

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](#).

Finding or Handling Game? IT vs UK

People keep asking me which are the differences between Italian and British trials. I already wrote [something](#) but, the more I compete in Italian trials, the more differences I notice, they cannot be contained in an article alone. I wrote “compete” because I am not new to Italian trials: I began watching them in 2004, but I am fairly new to competing in them, furthermore many things changed in these 13 years. My initial role was the one of the journalist/photographer, who sometimes helped judges writing down their notes. I was a neutral observer and it was a valuable experience as it allowed me to see things closely, yet from the outside. Getting into the competition surprised those used to see me in my “other” role, but allows me to understand things more deeply. My opinions, my feelings, my impressions and concerns have not changed but, I can see things more clearly and this is an ongoing process!

I often stated that obedience and control are more important in British trials and not so important in our trials. The reasons behind this approach are many, and some are probably more socio-economical than dog related, game presence, however, is certainly one of the key points. I came to the

conclusion (not much smartness needed here!) that birds, or rather their abundance or absence, are the culprits. Those familiar with Italian trials know that you have to be incredibly lucky to find a bird. On average, I think about, 25-30% of the dogs competing have a chance to point and properly work out a bird. Maybe 30-35% have a chance to "see" the bird but something prevents (a bracemate, a roebuck, a meteorite...) them to actually work it out, as required by the rules. Sometimes things are even worse: during a trial I ran in October no birds were seen, my stake was made up of 22 dogs, if I am not wrong, for a total of 11 braces. Some dogs, including mine, were also allowed to run a second round in the hope to find anything: well the only bird we saw during the whole trial was a (one) pigeon. As you can imagine no awards were given. In the UK, instead, almost all the dogs have the opportunity to at least "see" a bird": then many things can happen, but competitors are surely not so concerned about a living feathered being on the ground.

To find a bird at Italian trials you need a smart dog carrying on his shoulders a tremendous amount of luck: this is true, I will discuss the "why" in other articles. Besides being true, this is also very sad: I love pointing dogs and this would be frustrating for any person sharing this passion. Imagine what happens: you wake up at 3 AM (because trials start very early), you drive 200 miles, your dog has a nice run with a nice bracemate, and the dogs cannot find anything. The judge maybe likes him and gives him a second chance, but again no birds show up and the trial ends. Imagine this happening for most of the trials then you get the whole picture.

Years ago, I was chatting with a judge about the tremendous emphasis some breeders were giving to their dogs galloping style. There were (and there are) brainless dogs with no bird sense who "move very nicely". Do you want to know his reply? It was a short and smart one: breeders focus on movement because, 99% of the time, the dog is going to be seen by

judges while running, being pointing a rare happening. Judges are more likely to remember how he runs and how he searches, it makes sense and, again, it makes me sad. Weren't trials created to evaluate pointing dogs and make sure they were suitable to hunters? So we have a nice gallop here and, anything else?

I think that what our trials are focused on is "finding" (*that damn bird*) , and it is better do it nicely with deep and wide castings. It is so hard to find a bird that everything that comes later is, somehow, less important. I am not here minimizing the importance of a proper pointing style (Italians are suckers for this) but, basically, once the dog has found and pointed the bird, everything is going to be fine. This is probably why handlers get so excited and run anxiously towards the dog on point. What if the dog is a bit sticky? What if he is not super steady to flush or to gunshot? These errors are likely to be forgiven, given the aforementioned lack of game.



Gerry Devine at a Scottish trial. Such actions are a common sight

In Britain the opposite happens, dogs run in places where birds are present, sometimes too present, and this makes control vital. It is not difficult to find a grouse, on some moors you do not even need a dog to find one so... bird presence is taken for granted. Of course the dogs are expected to find a bird, but there are usually plenty of opportunities to find one. If you attend a British field trials you will see many dogs on point, points are not such an unusual sight. After all, field trials were created to evaluate pointing breeds and you cannot really assess a pointer without a point! When the dog is on point, the British handler paces quietly to him. I am not sure whether pacing (vs running) is required by some rules, but I think it is more a matter of culture and awareness. The handler, in fact, besides being used to "keep calm", is well aware that the toughest part of the trial has yet to come. After the point, the dog must work out the bird properly, demonstrate perfect steadiness to wing and shot, and perform equally well the "clear the ground", all seasoned with a good amount of obedience. British trials are not easy!

