

Life's Little Journey

by George DeCosta Photos by the author



When my computer activates its screen saver, a quote bounces around on the screen: "Enjoy the journey." You see, I believe life is a journey that is filled with chapters that you have a hand in writing. I also believe that you need to take time to enjoy the journey.

I'd like to tell you about my closest friend and a special puppy. Les Fohl and I have been friends for more than 46 years. Although we were best friends growing up, we were cast from different molds. I came to a tough area in Oakland, Calif., via Hawaii where my family were ranchers and farmers. Les was a city boy from the start, and grew up in Oakland until both of our families moved us to a safer area.

Growing up, I'd spend time with my uncles, ranching and hunting every chance I could get. And dogs, boy did I love dogs and still do! On the ranch, we usually had eight to 10 dogs, and I loved working with all of them, especially the pups. Not only did I work with the ranch dogs, but I always had my own dog, too. Les, on the other hand, never had a dog and didn't hunt.

As the years ticked by like the seconds on a grandfather clock, Les and I made our way through life. Les became one

of the most successful real-estate brokers in Northern California. I had my day job, raised a family and continued to work with dogs and hunt as we grew to middle age.

Then one night, I got a phone call from Les. He was in a total depression — his world seemed to be unraveling. His marriage of more than 34 years was coming to an end. His children were grown and going out on their own, and his business, although rewarding, was just that, a business. Les confided in me that his life seemed like a shell, he had no balance and didn't know where things were heading. I'm sure many of us have hit that fork in the road at some chapter in our life.

After that conversation, Les started coming over every Thursday evening to spend time with me and my dog, Cota. We'd talk, take the dog for a walk, train and just hang. It's good to have an old friend to lean on as we navigate those bumpy roads that we sometimes drive on during our life's journey. As we spent time together, Les saw the strong bond and love between Cota and me. He commented that he could now see why I had such sorrow, pain and tears when I'd lost dogs in the past, and even when I just talked about



Just a few days old, Little Cota gets a mealtime assist from George.

one of my pups that is now hunting in heaven's fields. He'd never seen, or felt the unconditional love that comes from a puppy.

After many months of Thursdays, the time came when Cota was due to be bred. Les made it a point to be part of the entire process. You see, Les was starting to experience the love of and for dogs. Les had also spoken about going hunting with me in the upcoming year. He enjoyed our time together training Cota, and had even purchased his first shotgun. To me, spending time in the fields with dogs and friends is a grounding experience that settles the mind and soothes the soul. I could see Les was ready to pen that chapter of his life's journey.

Whelping day came, and Cota had 10 pups. They were all beautiful, but there was one that was very special to my family and me. She was only five ounces when she was born, and I had saved her life at birth. And she looked just like her mom, Cota. In fact, we called her Little Cota for the eight weeks that she was with us. The litter was spoken for, but I had kept the pick of the litter for either myself or my co-breeder, Bruce Collett, owner of Gus, the sire. Bruce decided to wait until the next breeding to keep a pup, which left me with the pick of the litter.

When pups are six-weeks old, we work with our forever families to help choose the best puppy for their needs and expectations. The pups turned six on a Thursday evening. Les, my wife June and I sat at our kitchen table having dinner and talking about the pups. When dinner was over, I looked at Les and tenderly spoke these words: "We've decided to give you Little Cota."

There are some moments in time that live in your mind's eye forever. I will never forget the look of amazement on Les' face when I spoke those words. I can still see the tears roll down his cheeks and hear his soft-spoken words in astonishment: "Really? You're giving me Little Cota." He knew how extraordinary of a gift this was. Tears flowed, hugs were given and the new chapter began.

Now the real fun started to unfold for Les and Little Cota. We started training Little Cota with a pheasant wing, and Les started playing fetch and teaching Little Cota to whoa. Soon the love between Les and our Little Cota was ... well, you know, the love between a pup and its peep. I don't have to explain that.

