

Making Sure

By Tom Word

The blending smells of bacon, coffee, and fatwood smoke embraced him when he stumbled out of his first floor bedroom. The fire crackled on the hearth as the fatwood ignited the oak. The cook Dorothy heard his padding slippers as he shuffled through the dining room past the oil paintings of his two greatest champions. In the kitchen Dorothy had his coffee cup waiting to be filled. The chicory smell woke him fully as he lifted the cup for a first sip. The *Birmingham News* lay folded at his elbow.

Neither he nor Dorothy spoke as she hustled about the kitchen tending to the biscuits, eggs, toast, sausage, and ham brought from Tennessee, tribute to him he thought but in truth tribute to Dorothy. The kitchen's outside door rattled open and through it entered two bundled men, the first small and black, the second large and white.

"Mornin' Mr. Sam," they murmured in unison.

"Mornin' Joe, Bob, Mr. Sam responded to his scout and handler-manager.

Joe and Bob stood caps in hand awaiting their instructions. It was the last day of running of the trial. Only four dogs remained to make their bids for the title of All South Champion. Two would go down in the morning brace at 8:30, two in the afternoon brace at 1:00. Then a champion would be announced by the two judges who would shortly come down the stairs for breakfast.

Mr. Sam's entries, four in all, had run already. Three had been picked up, but the fourth, Ashtree Annie, was the consensus front runner for the title. She'd scored ten finds in her three hours, all mannerly and to the front. She had not run as big as some would want, and she was clearly tired at the finish, but so was every other dog that had fought the black belt prairie mud for the full three hours. Most had quit before that, or been picked up by their handlers before they'd shown the numbing fatigue that would have gripped them had they been left down.

Of the four dogs left to go, only one was a threat to Annie. That dog was named The Gladiator, and he clearly had the strength for the three hours. He'd go in the last brace, handled by Arch Price, trainer-handler for Mr. Sam's avowed enemy and rival in business and field trials, John Dunn. Mr. Sam sold and serviced John Deere and Caterpillar agricultural and earth moving machinery, John Dunn an upstart Japanese brand of the same that in recent years had given the iconic American brands a run for their money and then some.

"The Gladiator does not finish," Mr. Sam said.

It was the order Joe and Bob had known was coming. They nodded and filed out the door, Dorothy handing each a sausage and egg biscuit and the white man a thermos of coffee.

The judges came down for breakfast, scoffed down the morning feast with compliments to Dorothy, and returned to their rooms to make ready for a cold morning in the saddle.

“Gentlemen, let ‘em go,” the senior judge said at exactly 8:30, and the next-to-last brace was off, followed by their handlers and the judges and a gallery of twenty riders. Steam puffed from the nostrils of horses and riders, and frost crunched beneath hooves. The temperature was 25°F, the sky cloudless, and no wind stirred.

At the end of an hour, both handlers advised the judges they were picking up. The judges dismounted and walked to the dog truck, and the gallery turned for the barn. Joe and Bob led the judges’ mounts in.

The judges were glad to have the balance of the morning to sit before the fire in the big house living room. Mr. Sam presided there, as handlers and owners stopped by to say “thank you” before heading down the road to the next trial on the circuit or to home.

The senior judge, Ollie Gibbs, a tobacco farmer from Chatham, Virginia, and a veteran of the field-trial wars, was completing his second and final assignment as judge of the All South. As the fire crackled, he reflected on the week’s events. He and his fellow judge carried Ashtree Annie as top dog, but her standing was not unassailable. He would not be unhappy if The Gladiator came forth after lunch and beat her. It was nothing personal for Ollie, he was not close to either dog’s owner or handler (though they all assumed he was, for Ollie was a courtly Virginia gentleman in the Parke Brinkley mold, and made everyone in field trials feel he was their friend. He’d learned long ago that you got invited to nice places if you conducted yourself that way).

Lunch was served early in the commissary, and everyone still at the trial had his rig ready to depart as soon as the final brace ended and the winner was announced (no runner-up was named in the All South). Everyone knew it would be Ashtree Annie unless The Gladiator came through, and all riding were pulling for him, except, of course, for Mr. Sam, Joe, and Bob. The judges were neutral, at least on the surface. Ollie knew his fellow judge would lean hard for Annie because he wanted to be invited back to judge next year.