So... during an Italian trial the dog's ability to **FIND** a bird (hopefully in a stylish manner) is under the spotlight, whereas in Britain the dog is carefully assessed on "how he handles the birds". Italians do mind about how the dog points and works out the bird, but they unfortunately have much less chances to verify this. Environment and game management make the difference. If I go through my memories, the thing I remember most clearly about specific dogs running in British trials is, the way they roaded and worked out birds, as well as their obedience. Of course I remember a few, exceptional finds and runs but they occupy less of my memory. When thinking about Italian trials, things are reversed.

What is better? We have no winner here. To be successful at an Italian trial the dog needs an incredible amount of determination, good bird sense (and/or a tremendous amount of luck), a stylish movement, some boldness and, sometimes even

too much independence. When you get everything in the proper amount you have a great dog but, unfortunately, miscalculating the ingredients might produce dogs who run for the sake of running or are just too wild to be tamed by the average human being. The British system, instead, tests carefully how the dog handles birds and forces handlers to keep an eye on trainability, on the other hand, in Britain, finding a bird can sometimes be “too easy”. If only a dog could be assessed through both the systems we will be close to perfection.

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

British Field Trials: What's Inside (Sentieri di Caccia December 2016)

British Field Trials: What's Inside – Originally Published in Sentieri di Caccia December 2016

Disclaimer: This is the second of a series of articles I wrote for the Italian press. I wrote this article for Italian readers, this means that British people are not going to learn anything new from these pages and, whereas I did my best to be accurate, they may even find some inaccuracies. If so, please notify me. The first article of the series can be found [here](#).

Italy breeds the best English Setters in the world, so

presumably Italy also organizes the best field trials in the world, if so... why go to compete in Great Britain?

What you just read above is the widespread Italians opinion on the matter. Are they right? Are they wrong? This is an "opinion", hence I do not think it can be right or wrong, it is simply an opinion. The true, or presumed, supremacy of the Italian English Setter is rooted in our culture, our believes and our tradition about hunting and shooting. Is my choice to compete in the UK an expression of dissent? No, or rather not completely, as I firmly believe that experiencing different methods and traditions can enrich dogs, hunting and trials.

But why the UK? For a whole bag of reason, some [objective](#) and some [subjective](#); some widely accepted and some widely ridiculed. Some accused me of taking a shortcut, t as if British trials were much easier than ours. Wrong assumption! British field trials are NOT easier than Italian ones! I first met this reality in 2015 when I had the opportunity to watch the Champions Stake for Setters and Pointers. This was an awakening, James Joyce would have called it an *epiphany*, it was one of a kind experience which opened my eyes about field trials and training. Some of my readers probably remember what I wrote at the time, underlining that despite the lack of "professional" handlers, everybody was very "professional".



A few hints

The first problem you have to face, if you want to compete in the UK, is [entering a trial](#). Before you can even send your application, you have to get an ATC (Authorization to Compete) number from the Kennel Club. Then you have to understand when the trials take place: in Great Britain, trials take place only in specific periods of the year. There are two weeks of grouse trials in March; one on partridge in April; four on grouse in July/August and, finally, one more week on partridge in September. This is how things are organized for British Pointing Dogs, HPRs (Continental Pointing Dogs) follow a different calendar. Being the number of trials fairly limited (at least if compared to the hundreds of trials taking place in Italy each year), it often happens that there are more perspective competitors than available places. Each trial features only one stake (in Italy many stakes can take place simultaneously, on nearby grounds) and it is judged by two judges who can evaluate up to 40 dogs. As you can imagine, waiting lists are common and so are dogs put on "reserve", ready to run if another competitor retires. To enter a trial, competitors must contact the organizing club before the deadline and send the entry form together with the money (prices can range between 10 and 30 pounds). The club secretary will take care of everything and create a list giving priority to the club's members and to dogs who had already had placement in British trials. As you may see, it is not easy for a foreign newcomer to get a run. In my limited experience, however, I learnt that usually Scottish trials are less popular and that the *Novice Class* is sometimes easier to access. When possible, moreover, is always good to show up at the trial venue because some competitors might retire their dogs right before the trial. As for becoming a member of the clubs, it can be done but it might take up to a year the formal sponsorship by two former members and meeting you face to face. Each club usually organizes two days of trials, one for the *Open Stake* and one for the *Novice* or for the *Puppy*

Stake. The latter is open to dogs under 2 years of age. Dogs who had never placed 1st or 2nd but are older than 2 years can run in the *Novice Stake*. The *Open Stake*, instead, is open to any dogs (and compulsory for dogs who placed 1st or 2nd) but dogs who had previously been graded are more likely to get a run. I managed to compete both in *Novice* and in *Open* and I watched some *Puppy Stakes*: rules are identical for any of these stakes but judges can be “kinder” towards dogs competing in *Novice* and *Puppy*.

