

Miracles happen at Sandrigham: Norfolk Trials

Almost three months later, I am finally here to write down what happened. On Sept 7th 2017, in fact, Briony won Novice Stake on Partridge at Sandrigham, organized by the Pointer Club of UK. Some might argue that, well, it's "just" a Novice Stake, but for me it is a great achievement. Briony is not my first English Setter, I got the first one, "Socks" (Slai di Riccagioia), in 1999, but he was a rescue and he came to me after having be discarded by a "pro" trainer and with a bag full of behavioural problems. In his own way, he was a smart dog, we managed to go hunting alone together (he did not want men with shotguns around him), but there was no way I could rehab completely and train him for trials. I had not enough skills, nor experience, and he would not have dealt well with formal training sessions. He, however, opened me new doors as we started training for rough shooting and I got a firearms and hunting license. I met people, got new friends and spent many years rough shooting over English Setters and other pointing breeds up and down the hills of the Northern Apennines. I, somehow, had the chance to watch- and shoot over- hundreds of dogs during those years, and it was an incredible experience. I also began attending trials and to work for canine and shooting magazines which lead me to meet breeders, judges and handlers...



Socks (Slai di Riccagioia)
my first ES

After his death, when I started looking for another setter, I had very clear ideas about what I wanted in my next dog, but not so clear ideas about where to find her! It took months, but I finally located my litter and my puppy, on a farm on the Swiss Alps, not too far from Sankt Moritz (posh dog!). I knew what I needed to know about Briony's dad, but mum was quite a surprise: she was beautiful, gentle and smart. She came with us heeling off lead to the small village's café and then sat quietly under the table. I loved that, as well the whole bloodline registered in the pedigree and the parents' health clearances. When I brought Briony home, people thought she was cute, but too expensive, and that I was going to "ruin" her, training her in my own way and socializing her too much. I just thought she was a terrible pup who did not like me at all. It took quite a while to become friends, probably she was just testing me to be sure she was in good hands!



Ansa del Simano, Briony's

mum



First day of 2017 hunting season

She was naughty, but smart, and she quickly developed in a good hunting companion. Sometimes she had a mind of her own and sometimes she was not the easiest dog to handle, but she surely did not lack of determination and bird sense. She was, and she still is, strong willed and sensitive at the same time. Thanks to friends, we had access to some private estates where she could meet much more birds that she could have met on more affordable – by me – public grounds. Other people introduced her to woodcock and, I still remember the day, with my surprise, she pointed her first snipe. During these hunting seasons, she learnt to work with other dogs and we worked a lot on backing and on remaining steady on point. I must admit I had good teachers, and that skilled hunters helped us to locate birds, but steadiness to wing was not required. Hunters here want the dogs to be steady on point, but after the bird flies, all they wish is to hit it, none cares anymore about the dog.

In the meantime, as she also grew prettier, I entered her at a dog show that took place nearby and, to my surprise, she was awarded a RCAC (RCC), so I decided to continue on this road. Briony, however, had other plans and after a stressful indoor show, she decided she wanted to end her career as a show dog. She had already a CAC in her pockets and I did not want her journey to end. I am not a show person, and I consider dog

shows boring, but I wanted to prove that a good looking working dog, from working (mountain hunting and mountain trials) bloodlines, could make it. So, we went together to take handling lessons with [Richard Hellman](#), a great handler and a great person. Briony seemed to enjoy the lessons and, in August 2015, she became a Show (full) Champion. I also think that having learnt to face the ring she somehow increased her self esteem.



Briony first dog show... RCAC

Field trials were next on my list, but there was a HUGE problem: I did not want to send her away for training, nor to hire a professional trainer as people normally do here. I wanted to train and handle Briony by myself, easier said than done in Italy where field trials are dominated by male professional handlers. But, thanks to an unexpected series of coincidences, in the summer of 2015 I ended up watching the Champion Stake for Pointers and Setters in Northern England and... [I had an awakening!](#) I saw some “ordinary people” handling their dogs to a very high standard and I saw very obedient setters! I was used to see very obedient Drahthaars (GWPs), but the average Italian Setter is usually quite a wild critter! I could not believe setters could be that obedient and, as naïve as it might sound, I was impressed.



