

Save room for dessert

I like not-so-sweet desserts, and I always save room for them but, in this case, Briony, who came last, was the dessert.

This shooting season, for me, this year is quite quiet... With the exception of today, I had only one proper shooting day, the opening of the shooting season. Then nothing but for two micro-walks in the countryside carrying a shotgun, alone, no boar hunting yet. I really enjoy shooting, but this year it seems to be impossible to keep up with everything. I continue training Briony, attend some trials, work and prepare demanding university exams, sadly is really hard to find any free time to go shooting. Furthermore, nobody wants to come shooting with me, I must be an awful person! No, let's put jokes aside, the problem is that Briony is steady to flush and fairly obedient, while the average Italian pointing dog is not steady and is usually... well... WILD! It would not be fair to pretend her to be obedient and steady when other dogs are encouraged to misbehave .

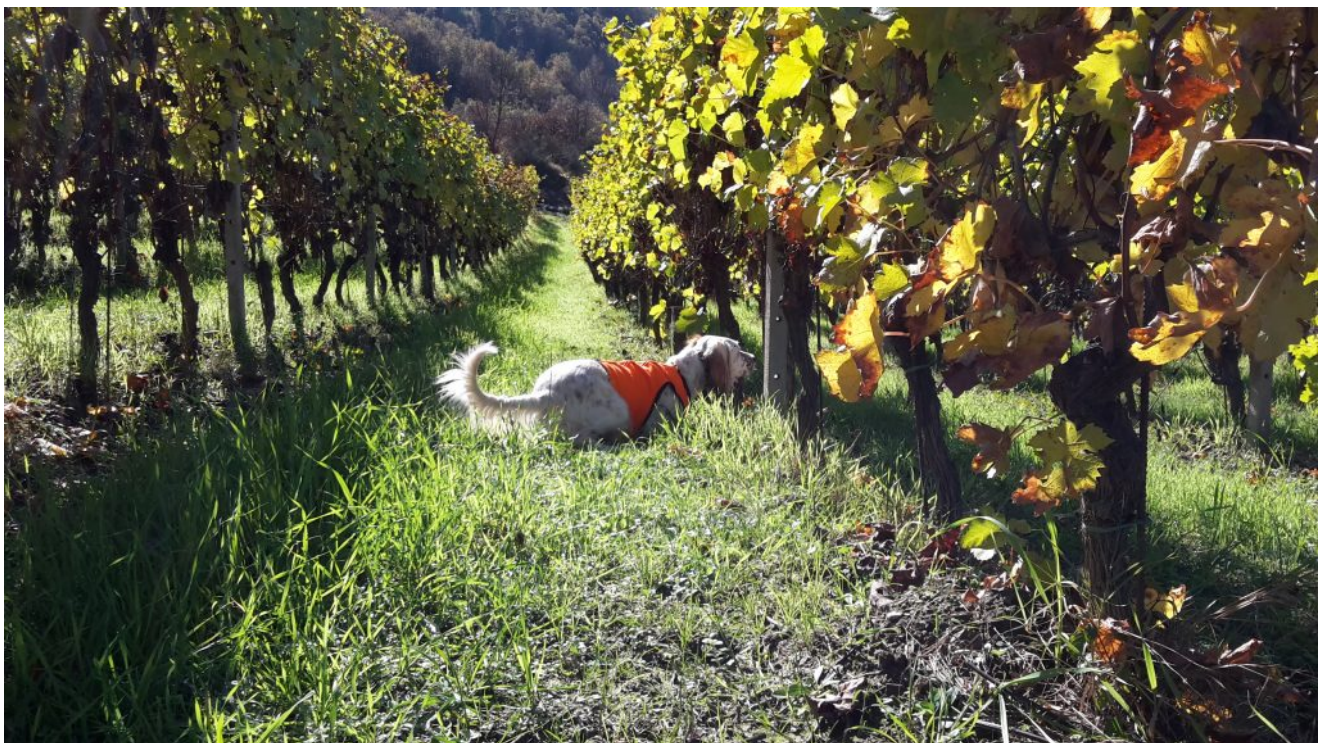


Biting the dessert!

Yesterday night I was commenting a Facebook post by my friend Andrea Vaccari (he has a [nice blog](#) on the Bracco Italiano, if you are interested in the breed). Andrea is a good hunter and a reasonably good trainer: he was complaining because almost all of the Italian hunters, who shoot over pointing dogs, feel the need to have a GPS tracking collar and/or a beeper to locate their furry friend. I agree with Andrea, this is nonsense and often equals to a lack of sportsmanship. People throw dogs out cars, let them run like wild horses and then go looking for them using some high tech device. Some people are really proud of having dogs who hunt (obviously for themselves) one mile ahead of their handler. I found this rather stupid and sometimes even annoying as beepers are extremely loud and can be heard from afar. Also, how can you test important qualities such as trainability, cooperation and connection to the handler? I am not attacking GPS and beepers because I do not like them: technology can be useful but it should not be used as an excuse to avoid training a dog.

When you say something against beepers and GPS collars, people get quite defensive and claim that they have purchased these devices for "safety". Yes, it is true, a GPS collar can be useful if a dog gets lost or something happens, but we are talking about pointing dogs, not about hounds. A pointing dog should hunt close and visible enough to be useful to the gun, which means you have to train the dog to hunt at a reasonable distance from you. If you keep the dog at the proper distance, you can see him and see what happens around him, you do not need a GPS tracking collar. Furthermore, a GPS tracking collar cannot save the dog if the dog is too far: last spring a young setter drowned in a river. He was wearing a GPS collar and the owner witnessed the whole tragedy through the device, he was one mile away from the dog. I think GPS collars give you a false illusion of safety: people think that knowing the dog's location they can save him in case of need, what they do not

consider is that they can be too far. This false illusion, in my opinion, indirectly encourages owners to give more and more freedom to dogs, in the false hope to bag one more bird, and yes birds are scarce here. I was also told that a GPS tracking collar is almost compulsory if you have a German pointing dog because they like chasing deer, people cannot not believe that you can drop a properly trained Deutsch Drahthaar when a deer is present. If you hunt woodcock, however, the beeper is even better – they claim- as you can locate the dog without checking the GPS screen constantly and... Brown dogs cannot be seen in the wood! What about a high visibility orange vest? It is cheaper and it does not make noise.