I liked almost all the dogs competing in the *Open Stakes*: most of them were good and well trained specimen, the overall level was high. As for the *Novice Stakes*, I saw good and perfectly trained dogs but also some dogs who still needed more experience and more training, some of these dogs, nevertheless, possessed the natural qualities to do very well in a *Open Stake*. As for the *Puppy Stakes*, they were quite unpredictable but I really loved seeing people being brave enough to run young pups, some of them were not even one year old: I really enjoyed watching these stakes.



1 volta raccolta tutte le richieste, il segretario del club stila un elenco dei partecipanti dando la priorità ai soci del club organizzatore e a cani che hanno già ottenuto qualche in prova britannica. Come potete capire, per un neofita straniero è abbastanza difficile avere l'occasione di partecipare.

Dalla mia esperienza ho capito che:

- 1) le prove che si corrono in Scozia sono meno affollate ed è più facile riservarsi un posticino;
- 2) la classe Novice è meno richiesta;
- 3) se è possibile conviene sempre presentarsi sul luogo della gara anche se si è in fondo alla lista, perché le cose possono cambiare all'ultimo minuto;
- 4) essere soci del club organizzatore spinge in cima alla lista e offre iscrizioni scontate; la richiesta di associarsi, tuttavia, deve essere fatta con diversi mesi di anticipo ed essere poi approvata dal consiglio direttivo (preferiscono avere modo di incontrarvi di persona prima di approvare).

Ogni club in genere programma due giornate di prove, una riservata alla classe Open e una riservata alla classe Novice o alla classe Puppy. La classe Open equivale alla nostra classe Libera ed è aperta a tutti ma, siccome è difficile entrare, la priorità viene data a soggetti che hanno ottenuto qualche importante in Novice o Puppy. La classe Puppy è per cani fino a due anni - che non abbiano mai vinto una prova - mentre la Novice è per cani di qualsiasi età che non abbiano mai ottenuto un primo o un secondo posto. Io sono riuscito a correre sia in Open che in Novice e ho assistito anche ad alcune prove Puppy.

Il regolamento resta lo stesso, teoricamente i giudici possono essere più tolleranti su alcune sfumature in Novice e in Puppy, ma sta alle decisioni del singolo. Nella classe Open quasi tutti i soggetti sono di buon livello (sono professionisti e preparazioni) e si ha la possibilità di avere dei compagni di coppia con cui lavorare bene. La classe Novice e la classe Puppy sono un po' più imprevedibili: ci sono soggetti eccellenti e ottimamente condotti, soggetti meno esperti, soggetti ben addestrati ma a cui mancano le qualità naturali per poter eccellere in una Open.



1 Steve Lound e i suoi pointer Frostad Elfin at Fleetstalk (il classificato al Champion Stake 2016) e Goddribb Judd

2 Briony del Cavaldrossa in guidata su grouse

3 Chi ha tanti cani ha un pick up e un carrello. Nella foto il mezzo di trasporto di Allan Neill (Irlanda) e fuori dal finestrino Dunroon Ginger Boy

L'obbedienza è importantissima

Per partecipare a qualsiasi prova, anche nelle classi minori, è vitale il massimo controllo sul cane: un cane disobbediente vi attirerà il disprezzo degli organizzatori, dei concorrenti e, soprattutto, del guardascaccia. Un fermo al frullo e allo sparo solido è indispensabile, idem il poter bloccare il cane a comando o l'esecuzione di un consenso a comando, se richiesta dal giudice. Questo è il minimo sindacale e non è facile da ottenersi quando la densità di selvaggina è elevatissima. In tali condizioni, per sopravvivere al turno, il nostro soggetto deve sapersi controllare e gestire. Rispetto alle prove italiane vi è maggior enfasi sui dettagli legati all'obbedienza: fermo al frullo vuol dire fermo immobile, non un passo in più e non uno in meno, andare a destra vuol dire andare a destra, non iniziare mezzo laici e saltare a sinistra. Stessa cosa per il fermo allo sparo: io sono stata eliminata perché il cane ha fatto un salto su se stesso o perché

