

Goodbye Blue

Memories temper pain of final journey

By Dick Ellis

Blue is asleep on his pillow on the other side of this desk while I work, like he has waited for 15 years and 11 months, for another hunt to begin. He won't quite make September, or 16. Later today, August 5th, 2008 we will take one last journey together.

My heart is filled with such love for a small blue-eyed mongrel that I cannot begin to write how much sorrow hangs over me, even though this day itself has hung out there and I knew it was coming. I'm an emotional man but I don't often cry. I'm making up for it these last two days. I can't tell you how much this hurts.

Sure I can.

Since I brought a puppy home hungry and dirty on a cold December morning on my lap in an old truck after we found each other in the inner city of Milwaukee, you've let me tell you about my Blue. One more time, please?

Blue wasn't brought home because I was an aspiring outdoor writer and he was a hunter. He was brought home despite the fact that I was an outdoor writer, and looking finally for my first pure bred puppy; maybe a pointer...maybe a flusher. That's when he walked up. "You know I'm hungry," Blue's eyes said. "I'll take you if you take me."

So I brought Blue home, solely because he needed me. No other reason. And he became a member of our



No contest. Wild birds could stick to heavy cover, but Blue would eventually win

family two years before Taylor, who will be a freshman this fall, joined Lori and me and made us four. I was just a story-teller anyway, a journalist, a line of communication using other experts to bring a story to the reader. I didn't really need a perfect dog, or even a hunter. We could be two blue-eyed mongrels in the field, and cast the spotlight on everyone

else, like always.

Blue changed the script. He flushed a first hen in Vernon Marsh, frantically following the bird's trail to impolitely bust the point of a majestic purebred. I apologized to the owner, then gleefully celebrated as soon as my back was turned. A rooster flushed under Blue's puppy push and I missed three times. The bird

landed in heavy cover across a field. Ten minutes later, my brother John and I stood incredulous as Blue introduced us to his "mongrel point". Frozen over the rooster except for the cocked head and slowly wagging tail for over a minute, Blue put the bird up prompted by our whispered "Take him, Blue." It was John who put the rooster back down again, the first of hundreds taken over Blue.

Blue learned to use his incredible sense of smell, and his incredible sense of hearing, and his incredible sense of sight together with extreme intelligence to become a very bad nightmare for the wild roosters of Wisconsin. Sometimes he would point. Sometimes he would flush. Always he would find the grouse or pheasant after the shot. But never, would my imperfect Blue, bring those monstrous birds back to me in his small mouth.

In Waukesha County where wild birds were sparse, his head popped up from working the tall grass with the sound of a distant cackle and he silently and deliberately lead us forward, following the voice of that individual bird for 200 yards until he worked downwind, nose high in the air, caught the scent and the bird was as good as in the bag. In South Dakota, Blue sent a wild rooster to the sky, and I missed. Blue disappeared. Perplexed, I located him a minute later, a small tan patch sitting



Blue was a partner on virtually all Ellis stories statewide. Here, as a relaxed and tough young dog, he row trolls for muskies in Polk County on Long Lake.



Soldier Blue died August 5, 2008 just shy of 16.

of Christmas Eve, he had once again given John and me four wild roosters. Even at 15 last October, opening day of the Wisconsin pheasant season, Blue gave me one last, wild, long-tailed rooster. And one last memory.

When everything else broke down on his body from muscle atrophy, his sense of smell and his heart never deserted him. It has been a growing chore for Blue to maintain his balance. When I threw out two pheasant wings used for training pups to the cattails next to our home last week though, I watched the next day as Blue caught scent, disappeared into that cover with great

struggle, and emerged with the wing in his mouth. Ten minutes later and 20 yards to the west, he repeated the game and emerged with the other wing.

Love is not always kind. You risk loving someone or something and you know this pain is eventually part of the deal. It's a good trade. I know the hurt will soon surrender to the memories. Blue hurts too much and is losing his dignity because his body is so worn out that if I keep him alive now it's for me. Not for Blue. So, in a few hours I will do what my very fiber is telling me I cannot do. I will say goodbye to my Blue. And I will purposely give the okay to take Blue's life, and take away a part of my own.

I will do this. Love demands that I do this. So... Goodbye Blue. There wasn't a day I wasn't proud to call you my dog.

Dick's Note: John and I took a long slow walk in Vernon Marsh with Blue and his 11 year old hunting partner, yellow lab, Gunner. We bought Blue a double cheeseburger at McDonalds, and I lay on the floor next to my dog at John's house for one final hour, smelling him, touching him, remembering him. We did what we had to do. Lori and Taylor made Blue a headstone with blue paint. John and I buried him outside our bedroom window. Blue will always still be right here...in our hearts. ^ow_o

Blue didn't like water. In the upland game fields though, it was Blue's behavior that served as our litmus test in determining if birds were in the area. If the labs were "birdie" but Blue was unimpressed, we came to know that almost surely the birds had departed. If Blue remained birdie even after the purebreds had surrendered the area, we knew, almost surely, that there was still a wily rooster to roust.

"I will never not believe Blue again," said a hunting partner after a hunt in which I could not participate. "After 10 minutes of watching him frantically work a bird I was trying to pull Blue out of the area by his collar because he refused to leave and everyone else was already gone. A rooster busted cover right on top of us."

Blue loved every person and every dog he ever met, and they loved him. He wanted to immediately fight anything wild he ever met, and often did. He tangled ferociously with otters, pine martens, porcupines, raccoons and snarled and snapped with all hair on end if a coyote dared to venture close. He has been bloodied and scarred many times by the end of this long road. But any two year old little girl with the inclination could fall on "Blusies" or pull on his ears without the hint of threat from an old and gentle dog.

After 15 years, his veterinary trail was long and green. Two ACL surgeries late in life, other surgeries, a lifelong sinus problem and a daily prescription joint medicine that kept Blue in the field and hunting the final two years, were part of the expense. Even at age 14, though, on the eve



John Ellis carries Blue from the field after the mongrel working alone finished a four wild rooster day in Rock County at age 14

in an adjacent field 200 yards out. "Come Blue," I screamed. His answer was to flip something in the air with his mouth over and over. "Did I hit that bird?" I asked my partners. I had not, they agreed. As I approached Blue, mad as a hornet, the rooster began to materialize at his feet. Still not convinced, I lifted the bird...still warm. Still unconvinced, I watched as a pick-up truck bounced down from a nearby ridge.

"We were watching your first push," the rancher said. "You must have put a single BB in that rooster. Your dog watched it fall that far out and was on it. Incredible."

Yes he is.