

COURSING BACK IN TIME

PART 1: DON'T GET TOO MUSHY ABOUT THE PAST

By Charles Alexander

There are differing levels of addiction for anyone who has ever coursed a sighthound in the open field. For some, it is literally a life-changing experience, a way of life around which other less significant choices such as employment and location of residence are modified to fit. To see your hound fly free from the slip and run fully motivated across vast and open fields is unquestionably a thrill laced with apprehension and uncertainty, but at its best, a lump-in-the-throat, near-out-of-body experience, that the uninitiated will never understand. So powerful is this elixir of double-suspension running that even if your addiction is not extreme, and like my wife Patricia and me you no longer own pets of any kind, the yearning remains, like a subtle gravity pulling you back to bygone days and all the memories tagging along.

So it was that one morning in early February, 2013, we made what we rationalized as an impulsive decision to attend this year's Grand Course. In retrospect, the more likely explanation was the subtle pull of our dormant coursing addiction, brought on, perhaps, by the incessant winter rain for which the northwest is well known. After loading our suitcases, cameras, tripod, and the monster 800 MM lens into the car, we blasted down I-5 just like in the old days when we were still running dogs. Unlike trips of old, however, this time we detoured in northern California to photograph migrating waterfowl and the raptors they inevitably attract. It was at one of these stops, the Colusa National Wildlife Refuge northwest of Sacramento, where thousands of snow geese brought back a flood of memories of early-spring coursing southwest of Merced.

In the 1970s and 80s, we would often meet at the *Pine Cone* restaurant in Merced for breakfast, before heading south on the Los Banos Highway (59) to the one store/gas station wayside town of El Nido for roll call. Tule fog was always a worry and often a reality. There were many times when we had to wait for hours for the fog to lift before even heading out to the fields. The fields and road by the same name that is indelibly stamped into the grey matter of all of us who used to course then is *Sandy Mush*. The best of the *Sandy Mush* fields were vast grazing lands (without cattle at the moment, if the field finders had properly done their job) extending west to the eastern border of the Merced National Wildlife Refuge. Undoubtedly, it was this refuge which was responsible for the profusion of egrets and snow geese that we often saw while coursing, but some years there were even ponds and marsh-like grass to attract the waterfowl and provide stunning backlit spray when hare and hounds coursed into the sun.

But like Eden, *Sandy Mush* had its serpent. The worst of the drawbacks were the barb wire fences. Responsible dog owners would try to teach their hounds how to duck below the lowest strand, but lessons or no lessons, dogs were often cut, sometimes badly, on the unforgiving barbs of the fence. Even when a course through a fence caused no injuries, one or more blankets were often ripped from the hounds' backs, and if these blanketless dogs were reasonably similar in appearance, the judge really had to earn his (yes, in the "old days" judges were mostly men) keep. Huntmasters would try to avoid the fences, but the jackrabbits seemed to love them. Sometimes galleries and/or hunt dogs were positioned right alongside a fence in hope that the hare would race into the open, but the jackrabbits' strategies often included U-turns back to the dangerous fence

equalizer. First aid supplies were thus a necessity, and even better was when there was also a vet or doctor in the field.

I've selected some photos taken in the fields off of West Sandy Mush Road to illustrate the vast open space as well as the ever-present fences. Some of the dogs and owners in these photos are identified, but as time passes, memory inevitably fades. I'll leave it to you the readers to collectively fill in the blanks and bring this segment of coursing history back to life. I've not included any shots of the notorious, often tightly-fenced alfalfa fields in the Merced area. Running in these fields was not open-field coursing's finest moment. The hares in some of these fields were not fast enough to attain a reasonable probability of escape, and consequently, they were insufficient to provide enough of a challenge by which to judge the performances of the hounds. Other alfalfa fields had faster hares, but the tight fences made for dangerous courses which sometimes weaved in and out under the barb wire.

The "modern" Grand Course fields bear little resemblance to the verdant, tightly-fenced alfalfa fields on the outskirts of Merced, or even the grazing lands of *Sandy Mush*. The new, or perhaps last, venue for southern California coursing enthusiasts is the yet-to-be-turned-into-orchards tumbleweeds and sand on the western edge of the San Joaquin Valley. If it weren't for the ever-intensifying war over water, I have no doubt that this remnant of "untamed" land would have long ago succumbed to the plow. Even if the needed water never arrives, the prospect of the next big oil find threatens the area. Until then, the soft ground, the scarcity of paved roads, the speedy hares, and, of course, the lack of barb wire fences go a long way toward mitigating my memory of the sun sparkling off the spray as my saluki coursed into the sun.

GALLERY OF COURSING MEMORIES



Pictured left to right: Priscilla Cogan with afghan Vincent, Laura Belkin with either saluki Taffy or Aqil, and Pat Stakel with saluki Monty at the 1976 Grand Course.

At its best, coursing in the fields off of Sandy Mush Road offered flat land with almost no brush or tumbleweeds and astonishing visibility.



Curt Ries with his two salukis: Azali (standing) and Sundance at the 1986 Grand Course in a field off of Sandy Mush Road.

Note the lush grass, water off in the distance, and an old irrigation pipe of the sort that was sometimes used by jackrabbits for escape. These brush-free fields might look enticing after a day of walking through tumbleweeds at the 2013 Grand Course, but that's only because you can't see the inevitable barb wire fence.



Left to right: Tom Handzus with saluki (?), John Cogan with saluki Windy, and Curt Ries with saluki Azali at the 1986 Grand Course.

Note that the field is not without significant contours (ditches and mounds) to aid the hare's escape and present running hazards to the hounds.



Laura Belkin with my saluki Cirrus at the 1976 Grand Course.

Note the sturdy barb wire fence marring what would otherwise be a near-perfect running field.



Jan Findley with her saluki Tammuz and greyhound Angel at the 1986 Grand Course.

Note the cars parked on the farm road and the nasty-tight barb wire fence.



Unidentified greyhound ducking to clear a barb wire fence in a field off of Sandy Mush Road.

Note the brush in the ditch on the far side of the fence. This was an escape of preference for many hares.



Left to right: Tom Handzus with saluki (?) and Chris Mason with saluki (?) at a 1981 hunt in a field off of Sandy Mush Road.

Note that they are on the line and positioned by the huntmaster directly alongside a tightly-strung barb wire fence.