ha fatto meno passo in avanti, la tolleranza sugli errori di dressaggio o condizionale è nulla. Non è possibile, durante la prova, toccare il cane o urlare ordini a distanza: la guidata il cane non si tocca, non lo si tocca per bloccarlo e non si urla mai, casuali si usa, e moderatamente, il fiocchetto. Ogni vostra interazione con il cane è decisa dal giudice: non potete legare il cane senza il suo consenso, non potete farlo guidare o produrre il selvatico senza che vi sia stato ordinato di farlo. Una differenza fondamentale tra le loro prove e le nostre è la gestione del cane dopo la ferma e l'involto del selvatico. Il cane non va legato e inizia il clear che ground, ovvero la parte più difficile del lavoro. È improbabile che ci sia una sola grouse, quindi il cane deve lavorare anche le successive, guidando senza esitazioni e senza mai perdere il controllo. La cosa è tutt'altro che banale: in Inghilterra possono esserci molte grouse in uno spazio ristretto e produrre un'emissione talmente forte da disorientare i cani meno esperti e, secondo problema, ➔

Larger photo by Rhia Tapper

Obedience is extremely important

To compete in British trials (even in the Novice and Puppy Stakes), it is vital to have a good control on your dog. Dogs who ran away and disobey are not appreciated, they might make organizers and other competitors unhappy but, most of all, they will alarm gamekeepers. Dogs must be very steady to flush and shot and drop on command. Judges can also ask you to drop your dog while his bracemate is on point: some British dogs are not naturally backers, so the judge can ask competitors to drop dogs on command. These skills are not negotiable and it is not easy to obtain these behaviour when a dog is surrounded by grouse. Game density can be incredibly high, the dog must be under control and have quite an amount of self control. If we want to compare these trials to the Italian ones, judges pay much more attention on obedience: steadiness to flush means not moving at all, a dog cannot even attempt to step forward or jump on himself; turn left means turn left and so

on. The same is true for steadiness to shot, I have been eliminated a couple of times because Briony moved or jumped on herself after the shot, excitement can lead to this, but does not make it more tolerated. During a trial you are not allowed to yell, nor you can touch the dog. You can moderately use the whistle to direct or drop the dog, but you cannot touch him unless and until the judge orders you to put the lead on. You cannot encourage your dog to road and produce the bird by touching him: this behaviour would lead to an elimination. The judge tells you how to interact with the dog: you have to wait for him to tell you that you can let your dog produce the bird; that you can pick him up or that you have to drop him. The biggest difference between our trials and British trials, however, is likely to be the behaviour judges expect after the dog has been shot over. In our trials we usually put the lead on and then maybe cast the dog again, if there is still time (our runs last 15 minutes), in Britain, after the birds have been flushed and a shot fired, the dog is supposed to "clear the ground" making sure there are no grouse left. Given the amount of game [\(you can read more about this here\)](#), it is unlikely that the dog pointed only one, or a few grouse, more grouse, maybe part of the same covey, might still be there and the dog has to work them properly. He should road and flush them, keeping his enthusiasm at bay but, most of all, without hesitation. This is not easy, many birds sitting tight together can produce a strong scent which can confuse the less experienced dogs, at the same time they might be incredibly tempting. Clearing the ground is not always easy, it happened to me to find several grouse during a clear the ground some of which were bold enough to fly straight into the dog's face, a tough way to test for steadiness.

Each stake is judged by two judges and a dog, in order to be graded, must run twice: this, together with the clear the ground (that does not exist in our trials), increases the likelihood of mistakes being made. If you are still thinking that British trials are "easy", let me tell you that the

mistakes made during the run's first minute – which are not taken in account in our trials – can lead to an elimination in the country ruled by Queen Elizabeth II. Hare and rabbit shall not be forgotten and, together with the abundance of grouse, make obedience incredibly important. The Italians main focus are the dog's natural abilities and, therefore, they might be shocked by seeing so much importance given to obedience. Some of my countrymen think that focusing so much on these kind of details you risk to forget the whole picture. It can happen, indeed, but at the same time, obedience and trainability shall never been undervalued. While discussing the Italian version of this article with a British handler told me that, whereas he understood and partly agrees with the Italian point of view, *“not selecting for a trait, in the long run, leads to a selection against this trait”*. These were his exact words and I agree on them, my ideal evaluation, indeed would be something in between the two systems.

