

In the Blood

By Skip Knowles

ONCE YOU'VE SHOT a ton of ducks, it's the people, dogs and sunrises that keep your love of the game fresh and new. On a trip with the Mojo men last month, I met a young fire-breather in South America, a 19-year-old named James Britt, who has it bad. He was in Argentina on a special trip gifted to him from his enormous father Ralph, a North Carolina farmer who is a former Steelers tight end. The kid is just eaten up with duck hunting. He's killed dozens of deer and many bears, but could pretty much care less about chasing those anymore.

Some years ago in this space, I touched on old school versus new, the so-called black hoody faction versus traditionalists, a theme that also seems closely related to those hand-grenade editorials about the field-versus-waterfowling debacle, hot-button etiquette issues, and so on. This kid embodied it all. A young man with an East Coast water-hunting pedigree, he was consumed with the idea of field hunting mallards. He is at once a cocky college pitcher, and an aggressive post-adolescent with a silly big-leaguer chain necklace, yet possesses a pleasant bearing, with terrific manners.

Britt told me how he and some young buddies had ventured all the way to Arkansas' famed Bayou Meto to chase greenhead dreams, unguided. They survived the famed boat races and most brutal of public competition all on their own. He witnessed the slashed tires and the fierce pre-dawn jockeying. Yet his crew of first-timers had done quite well, better than some of the locals, taking home dozens of drakes in the flooded timber.

He was intrigued to the point of agitation to know if I'd ever been on a field mallard hunt. I told him about trying to grab ducks out of the air and having them land on our legs in layouts in Canada, and that out west the black clouds in the corn fields from Colorado to Eastern Washington looked like starling swarms. His eyes got huge, like he'd learned sharknadoes were real. They are not, but ducknadoes are...

Though full of swagger, James was earnest, polite and brimming with vigor. In Argentina, he'd waded out and help pick up the dekes and ducks in a place where the hunters aren't expected to.

We went fox hunting one evening, and I smiled as he rushed the first shot, then settled down and made a great kill shot on a vermin culpeo with a .22 Hornet. *Hey kid, I thought, let's walk down to ALL those cows...* He was like a young Lab straining at the leash, unsure of what to do but just dying for a chance to do it.

Once, in the heat of battle, he sprinted to the truck to get more ammo in such a frenzy he leapt a big ditch and fell so hard his feet were above his head when he landed with a *whop* in the mud that could be heard from a hundred yards. His dad will laugh about that one for all time.

Getting to hunt with him was a reminder of the "why" of it all, and he gave me hope anew for our fall passions. In a time where there are murmurs about decreasing participation, this kid and his bros are the type that will hear about a new lower three-duck limit and not bat an eye, but instead knuckle down on which are the three coolest drake species they can still kill and focus on when and how to get them.

Clearly it seems there has been some maturation in waterfowling in the last half-decade. You don't see as much kill-happy heavy-metal face-paint hooliganism from the young guns as the sport seemed to be spawning at one time. I'd voiced hope in the past that the old-vs-new-school split was a false dichotomy, and it seems to be bearing out. Killing ducks is cool, but hunting them is even better. Duck hunters young and old are by design, ever-adaptable to their environment.

And whether they are guides, decoy builders, champion callers, or all three, it's worth noting that ours is a sport in which more of our dominant, legendary icons are alive—thriving, even—than those who have gone before.

That is unusual, and quite wonderful. My father told me about how my great-grandpa once announced, "I'm not duck

hunting anymore. It's just not worth it now that they've made it so you can only shoot 25 birds."

Though we are ever-nostalgic for the past, it's a rich chapter we are currently writing in waterfowl history, and I'm grateful to be a part of it. Have fun out there.

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