Dorback Estate, Scotland,
training with gamekeeper
Brian

Briony herself was pretty wild at the time and her nickname was “Tigress” but, again, unexpectedly, a good mentor came to us. You can read more about Briony’s taming for field trials and about “White Feather” [clicking here](#) but, in a few words, I would describe her [training](#) a demanding task, it was equally rewarding though! It took a while to tame “Tigress”, but as soon as she decided to cooperate, she became impressively reliable and well behaved. This is how we ended up on the moor in the summer of 2016, and this is how my passion for British trials developed even further ([you can read more here](#)). [Our first experience with grouse](#) was not that bad: she always behaved and she kept improving but paid her inexperience with grouse during the English Trials and she paid my inexperience with trials in during the [Scottish – and the English- trials](#). She still needed some fine tunings but, overall, I could not complain. At the end of the circuit, I went home with no awards but determined to save money and to go back in 2017.



Haughton Hall, roading a hare :-)

But, when the time to go again on the moors was close to come, I had to withdraw all my entries as Briony anticipated her season. I wasn't happy, I was quite disappointed, no... honestly... I was quite upset, but there was not much else I could do. Some friends, however, tried to cheer me up advertising September trials on partridge. It is easier to get a run, they said, the atmosphere is very relaxed, they added and... we are going to run at Sandrigham Estate, on Queen Elizabeth II's grounds, they concluded. I must admit the last thing they mentioned was very tempting: it was thanks to such a good advertisement that I decided to bet on partridge trials in Norfolk. That was a brave bet, I shall admit, as I was perfectly aware they were going to be more difficult than grouse trials. While gathering information, I learn that: 1) during the first round, usually on stubble, dogs were going to be evaluated mainly for pace, style and ground treatment and that 2) "a few" hares were going to be present. Uh, I was forgetting the sugar beet! So well, while I was going to do my best to show up with a well behaved dog, going there to win was not surely written down in my agenda. I just wanted to be there, see people, get to know things better, learn more and feel part of a world I like.

Briony started the circuit well (we went to the 2nd round in 4 trials out of 9) and, even if, we could not find any birds on our paths, she was behaving well and respecting hare nicely (I do not have hare here, just rabbits and cats to train on). I was happy, we were learning more and enjoying the social side of September trials : I do not drink, but I was always at the pub! It was nice to see friends doing well and, especially after IGL Snettisham trials , when no awards were given, I was super happy to see Rhia (Tapper) and Sara (Chichester) receiving the Gun's Choice rosette. Trials proved to be as difficult as I expected: while there were plenty of hare,

feathered wildlife was scarce or, should I say, very smart and very professional at hiding. On Thursday, 7th of September, (Pointer Club trial at Sandrigham) I was number 13 AND the bye dog (quite a scary combination), but she did well in the first round, and well again in the second, so I knew I was going to get "something", but I did not know what.

When the secretary announced that I had won First Prize, I could not believe it and indeed, the Vaux Silver Tankard, fell from my hands a couple of times! It was like living in a Disney movie and this article should have explained you why. She is the first dog I have ever trained for trials, and I trained her all by myself. Yes, many wonderful people helped me through the journey (in Italy and in the UK, and I am grateful to them all), but I have always been the one in charge. I am just a normal person with limited training opportunities coupled with a high degree of stubbornness and self discipline which surely helped. This is why everything that could sound normal to someone else, is so special to me, and yes, winning an award at Sandrigham confirms that Briony is a posh dog!



Me, Alan Goodship (Queen Elizabeth's dog trainer) and the fallen trophy

Ps. I promise I will also write on other dogs – and not just on mine – as there will be more articles on September trials, (all [partridge trials](#) results can be downloaded here) in the

meantime, if you have a chance, take a look at the [research project](#) I am working on for my Veterinary Medicine dissertation.

Still curious about British trials? Check the section A Month on the Moor or [click here](#).

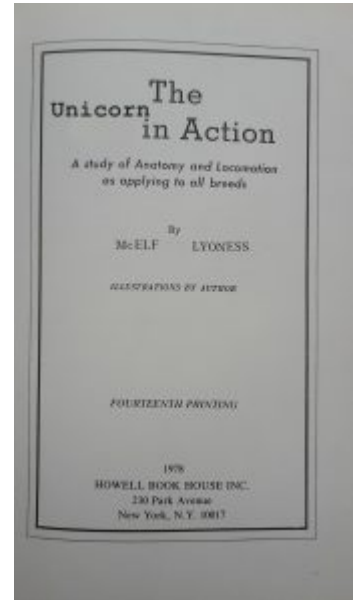
A Letter from Hogwarts, on Unicorns

Dear Miss Granger,

I am answering here to your doubts on [unicorn Standards](#).

*Standards were written in ancient times by magicians that had a deep knowledge of unicorns, and of dragons as well, in working conditions. Unfortunately, nowadays, only a few muggles, have achieved the same degree of knowledge and practical expertise. The average muggle breeder is aware that the Standard demands a certain physical trait, but he does not really understand what it means. Words do not give him a real image. Furthermore, he does not know the reason that makes some traits so desirable. In ancient times, a muggle was capable of judging a unicorn properly, but he forgot, once he became part of the "system". Once inglobed within the system, he forgot. Please go and read what is written in **"The***

Unicorn in Action» by Lyoness McElf“.



