

# Unintended Consequences

By Tom Word

John Stark was one of those who give the rich a bad name. Drove a yellow Hummer with his initials and “If it Flies it Dies” on the doors. Goes all over the world wing shooting—ducks in Mexico, doves in Argentina, red grouse in England, partridge in Spain, pheasants everywhere. Owns a plantation at Thomasville for quail, a duck place in Arkansas.

Money’s inherited, of course. Third generation. Trust funds. Coal mines. Never hit a lick at a snake his self, far as I know

That January we flew in his Gulfstream to Falfurrias, Texas. Guide met us at the airstrip. Two dozen jets parked there for the same reason.

Guide drives us to Rachel, then onto a section of the King Ranch, through gates with a dozen locks, one for each of those got a right to get in—for the oil or the gas or the deer or the cattle, whatever. Guy named Tommy Dugger had the quail lease and hired a half-dozen guides like ours with their own rigs and dog strings. Seven grand a day per gun.

It was a pretty good quail year ‘cause they’d had a little rain when the quail needed it. Country looked like Africa—short prairie grass and big motts in the distance. Cactus and wild hogs and Javalenas. Guide turned loose two pointers. They lit out, all business, skimming the motts downwind, payin’ no attention to the sandspurs, except every once in a while dropping and chewing one out of a foot. Creep at a cactus, the guide yells “leave it,” and they do—snake. Then they point, and

the guide signals get down, and John Stark and I hustle up nervous in our snake boots, and the birds fly low, and Mr. John doubles.

“Don’t shoot my dogs please,” the guide says, and you know if you do he’ll collect \$10,000 and drive you back to the Gulfstream. It’s in the contract.

We’re in birds constant until noon, braces down about twenty minutes each, it’s real hot. Then he puts down one dog to hunt alone, the toughest lookin’ tri-color male pointer I ever saw, orange bumblebees above his cold eyes, rest of his face and ears liver, and scars. When he points he quivers, he’s so intense. Six finds in twenty minutes, retrieves all the birds. Name’s Ike.

“What will you take for him?” John Stark asks.

“Ain’t for sale,” the guide, name is Billy, says.

“Not for twenty thousand?” John asks.

“Nope,” Billy says.

“We’ll see,” John says.

Before the day’s over, he makes two more offers, same answer.

When we’re flying back to Albany that night, Ike is all Mr. John talks about.

“I’m going to own him,” John Stark keeps saying.

Sure enough, two weeks later, I get orders to pick up a dog at the Albany airport, and its Ike. The air bill shows he was loaded at Lubbock. The shipper’s name is not Billy’s, but I figure John Stark has got a dog jockey to buy Ike off Billy.

Ike won’t handle for me, and you put a ‘lectric collar on him, he won’t leave your side. John Stark cusses, but he’s bought a half dozen well-bred bitches, and soon enough we’ve got a puppy lot full of Ike’s offspring, good lookin’ too.

That summer of 2003, the article came out in the *Field* about DNA proof of parentage. That's going to change the field-trial game, I suspect when I read it, but I can't imagine how much, or the unintended consequences. I tell John Stark about it, and he looks puzzled.

"I didn't get the papers when I got Ike," he says. "We'll register his pups as out of Buster. If any of them win, we'll say Buster is dead." A lot of other folks come up with the same solution, it turns out.

Two years whizzes by. John Stark still shooting all over the world, including at his Thomasville place, which I run for him. He's started reading the *Field*, and I tell him some of Ike's derbies ought to make trial dogs—I'm up on his place in North Dakota breaking dogs. He flies up, and we enter three in the two derby stakes they run at Columbus in September. One that's the spit image of Ike wins them both, and now John Stark is a field-trialing fool, as well as a wing-shooting fool. He meets a bunch of trialers at Columbus, but he don't make a lot of friends. None in fact. He can't utter a sentence without "I" in it.

John Stark says for me to stay on the circuit with them three derbies—my helper takes the rest of the dogs we've been breaking back to Georgia. So I go down to the Pheasant Futurity (we post enter the derbies). Buster's DNA is not available because he's dead, that's what we tell the *Field*.

The derby that won at Columbus wins the Futurity too. His picture is in the *Field*, me behind him grinning. Fame spreads quick for a winning fall derby. I'm renewing lots of friendships on the circuit (I used to train and handle for the public before I went to work for John Stark at Thomasville).

The wheels came off the wagon at Christmas time. John Stark had the Big House at Thomasville full of shooting guests. We were hunting two parties every day—six guns on each wagon. I'd hired a couple of handlers off the circuit to bring their strings—they were glad to get their dogs some work on wild birds (well, pre-released mostly to tell the truth) and to make some good money. But that many guns hunting every day of the week puts a strain on a place and the help, sure enough.

The week after Christmas a whole new crowd came in. Bankers and lawyers from up north and London, a strange bunch. The gals cooking and cleaning at the Big House, including my wife, were pulling their hair out trying to keep clean sheets on the beds and towels in the bathrooms, not to mention food on the table.

We were all in the gun room with the first round of after-hunt drinks when the truck rolls up the lane between the live oaks. I recognized it at once as a South Texas rig—you don't see shooting trucks rigged that way in Georgia. The light blue color seems familiar.

It rumbles up to the front door. I hear the driver's door slam, that loud slam a mad fellow makes. In walks Billy, our guide from South Texas. On his hip is the long-barrel revolver he'd shot snakes with on our one-day quail hunt two years before.

"There ain't nothin' lower than a dog thief." Billy says, and with that he draws that revolver and shoots John Stark in the heart.

Then, as cool as you please, he hands me the revolver and says, "Call the law."

Ben ("Long") Reach, the little old lawyer from Albany, takes Billy's case and convinces a jury it was temporary insanity. Plenty of folks around Albany understood how you'd feel if some son-of-a-bitch like John Stark stole your bird dog-of-a-lifetime.

Mr. Ben begins his talk to that jury with the line I'd heard so many times,

"Ladies and Gentlemen, a man, if he's real lucky, gets one good bird dog in a lifetime."

How had Billy figured out John Stark had Ike stolen? He'd seen the Pheasant Futurity picture in the *Field*. Billy sent them DNA from a pup of Ike's he had, asked them to compare it to John Stark's Futurity winner. The *Field* confirmed they had the same daddy, simple as that. Unintended consequences.