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Sam



My lion-hunting dog



JOHN COLEMAN

I have owned a number of good hunting dogs during my lifetime of hunting but the best one I ever had was a little fox-terrier named Sam. This was during the 1960s and early 1970s when we lived on Nampini Ranch, on the Zambezi River, about forty miles above Victoria Falls in Rhodesia.

Sam originally belonged to my brother-in-law, Pete Kileff. Pete went overseas and gave Sam to me and I soon found out that the little dog was

an excellent hunter. Of course, I had to train him to chase only the animals I wanted to shoot, mainly cattle-killing lions. Unfortunately, Sam could not resist chasing warthogs and many times I had to shoot the animals because he wouldn't back off. Luckily warthogs are good to eat! I had another two mongrel dogs and an English pointer and Sam learned to bay lions with them. Eventually, the three bigger dogs were killed or became too old.

Sam became the greatest lion-hunting dog I had ever known. If I put him on a fresh lion spoor, I knew he would find it, bay it and I would shoot the lion. In the end, he accounted for at least 30 lions working on his own. He had a special "lion bark" and I always knew for sure he had a lion bayed when I heard this bark. It was much gruffer than his normal one; I suppose he was trying to make himself sound fiercer and bigger than he was!

He was also a compulsive "womaniser", locating bitches up to ten miles away. It always amazed me how far and quickly he went. I would see Sam in the morning and, about an hour later, would receive a phone-call from a neighbour telling me that Sam was there, had already mated with the bitch or was making a great nuisance of himself in attempting to do so. I would have to jump in the Land Rover and fetch him. He fathered numerous pups around the area with both large and small breeds.

He loved riding in the Land Rover or any other car for that matter. He insisted on sleeping in the back of the Land Rover and I even had to feed him there. Obviously, he was making sure that I didn't leave him behind when I went hunting.

The first time I took Sam on a lion hunt I had three bigger dogs that I regularly used: Tammy, a brindled boxer cross ridgeback, Bruno, a brown bull terrier cross German shepherd and a gun-shy English pointer named Pepper. Two lions (a lion and a lioness) had killed one of our cows on Nampini ranch. The herd boy called me out early one morning and reported the incident. Apparently, the lions had approached the kraal where the cattle were enclosed, urinated and left their scent upwind, terrifying the cattle and causing them to break out of the kraal. Then they had caught, killed and partly eaten one cow.

We carefully approached the scene of the kill, hoping to find the lions there but they had already left about an hour before, so the tracks were fresh. I released the dogs and they took off on the spoor. They started barking and I soon heard the infuriated grunts and roars of the lions, so I ran in the direction of the sounds. I was afraid that

the lions would maul my dogs but I needn't have worried! As I got closer to the sounds of the battle, I could hear that the dogs had the lions bayed in a patch of thick bush, so I slowed down and cautiously approached. After a few paces into the bush, I saw the dogs and two lions in a small clearing. The lions were sitting on their haunches, swatting at the dogs and then making short rushes but the dogs kept dodging and diving out of the way. Sam was in the thick of it but was very agile and avoided the furious attacks. I first shot the lioness and, when she went down, shot the lion. He jumped in the air, let out a roar and tried to take off but the shot from my .458 was good and he went down struggling, before collapsing, dead. Sam immediately latched onto the lion's testicles and started shaking and worrying the organ, much to my amusement! Whenever I shot lions after this, Sam always did the same thing and he did this with buffalo and other game as well.

I successfully used my dog pack numerous times after that and little Sam always seemed to lead the chase. My boxer cross, Tammy, eventually died and the bull terrier cross German shepherd, Bruno, was killed by a lion, so this left me with only little Sam and, of course, Pepper, but I gave up taking her along because she took off over the horizon every time I fired a shot. I initially thought that Sam would not be able to cope with a lion on his own but, not to worry; he was a star! He soon learned to bay lions by keeping a prudent distance but chasing and worrying them when they ran, the whole time keeping up his "lion bark".

Even though I had left the Department of National Parks, farmers still regularly called me out to deal with lion problems and I must say, in the end, I shot more lions than anyone else I know or have heard or read about, although I never bothered to keep count. Sam always came with me until he tragically died and I can say that he was partly responsible for my high success rate in finding and killing the marauders. With Sam and my Bushman tracker, Luka, on their trail, very few lions ever got away.

On one occasion a local farmer called me out to his farm near Matetsi. He was having the usual lion problems and a big male lion had killed one of his young breeding bulls the night before. When I arrived with Sam and Luka, the farmer took us to the spot where the bull had been killed and partly eaten by the lion. I initially thought there must have been more than one lion to be able to kill the bull but it was obviously only a single lion. A very big one!