Let's now talk about practicalities: you are expected to reach the venue ON TIME and drive a proper off road 4x4 car. Nobody has a huge van, it will not be of any use; people with many dogs have a pick up truck and a dog trailer. You might have to cross streams or drive on rocks, a normal car cannot do that. Lunch is eaten on the moor and you have to bring your own lunch (in Italy the venue is usually a restaurant and you go to eat there after the trial). Once the stake starts, people are allowed to follow on foot with the dogs kept on lead. As you can end up walking for hours in a mutable – and often windy- weather, it is advisable to carry with you all the clothes you might need. High heather, cracks and quicksand make the grounds demanding for the dogs and for you as well. All competitors are expected to remain until the end of the trials, when the awards are given. If, for a valid reason, you need to leave the ground in advance, you have to ask permission to the organizers and let them know when you are leaving. A steward of the beat coordinates what happens on the ground supported by one or more gamekeepers and a gun (the

person who shoots the produced bird – without killing it). The gamekeepers present at the trials are the same people who take care of the moor all year round, hence they want to be sure that dogs and people do not harm the wildlife they protect. Trials are run in private estates which are generously lent to the clubs, competitors must respect the grounds and the wildlife: dogs out of control are not welcome and can put you under a bad light as well as put organizers in a bad position.

More on the differences between Italian and British trials can be read [here](#).

Cani da caccia



1. tante e tante grouse sono una forte tentazione: è successo di trovare decine di grouse durante il *clear the ground*, alcune talmente spavalde da volare verso il muso del cane che, ovviamente, doveva rimanere immobile come una statua. Ogni battuta è giudicata da due giudici e che un cane ritenuto valido, per andare in classifica, deve fare un secondo turno di richiamo. Tra i tranelli in cui può incappare il cane vanno ricordati i conigli e le lepri e, non esiste il minuto se il cane commette un errore un istante dopo lo sgarzo è eliminato. L'abbondanza di selvaggina e l'enfasi sull'obbedienza non rendono queste prove più semplici di quelle nostrane, le rendono diverse. Porre l'accento sull'obbedienza e privare i conduttori di ogni iniziativa a volte stride con il nostro voler mettere in risalto le qualità naturali del cane: si perde di vista l'insieme a favore del dettaglio ma, d'altra parte, da noi si tende a chiedere un po' troppo gli occhi sulle impressioni di dressaggio. La "mia" prova ideale sarebbe una via di mezzo. Veniamo alla logistica. E' necessario arrivare al punto di ritrovo puntuali e con un fuoristrada. Nessuno ha un furgone, non potrebbe affrontare i terreni: chi ha molti cani ha un pick up o un carrello o... entrambi! Non è raro dover attraversare torrenti o arrampicarsi lungo sterrati ripidi e rocciosi, una normale automobile non può farcela. Per il pranzo ognuno deve provvedere da sé, si

mangia sul terreno, raggiunto il punto di partenza per la battuta si lascia l'auto e si prosegue a piedi, la camminata può durare diverse ore e il clima può cambiare da un momento all'altro e c'è quasi sempre vento. Il cane viene tenuto al guinzaglio e si segue la battuta a distanza,

1. Setter gordon affetto Warrenfell, la razza ha un buon seguito di appassionati



2. Allan Neill (Irlanda) e Gerry Devine (Irlanda), due "rari" professionisti, vanno sul terreno con tutti i loro soggetti al guinzaglio

I classificati del Champion Stake 2016

- 1) FT. Ch. Ballyellen Cara, setter inglese femmina di Billy Connelly (Irlanda), condotta da Gerry Devine (Irlanda)
 - 2) Frostied Elfin at Fleetstall, pointer inglese maschio di Steve e Sharon Lound
 - 3) Hunshigo Donard, setter irlandese femmina di Mark Adams (Irlanda)
 - 4) Bonnard Cherry Cherry, setter irlandese maschio di Donna Clark, condotta da Colin Forde
- Certificati di merito: Upperwood Clover e FT Ch. Upperwood Here, entrambe setter inglesi femmine di Dom Goutorbe, e Upperwood Ash Alert, setter inglese femmina di David Hall



