only a few times in the next two miles did I see any blood in the trail. The driving snow continued and darkness came. Quitting never occurred to Sabina, nor to me. We were two hunters of like mind, partners in the chase.

The buck went a long way; we saw him several times fairly close in the darkness. I had learned from experience that when wounded deer knowingly let you approach closely three times, they are not long for this world. But this little buck was special. He hadn't learned these rules; he was tough and he was mad. He needed to do something about this dark, fox-sized creature that followed him relentlessly wherever he went.

We were crossing a field when the buck charged out of nowhere. He must have been lying down, but once on his feet he could move fast, and he rolled Sabina with his antlers. It happened too quickly for me to be able to shoot. This time I did not have someone with me to hold the light.

The second encounter was more serious. We came on the deer standing at bay. He was magnificent and the magic of the moment transformed his little six point antlers to Pope and Young dimensions. I was trying to pick him up in the useless handgun scope, while holding leash and light, when he charged. He hit Sabina and then he hit me. His contact with me was head-on and hard enough so that he knocked one antler off against my jaw and chest. I didn't feel a thing, but opened my eyes to see his antler lying on the ground beside my glasses about a foot from my nose. Sabina was licking my face, and she had a gash in her side. I couldn't see how serious the wound was, but Sabina was ready to go. I put the antler in my hunting coat, and we began tracking again. In about 150 yards we came to a country road. It was not clear whether the deer had crossed or doubled back, and Sabina seemed a bit disoriented.

Now was not the time to risk her again. There were lights of a house down the road, and we walked down so I could make a phone call. It turned out that I was a mile from where I thought I was and on an entirely different road. The householder kindly drove us home in his pick-up.

I showed my wife the bloody antler and explained to that we had come home for reinforcements. Since Sabina, as always, was ready to eat her supper, we concluded that she had no serious internal injuries. She wagged her tail even though she had a bloody five-inch gash from her spine down the side of her flank. We had been very lucky.

I called two good friends with tracking licenses to come and help me finish the tracking job. I had a bite to eat myself, and I noticed that my jaw was out of

alignment so that I could not chew my food. Nothing was broken or dislocated and after a couple of days everything went back to normal. I had caught a lower tine on my chest, but it had slid along my heavy nylon coat instead of penetrating. A long bruise developed, and the next day I realized that the shock of the impact had cracked a rib in back next to my spine. I could press the bruise in front and feel a sharp pain on the same rib in the rear. My injuries were minor. Sabina was less lucky, and spent the next day being sutured at the vet. It could have been much, much worse.



When my friends Jim Hens and Dave Snyder arrived we went out with Amy to find the buck. Amy picked up the track with ease, showed us two more beds with very little blood, and then she jumped the deer. This time the deer retreated. There was not enough adrenalin and courage left to sustain him. Dave's shot ended his courageous life.

Only a hunter can understand our respect for the game we hunt. His little, six point antlers will always stay on my desk. And Sabina will always be with me.