We set out on the tracks; me carrying my .458, with Sam at heel and the bloke following with his .375 magnum. After about two hours of painstaking tracking over hard ground and grass, Luka held up his hand, signalling us to stop. "The lion is near", he said. "How do you know?" I asked. "I just know", he said with a grin. I had long ago learned to accept his word if he said a dangerous animal was close, so I snapped off the safety on my .458 and held

it ready, telling Sam to “Sah!”. He took off on the tracks and soon I heard his excited “lion bark”, then the infuriated roars and grunts of the lion. I started hastily and quietly approaching, Luka following closely, with the farmer about ten paces behind. There was a huge performance going on in a patch of thick thorn bush. I knew the lion was in there but would charge as soon as he saw me. I peered into the bushes and finally saw the lion as it saw me. Its tail shot out and up and this meant that it was going to charge. As it let out thunderous grunts and started coming at me, I knelt down and shot it in the chest. It somersaulted, tried to get up and I shot it again in the chest, dropping it a few paces from me. Sam, as usual, immediately latched onto its balls! I turned to talk to the bloke but he wasn’t there, so I called out that the lion was dead.

He pitched up shortly and, when I asked him where he had been, he said, “I thought I had better keep back so that I could watch behind in case it circled around”. He looked a bit sheepish!

One time, Sam almost got killed! Two lionesses had killed a cow on a neighbouring farm and the owner called me out to find and shoot them. I set off with Sam and Luka on the fresh tracks as soon as I arrived at the spot. I was a little concerned that Sam would not be able to cope with two angry lionesses as he was on his own! However, we pressed on and soon I heard Sam’s “lion bark” and the angry roars of the big cats. Then I heard Sam yell. “Oh hell; they have got Sam”, I thought, so I ran as fast as I could towards the spot where the commotion was going on, hoping to get there in time to save my little dog. As I got near, much to my relief, I heard Sam yelping and barking again and then silence! I wondered what was happening! As I got to the spot where the sounds of battle had occurred, I saw the tracks of the two lionesses running off with Sam’s running tracks over them. I took off in all haste along the clear tracks and soon heard Sam barking and the grunts of the big cats, only about a hundred yards ahead. I approached as quickly as possible and beheld an incredible sight. There were the two lionesses sitting on their haunches, swatting at Sam who was dodging in and out almost under their claws. I could see two parallel scratch marks on his rump where one of the lionesses had obviously managed to nick him during the first encounter but this seemed to have enraged him, although he was taking care to keep just out of their reach. I immediately shot both the creatures and Sam, as usual, latched on to the rear end of one of them, shaking and snarling!! After that he always let out a yell when he first saw any lion and I always thought he had been nailed, but no chance! I would soon, with great relief, hear his “lion bark” and know he was on the trail again.

Sam was also great on hunting and baying wounded buffalo, particularly in thick bush, long grass or reeds. It was extremely useful to have a dog that would locate the animal when it was hiding in dense cover and that was often the difference between a very dangerous encounter



One of the many lions shot by the author.

and a successful kill. The little fellow would go in on the tracks, locate the buffalo and keep up a continuous chorus of barks until I could come up and despatch the beast while Sam kept its attention on him. A few times, that probably saved me from being gored or killed.

Sam’s only vice was his inability to resist chasing warthogs when we came across them. He would immediately abandon the tracks of whatever we were following to give chase and he would not leave off until I came up and shot the unfortunate pig. Warthogs can be pretty dangerous and can rip a dog to pieces but Sam was too quick and was never hurt (except when I gave him a hiding for disobeying me). That didn’t cure him, though!

Sam actually saved my life when I was mauled by a lion. I was chasing a lioness wounded by a neighbour and had become careless. As I passed a thicket, Sam let out his lion bark and I desperately swung around and let off a shot with my .458 as the lioness reared up at me. The animal hit the end of my rifle as the shot went off, which fortunately broke one side of its jaw; then Sam kept worrying the enraged animal while it mauled me and shook me around like a rat. This caused the lioness to leave off mauling me and gave the other dogs time to come up and engage the beast. That saved my life and also gave Fanie enough time to come up and shoot the animal. Even though the lioness had its jaw broken on one side, it bit right through my left leg, crushed my right hand and gashed various other parts of my body. I was lucky it had only half a jaw!

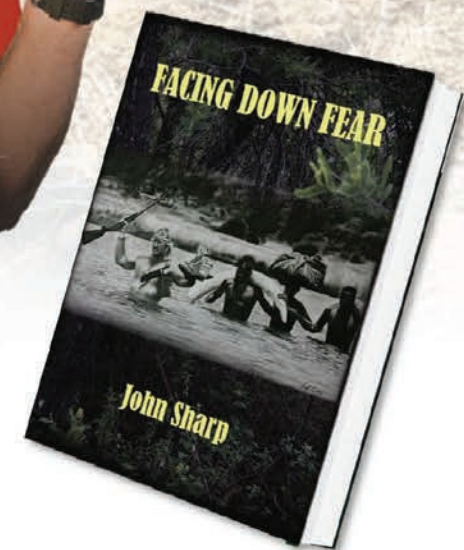
In the end, poor little Sam died tragically. He was afflicted by a dreadful disease, distemper. He became sick, wouldn’t eat and then started having terrible fits and awful hallucinations, seemingly thinking that a lion was mauling him. The fits grew worse and worse. I sat up all day and night with him trying to pull him through his terrible sickness but, in the end, when he was having a fit, I put a bullet in his brain, putting my brave, little dog out of his misery. I had never cried since I was a child but that brought tears to my eyes and I cried for my best friend and hunting companion, Sam.



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