3. I terreni possono essere impegnativi, l'erica è alta e rigida e il moor è imprevedibile, ci sono crepe nel terreno, buche e sabbie mobili. Ci si aspetta che tutti i concorrenti rimangano fino alla fine della prova: si resta, si fa il tifo per il migliore e ci si congratula al momento delle premiazioni. Per lasciare un trial in anticipo occorre chiedere il permesso all'organizzatore. Sul terreno, oltre ai giudici, è presente lo *steward of the beat* che coordina i movimenti di tutti, uno o più guardiacaccia (generalmente che *headkeeper*, il capo guardiacaccia) e *gun club* (colui che spara al selvatico involato senza colpirla, secondo le indicazioni del giudice. I guardiacaccia, gli stessi che durante tutto l'anno si prendono cura

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The Puppy Derby and the Champion Stake 2016

In the summer of 2016 I watched and ran in many field trials that took place in Northern England (Durham County and North Yorkshire) and Scotland (Highlands & The Borders), here I am telling you about the *Puppy Derby* and about the *Champion Stake only*. Those who want to know more about dogs and grouse can follow my blog www.dogsandcountry.it, the section "[A Month on](#)

[the Moor](#)" is entirely dedicated to my month among heather. In 2016, the *Puppy Derby* and the *Champion Stake* were organized by the SFTA (*Scottish Field Trials Association*), a big club whose president is Wilson Young and whose secretary is Jon Kean. Jon is a journalist as well and writes on dogs and shooting, he trusted my skills enough to let me follow both the trials closely, I am grateful for that. The Puppy Derby took place on 9th August at Tollishill Estate, owned by the Duke of Northumberland, and located near Lauder (a small village not too far from Edinburgh, on the Borders between Scotland and England). Whereas the catalogue listed 30 dogs, only 9 actually ran in the *Puppy Derby*. This trial is open to dogs under 2 years old: I do not know why the numbers dropped so dramatically, it might have been caused by a kennel cough epidemic or by the fact that some pups were still not ready to compete. Many of the competitors were about one year old and certainly paid a high price for their lack of experience; here coming from every direction further complicated things. Billy Darragh and Colin Forde (Ireland), who judged the trial, could only grade one dog, Ballyellen Tango, English Setter dog aged almost two, owned by Billy Connelly (Ireland) and handled by Gerry Devine (Ireland), Gerry is one of the few professional handlers. Whereas only one dog could be graded, I saw some interesting specimen as far as natural qualities, I especially liked two English Setters and I hope to have a chance to see them at work again when they will be more experienced.

On 10th and 11th August, we moved to Byrecleugh Estate, still close to Lauder, kindly offered by the Duke of Roxeburghe. The *Champion Stake* is a special trial that takes place every year: only the dogs who had gained a 1st or a 2nd placement in previous trials (Open Stake) are allowed to run. This year something new was going to happen: the trial would have been judged by three judges, no longer by two. The chosen ones were Meryl Asbury, Shaun McCormack and Michael Houston, the latter two were from Ireland. They were going to see 37 dogs, less than expected due, again, to the kennel cough epidemics. On

the morning of the 10th, many dogs made mistakes which lead to their elimination. The first braces ran in very high heather, grouse were well hidden and walking away from them, flying from a distance; later in the morning grouse density decreased and things became slightly easier. In the afternoon we had a torrential rain, but many dogs did extremely well in those conditions (Photogallery for the day [here](#)). Only 14 dogs "survived" day 1st and 7 of them, I allow myself to be partial sometimes, were English Setters! On the 11th, all the survivors exhibited outstanding performances, confirming to the judges that they had made wise choices (Photogallery for the day [here](#)). I really appreciated how the judges directed the trial, they worked together in harmony and always sided with the dogs, never against them. They were incredibly supportive and really did their best to give the same opportunities to all the dogs and sometimes closed an eye on minor details. Having three judges (one on the left, one on the right and one in the centre) made this trial slightly different. The dogs were allowed to run further and wider and what happened was not much different from what I am used to see here in Italy. When allowed some more freedom, these dogs were still doing very well and were not inferior to most of the Italian dogs I routinely see at our trials.



del moor e dei suoi selvatici, vigilano. Si corre in riserve private generosamente messe a disposizione dei club, ci si aspetta dai concorrenti il massimo rispetto dei terreni e dei selvatici. Un cane fuori controllo, che butta per aria la riserva, potrebbe mettere in seria difficoltà il club organizzatore, oltre a farvi recapitare un invito a non presentarsi più.

