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Author: Jackie Drakeford

We all know the saying about comparisons being odious, but it is very hard even for paragons of virtue like me to avoid making them. The dog fluffs a catch, and before you can give her credit for a damned good try, into your head pops “The old dog would have had that”. This is especially true for dogs now deceased, the memory of whom is now gilded and rosy, your having conveniently forgotten all the losses that ‘should have been’ catches along the way with each of them.

It stands to reason that catching quarry run on its own terms in its own environment is not a piece of cake: if it were, there would be no appeal to it. Even the best dogs have their off-days, and we have to allow them that, just as they have days when they make incredible catches, usually with nobody around as witness. One of the best foxing dogs I ever had missed three consecutive bolts one day: my friend shot the fourth one. Yes, four out of one drain, and my dog put up the performance of a lifetime if ineptitude was what we needed. She came on heat the following day, which explained all so far as I was concerned, but it was a long time before that particular friend believed in her. In a long working life, she never missed another fox that she should have caught, and she nailed a fair few that should have been impossible, but that day, I cringed.

I have seen a squirrel fall out of a tree and land like a starfish in the midst of the dogs, and every one missed it. I remember a quality young dog picking up a rabbit and dropping it when the rabbit squealed, a fox coursed with determination but no strike being spun round and around and boxed in but without the follow-through, I’ve seen one helluva fast dog straightlined by a rabbit that knew where it was going, and a hare clap down and disappear while a dog with a well-proven nose tracked and backtracked but made nothing of it. Come to think of it, I’ve seen foxes run right

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through a pack of hounds on quite a few occasions and get away with it, and I've also been there more than once when one went in but just did not come out of the other side. That was the food-processor effect: a bit of noise and flurry, quickly over, leaving nothing but a few stains and some steam.

So what I'm saying – and I'm saying as much to myself as anyone else – is that there is always 'the one that got away' so don't dwell on it like old scent. Every mistake teaches the dog something else. Sometimes there is no mistake, but a quarry that is master of the dog. Factor in luck, which is sometimes on one side and sometimes the other. It really doesn't matter: we have to lose a few. A short while ago, there was a high-speed duel between the Colly and a rabbit which resulted in the rabbit getting away: as the dog struck, the rabbit leaped, the dog stumbled, and that was that. The other side of the ditch, I heard her jaws 'clap' and heard her go down: she came past me flat-out, with mud in her mouth but no rabbit. A good rabbit, scarred from myxomatosis but fully fit, got away. Respect to you, rabbit.

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They say a long tail is the sign of a fast dog, which is a half-truth in that a long tail indicates a lot of sighthound blood. The tail is a counter-balance, so it follows that the longer the tail, the more agile a dog is likely to be in the turn. Those of you who see a dog working high crops or grassland in a series of leaps will notice the tail spin one and a half, sometimes two revolutions while the dog seems to hover. Pups' tails change in proportion as they grow, too long then too short, but only the parents will give an indication of the likely size of the finished article.