When I first got involved with pointing dogs, I used to train with Deutsch Drahthaars (German Wirehaired Pointers), these dogs were trained for German Hunting Tests and obedience was incredibly important. I used to admire these dogs (I have a soft spot for these rugged hunters) and their people, I never thought any English Setters could learn the same things. In 2015, instead, I went to England and I saw some English Setters behaving like the Germans I knew, what an awakening! I can candidly admit that for me there is a BE (Before England)

and a AE (After England) era, as my views on dog handling and training radically changed. I eventually came to the conclusion that there are two pointing dog training methods:

- ***The Italian Method: aka let the dog run and do whatever he likes and... chase him;***
- ***The German (but also British, Scandinavian...) Method: aka the dog has to do what you ask him to do, no matter what.***



As a consequence, I now feel a “**little**” out of place and none of my friends has a dog who can go shooting with Briony. The last time she went shooting with other dogs was last year, I was invited to a nice estate and I brought her: huge mistake. Dogs were running all over the place, no obedience, no steadiness nothing AND... guess what, a group of incredibly disappointed dog owners. They could not get close to the birds in time to shoot, birds were flying out of the estate and taking the dogs away with them. It was terrible, Briony was doing well but, being the only dog still around she became an easy target, all that was happening was our fault! Exhausted, I took her back the car and began picking blackthorns, shooters then calmed down, came to me and sincerely apologized. I went back to the grounds, but left Briony in the car, it was the wisest thing to do. This year... I got invited

to the same place again, by some of the same people. They are good friends, I like them and I did not want to disappoint them in any way: we have been shooting together for years and, when Briony was younger, it was thanks to the birds they paid for that she gained experience. I really owe them much, but I did not want to find myself in unpleasant situation again. I kindly accepted the invitation, but I told them I was not going to run Briony. They offered to give me ground for myself, but I refused, I told them I was happy to be their guest and I would have enjoyed their dogs. Briony was going have a run at the end of the shooting day, alone.



When I reached the lunch hut at 9 AM, they had already left so the gamekeeper told me where to go. A pack of SIX English Setters was running all over the hill: I could quickly locate everybody. Two men were on this side of the hill, and two more on the other side. Two shooters were following two (randomly chosen) dogs and the other two were following the remaining three. The sixth dog had disappeared. I joined the first two shooters that passed by me, their setters were wearing a GPS collar because, I was told, they tended to roam. The men disappeared as soon as they came, the two white dogs told them

it was time to move to a different place. The gamekeeper gave up and remained with me for a while: the missing white dog was running wild in a different part of the estate. An "important" client was shooting there, and other keepers were busy trying to catch the white wild dog, I bet he was having a lot of fun. The other friends eventually passed by with their three setters, I followed them for about three hours. The dogs were nice but they worked like a pack. Vento is the leader and the other ones, humans included, follow. These dogs could find birds, point them, honour each other's points and retrieve killed birds, but this game had no rules. Dogs were not steady and did not make a good use of the ground, I could see no logic behind their running but, most of all, they did not mind the owner. Yes, they waited for him as they wanted to retrieve the birds and they knew the birds had to be shot first but, after the bird had fallen and being grabbed in their mouths, they would quickly forget any humans.



Keeping an eye...

By the end of the morning, 18 birds (pheasants and grey partridges) were bagged but, we had gone up and down the hill and in and out of woods and briars walking at least twice on the same ground. Some grey partridge mini-coveys were also flying back and forth, teasing us. When my friends announced they were going back to the car, I went to mine and let Briony have a well deserved run, this is what happened. As soon as we left the car she pointed, she waited for me and then roaded towards the bird, a grey flew from afar, she did not see her but I stopped her. I then told her to go ahead with the action and she did it again, another grey which flew into the bushes. Briony was steady and we could perform the same action again, on a third bird. I then let her "play" again with the greys (now more hidden by briars) until bushes began to thicken to let me keep an eye on her. In less than 20 minutes, I could have bagged about three or four birds, without running back and forth like a comet, without a GPS and without a beeper. I then moved to a more open ground and let her run left and right, practicing some obedience. More greys, undisturbed by my non-chasing dog – were in a wood below us but she had already done what she was supposed to do, and confirmed me that my sacrifices had been definitely worth! I was very happy!!!



When, over lunch, I told people what happened and why I handled the dog in the way I did, they were happy for me and impressed at the same time. Some asked how I trained her, I simply told everybody that it was just hard work and that everybody could do the same. They vaguely agreed, but underlined they had no time to undertake such an intensive training program, Fishing ad hare then became the main topic until...they saw Briony again in the parking lot. She was on lead and she did not do anything special but for behaving nicely and remaining seated if told to do so. There were other unknown shooters around and many of them came to see the "trained" dog: according to some I am very "lucky" to own such a dog. Of course I have been lucky to find her when she was a plumpy puppy but, what came later was not just luck. Luck played an important role because I had a chance to have my British eye opening experience; had a chance to ask questions and get answers; had a chance to have wonderful mentors, but I was also open enough to discard an old system of beliefs and start working hard following a new scheme.

Ps. If I could make it, you can do it! Peace, love and happy training! I am in a happy/hippie mood tonight!