Il Puppy Derby e il Champion Stake 2016

Questa estate ho assistito e partecipato a numerose prove corse nel nord dell'Inghilterra (Durham County e North Yorkshire) e in Scozia (Highlands & The Borders). In queste pagine mi limiterò a scrivere del Puppy Derby e del Champion Stake, ma i curiosi potranno apprendere di più visitando il mio blog www.dogsandcountry.it la cui sezione A Month on the Moor è interamente dedicata al mio mese in mezzo all'erica.

Nell'estate 2016 l'organizzazione di queste due prove è toccata alla SFTA Scottish Field Trials Association, un'importante associazione che ha nel consiglio direttivo Wilson Young coordinato sul campo da Jen Keen, con cui sono subito andata d'accordo: si è fidato delle mie capacità di fotogiornalista e mi ha lasciato seguire entrambi i trial da vicino: gliene sono grata. Il Puppy Derby si è corso il 9 agosto a Tollyhill Estate, riserva del duca di Northumberland, a Lauderdale (un paesino vicino a Edimburgo, al confine tra Scozia e Inghilterra). Nonostante a catalogo ci fossero 30 soggetti, solo nove si sono presentati: il Puppy Derby è aperto a cani sotto ai due anni, i numeri potrebbero essere cresciuti perché alcuni cani non erano ancora del tutto pronti, nonché a causa

di un'epidemia di tosse di canile. Tra i partecipanti molti avevano circa un anno e hanno pagato l'insperienza e, sicuramente, la scarsa abitudine alle legni che, in quella giornata, sembravano sbucare da ogni angolo. Uno solo il cane messo in classifica dai giudici Billy Darragh e Colin Forde (Irlanda), Ballyellen Tango, maschio di setter inglese di quasi due anni di proprietà di Billy Connelly (Irlanda) e condotto da Gerry Devine (Irlanda), uno dei rari professionisti che frequentano le prove. Nonostante un solo cane sia andato a premio, ho visto soggetti interessanti dal punto di vista delle qualità naturali; due setter inglesi mi sono piaciuti in particolare, spero di vederli fare buone cose quando saranno più maturi.



1 Upperwood Allez Allez di Fiona Kirk, a poco più di un anno al Puppy Derby a Tollyhill Estate

2 Bownard Cherry Cherry (TV classificato al Champion Stake 2016), uno dei tanti setter irlandesi di qualità presenti alle prove. Il soggetto è di proprietà di Donna Clark ma è condotto dal suo allevatore Colin Forde (Irlanda)

Il 10 e l'11 agosto ci siamo spostati a Pyreleugh Estate, sempre a Lauderdale, gentilmente concessa dal duca di Roxburghe. Il Champion Stake, la tradizionale prova di eccellenza a cui sono ammessi solo cani che hanno ottenuto un primo o un secondo posto in prove precedenti, quest'anno è stata giudicata da tre giudici. I prescelti erano Meryl Ashbury, Shaun McCormack e Michael Houston, gli ultimi due provenienti dall'Irlanda: avrebbero giudicato 37 cani, un numero leggermente inferiore alle aspettative a causa, di nuovo, della tosse dei canili. Durante la mattinata del 10, nonostante le condizioni apparissero favorevoli, molti cani si sono auto-eliminati. Le prime coppie hanno corso in erica alta e rigogliosa in cui le numerose grosse pedane involontariamente a distanza, in diversi hanno commesso errori; nella seconda parte della mattinata la selvaggia è andata calando e questo ha agevolato i concorrenti. Al pomeriggio la prova è proseguita sotto una pioggia torrenziale che, tuttavia, è stata testimone di ottime prestazioni. L'11 agosto i concorrenti sopravvissuti al primo turno erano 14, di cui ben sette setter inglesi. Tutti i soggetti si sono espressi ad alti livelli, confermando alla terra giudicante di aver scelto correttamente quali cani rivendere. Mi è piaciuta moltissimo la conduzione della prova da parte dei giudici, con armonia e tranquillità, hanno giudicato stando sempre "dalla parte del cane", cercando di offrire a tutti le stesse opportunità e tollerando piccole sbavature. La presenza di tre giudici (uno a destra, uno a sinistra e uno dietro) ha reso la prova un po' diversa da quelle a cui avevo assistito fino ad ora: i cani "aprivano" molto di più sul terreno di quanto non fosse loro normalmente richiesto e consentito. Ho visto aperture e velocità non inferiori a quelle delle prove nazionali e sono stata positivamente colpita da più di un soggetto. Quando siamo tornati a valle, in attesa del responso dei giudici, Allan Neill, noto addestratore e conduttore, mi si è avvicinato chiedendomi di scommettere su un vincitore, così ho fatto il mio nome. Allan concordava con me sul fatto che il vincitore sarebbe stato un setter inglese, ma non era il corso che io avevo fatto il nome giusto. E invece sì! Sul podio è finita la FT.Ch. Ballyellen Cara madre di Ballyellen Tango, vincitore del Puppy Derby, che già avevo visto e apprezzato al Ch. Stake 2015, quando aveva ottenuto il premio per il miglior stile.