In case you are still curious and want to know more, I suggest you, besides the textbook you have already studied during last semester, to read all my books, written in modern latin. Foreign magicians and muggles can easily read some articles written in Anglo-Saxon language [linked](#) here (they say something on dogs as well), and my book in Anglo Saxon on the Afghan Unicorn. I also remember you there are plenty of papers on the Magical Creatures Aesthetic and Functionality [website](#)

Regards

Marius Cantonis

**Professor of Magical Creatures Aesthetic and Functionality
(Hogwarts)**

Which one is wrong?

Today we are going to talk about ~~dogs~~ unicorns. I choose unicorns because I can say the same things I would write about dogs and, at the same time, avoid people getting defensive.

Because... When you discuss some hot topics, plenty of people can turn aggressive assertive.

It all started a few days ago, in a super secret Facebook group, made of people who have been knowing each other for about 20 years. There are plenty of breeders, judges, trainers, scholars, involved with different breeds. In such a diversity, there are also plenty of vets and... anyone familiar with Italian Vet Schools knows how strong willed these people need to be, in order to graduate! So, put some of them together and you will get fireworks!

The fire point's of origin was caused by a scholar of canine genetics (who in real life is a marketing specialist) who started to publish pictures showing how some breeds have changed through years. He picks a breed, almost daily, and publishes the changes for us to discuss. It all went quiet until we came to the Unicorn Spaniel: at this point, I came out questioning why the current working specimen of a breed are much closer to their ancestors than their show counterparts. I said this in the Unicorn Spaniel discussion but I deemed it valid for most of the "working" breeds that have gone through a split. It could have been the Unicorn Setter, the Unicorn Collie, the Siberian Unicorn, the Unicorn Shepherd... Pick any breeds created for a specific purpose, better If it is performing its job, go through old prints and pictures and draw your own conclusion.



A working Unicorn Setter
during a FT

What happened is that a vet (and very good friend) involved

in the show type Unicorn Spaniel, got defensive and accused me of being strongly opinionated, which I can sometimes be, but not in this case. I showed him some Working Unicorn Spaniel pictures and he was literally horrified by them stating that those dogs had wrongly set ears, wrong heads, wrong paws, they were all wrong. At the same time, another vet (and good friend as well) who breeds Show Unicorn Retrievers stopped by and commented that *"Oh well, it is the same story with Unicorn Retrievers"*. While I can understand their viewpoints, and agree upon the fact that the show type Unicorn Spaniel is still a nicely built animal, I am also firmly convinced that it diverged from the original model and became something else. Not better, not worse, just different.



A show Unicorn Retriever
(notice the extra long
fluffy hair and the sturdy
build)

I admit being a supporter of the working unicorns cause, but I was not trying to prove anybody wrong, nor to end up in the same old (yet always important) discussion on show unicorns vs working unicorns. I was, and I am, trying to understand WHY working type unicorns are perceived as being "wrong" by the majority of people, and especially by show people. Whereas I am ready to declare that some working type unicorns are incredibly UGLY and do not resemble unicorns at all, I am also ready to point out that there are also some very pretty (or

handsome, depending on the sex) ones. My ideal unicorn is a good looking, nicely built, working unicorn: I won't be happy to own a ugly unicorn, but at the same time, my unicorn should perform well in the field. These animals are the purest expression of beauty: harmonic and sober, they are a pleasure to look at either when they are on lead or when they are performing their job. Needless to say, they resemble their ancestors, models of unicorns which were created for function.

During my first histology (the study of body tissues) lesson at the university, while introducing the cell, the professor pointed out that form follows function, and that this was true for a cell, for a tissue, for an organism. I guess it should be true for unicorns as well. So why do functional specimen look wrong? And why do they look wrong if they still incarnate what is written in their breed standard? If you go through breed standards carefully, you will notice that most of them are not promoting, nor advocating, most of the exaggerated features we now see winning in the show ring. I was almost forgetting... that they still do the job they were created for!

So why do people perceive exaggerations such as extra long coats, extra long ears, super fluffy coats, super short legs and extra pounds as correct and aesthetically pleasant? Let's forget functionality – for a moment, where has good taste gone? Has our aesthetic sense being contaminated by modernity (rubbish on tv, fast food, short lived made in China goods...)? If so, I think I should have born in another century, but the question, a pretty philosophical one, remains unanswered.

[More later, maybe.](#)