After a few weeks, it was time to move to live birds. I placed bird launchers with chukars in the training field. Les and I worked Little Cota up to the launchers. As we approached the bird, you could see Little Cota's body language change — she was birdie, and then it happened. Her natural pointing genetics kicked right in, and Les got to see his first puppy snap into her first point. All he could say was, "Wow." For those of you who have witnessed a pup's first point, you know the feeling of

Mirror images: Cota and Little Cota



amazement, astonishment and adulation. It is a truly magnificent sight.

Our training kept moving forward. Momma Cota and Papa Gus would sometimes get out in the field and help show not only Little Cota but also some of the other pups the ropes. Did I say I love working with pups! There are so many special moments when training hunting puppies. The first time they make scent, the first point, the first flush, the first retrieve ... I live for being a part of those moments.

Hunting season was upon us, and the day came for Les' first hunt with his first puppy. Cota, Gus and Little Cota were let loose to work the terrain. Gus and Cota went right to work, but as puppies tend to do, Little Cota wanted to run and play with mom and pop, both of which ignored her and focused on the task at hand, locating quail.

Gus was first to make game, and slammed into a solid point. Cota froze and honored as soon as she noticed Gus. Little Cota made game, but wasn't sure what to do when all of a sudden the pounding of wings changed the silence of the moment to an explosion of thunder. Shots rang off, and birds dropped. Cota and Gus were sent out for the retrieves while Little Cota went into frenzy. No more playing with mom and pop, the light had come on.

Cota located a single and locked into a stunning point about

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Cota and Little Cota on the hunt



Journey *continued from page 47* 20 yards from Les and Little Cota. We had a short eight-foot lead on Little Cota, so I had Les grab the lead and take her up alongside Cota. Cota held her point as Little Cota made game along side of her, and then stopped in her tracks. Mom and daughter were like statues in the field. What a gorgeous sight.

The bird flushed, my shotgun hit my shoulder. "Bam!" An explosion of feathers filled the air. Little Cota was released for the retrieve as momma stood steady to watch her daughter in action. After prancing around like a fashion model on a runway, Little Cota brought the quail back to Les and released it without a hitch. Now she was really fired up.

As Les praised Little Cota, I walked over to Cota to praise her for being so steady; she was still standing in the same spot. I reached down to give her a rub behind the ears, my over/under shotgun open at my side as was Les'. And of course, we got caught with our pants down when another quail burst up from the cover near my feet. After more than 45 years of hunting, you'd think I'd learn to trust my dog. The excitement of watching Little Cota on point and our laughing at her prancing around with the bird had taken my concentration away from Cota. She knew there was still a bird there, but I was in never-never land watching Little Cota. Oh well. Sorry girl.

Little Cota took off after the bird and would not stop ... the whoa training was going well, but when you introduce a flushing bird, all bets are off. Over the hill went Little Cota, and the chase was on. Les walked up the hill to see if he could find his pup. I followed a good distance behind.

Coming over the top of the hill, we saw Little Cota on her way back when all of a sudden she made a full speed U-turn, put her nose in the air and slammed into her first true hunting point. I was about 80 yards away, and Les was about 40. I just stopped and watched. Les slowly walked up to Little Cota, and to my delight, she held her point solidly. As I said, I was 80 yards away, but let me tell you my heart was pounding as if the bird was under my feet.

Sometimes scenes appear to unfold in slow motion when they are actually unfolding at lightning speed. This was one of those times. I saw the quail come up from the ground. I saw Les' shotgun rise to his shoulder. I heard the sound of the report. I watched the quail fold in midair and roll towards the ground. Little Cota broke point and, to my surprise retrieved the bird right to hand. Les, smiling, held up the bird and I gave him a thumbs up. What an honor to watch my friend get his first bird over his first pup.

I grinned as I turned towards my Cota girl, gave her a rub behind the ears and said, "He's hooked now, baby girl."

Yep, life is a journey, and each of us has a hand in writing the chapters within our journey. I'm lucky my chapters are filled with fond memories of times afield with puppies and dogs, present and past. And I'm looking forward to the making of future memories with my friend Les and his special pup.

By the way, we let our forever families name their pups. So "Little Cota" was just a temporary name that my family used while the puppy was with us. Little Cota's pedigree name is HG's Cota's Little Journey. Call name, "Journey." I think it's perfect. ☼

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