“This is going to be fun,” Ollie said to himself as the final two pointers were led to the line. Joe and Bob were mounted in the back of the gallery, Ollie noticed, and on their most athletic mounts, which had no doubt received an extra measure of sweet feed this morning. Just then the Devil took hold of Ollie.

As soon as the dogs were cast off, Ollie sent word to Joe to ride up for a chat.

“Joe, you know I’ve got to report this trial for the *Field*, as well as judge these dogs. I want you to ride with me this brace so I can ask you questions about the course and past performances you’ve seen on it—that will make my report a lot more interesting.”

"All right, Suh. I'll do 'dat," Joe stammered. Ollie saw Joe cut his eyes at Mr. Sam who, riding at the front beside his fellow judge, looked unhappy.

As the opening hour passed, The Gladiator began to click. At the one-hour mark, he'd scored three limb finds, and his race was superior to what Ashtree Annie had accomplished on the same ground. Ollie was peppering Joe with questions, and the old scout was enjoying recounting memories of thirty years of scouting on the course. Mr. Sam was looking more put out with every passing minute. At the end of two hours, The Gladiator had improved his standing even more, scoring four finds and laying down a torrid ground race.

Fifteen minutes into the third hour, The Gladiator's handler, Arch Price, rode furiously from the front to Judge Ollie Gibbs, fire sparking from his eyes.

"Judge, that damned Bob Payne (Mr. Sam's handler and manager of Ashtree Plantation) is riding out there in the woods, and way up front. He's supposed to be a marshal, not a damned renegade. If Mr. Sam wants him alive at the end of this trial, he better call him in."

With that, Ollie, who had a very strong voice, called out "Bob Payne, ride back to the gallery." Mr. Sam was beside himself.

"Ollie Gibbs, you're getting too big for your damned britches, telling my manager and my scout where to ride," Sam blurted.

"Why, I'm sorry to upset you, Mr. Sam, but I want to make sure your trial is seen by all as the fair contest I know you want it to be," Ollie responded with a grin that further infuriated Mr. Sam.

Bob Payne came riding slowly back to the gallery, his mount's lathered coat revealing much hard riding. Only a half-hour now remained in The Gladiator's race. His bracemate had been picked up at two hours.

Suddenly, Mr. Sam rode over to Ollie and Joe.

"Joe, take this note back to Barbara at the big house. I forgot to tell her we've got four more guests coming for supper tonight."

"That won't be necessary, Mr. Sam. I've got my cell phone right here, and I've got Barbara's cell number programmed in it." With that, Ollie punched in a number and gave Barbara the message.

"That's funny, Mr. Ollie. Mr. Sam told me before y'all left this morning that he wasn't staying down for supper tonight." Ollie closed his cell phone without answering Barbara's remark. He struggled to avoid a grin. When his cell phone rang a minute later, he knew it was Barbara calling back for clarification. So he handed the phone to Mr. Sam to answer. "This has got to be Barbara," Ollie said as he held out the phone to Mr. Sam, who took it and rode out of earshot to talk with his cook.

The Gladiator finished his three hours with a flourish, scoring his eleventh limb find at pickup time. Ollie got a mild argument from his fellow judge before naming The Gladiator Champion, but the gallery's applause confirmed all riding agreed with the verdict—all that is except Mr. Sam.

As he loaded up his horses at the barn, Ollie called Joe over and slipped him two twenties.

"Thank you for looking after me this week, Joe. Sorry I had to interfere with your job when The Gladiator ran."

"Das all right, Mr. Ollie. You saved me from a sin I didn't much look forward to committin'"

"Now Joe, don't be telling me a big one. I know you enjoy grabbing another man's dog off the course so it can't beat yours."

"Not really, Mr. Ollie." Joe said with a grin.

On his drive back to Virginia, Ollie Gibbs wondered if Joe had been telling the truth when he said he didn't enjoy interfering with another man's dog. "You will never know how a black man really feels about anything he tells you," Ollie told himself. Concealing his true feelings from white men was how the black man had kept his dignity for centuries, Ollie knew from a lifetime of working in sweaty shirtsleeves beside them in the tobacco fields of Ole Virginia.