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Once back at the venue, Allan Neill, a very reputable trainer and handler from Ireland, asked me to tell him which dog was going to win in my opinion. *You were close to the dogs*, he added, *so you should have seen everything well and have an opinion.* Without hesitation, I made a name, Allan agreed upon the fact the winner was going to be the dog I named. But... I was right! FT.Ch. Ballyellen Cara (mother of Ballyellen Tango, who won the *Puppy Derby*) placed first: her run was unforgettable and she surely possesses some great qualities, I remembered (and liked) her from Champion Stake 2015, at the time she was eliminated but given awarded as the most stylish dog on the ground.

Champion Stake 2016

I° FT. Ch. Ballyellen Cara English Setter bitch owned by Billy Connelly (Ireland), handled by Gerry Devine (Ireland)

II° Frosted Elfin at Fleetstalk English Pointer dog, owned by Steve e Sharon Lound and handled by Steve Lound

III° Hunshigo Donard Irish Setter bitch owned and handled by Mark Adams (Ireland)

IV° Bownard Cherry Cherry Irish Setter dog owned by Donna Clark and handled Colin Forde (Ireland)

Certificates of Merit: Upperwood Clover and FT Ch. Upperwood Hera English Setter bitches owned and handled by Dom Goutorbe and **Upperwood Ash Alert** English Setter bitch owned and handled by David Hall

The organizers would like to thank the sponsor Red Mills.

Slideshow below

Trusting a Free Spirit

This article stems from this morning walk. My walks in the countryside are always a good source of inspiration.

Today I realized that, when you are “walking” an English Setter, all your senses have to be well alert in order to locate the dog who, as the breed demands, appears and disappears from your sight. You can hear him when is behind the trees, or coming out from a bush; you can see him when he is running free on a open ground. You can sometimes even smell him when he rolls into “something” and, no, you cannot taste nor touch him but, along the years, you have surely developed a sixth sense which tells you where the dog is, what is he doing and from which direction he is going to return.

While keeping all my antennae alert, I met a man with a golden retriever. She was meekly trotting by him carrying a huge log in her mouth. I am wondering whether I would be happy with such a dog or, if, on the contrary, I will be bored. As Briony was running at a full speed in a rice paddy, we met a runner trying to "Canicross" with a Cane Corso (a huge molosser) and another primitive dog, something bigger than a Shiba and smaller than an Akita. He was impressed with the recall, but most of all, he was astonished by her speed and deep castings. British pointing dogs, with the exception of Gordon Setters – sometimes, are the most extreme of the pointing dogs: they can hardly be understood by the average pet dog owner. They often look puzzled when the setter (or pointer) owner refuses to let their dog free on a tiny patch of ground surrounded by roads, explaining it is too small, it would not be safe.

They cannot understand how small those places are: an unleashed German Shepherd or a Border Collie would always be alert, ready to obey an order; a Dobermann or a Rottweiler would always keep an eye on their owner, because they feel the need to protect them. With an English Setter, things are different: the best gift you can give to a working English Setter is freedom. Yes, they enjoy snoring on soft surfaces, they like good food but, if you want your Setter to be truly happy... Let him free! His cute face will become a cute happy face and he will start exploring. A free English Setter would not worry much about his owner. They perfectly know we can take care of ourselves when they are busy exploring the world, finding birds and so on... These guys watch Discovery Channel! The countryside has so much to offer! Giving freedom to an English Setter is like taking a pig to an "all you can eat" restaurant, or gifting a woman with somebody else credit card! So much excitement clashes with control!

A free ranging setter may pay more attention to you if you are carrying a shotgun: dogs actively used for rough shooting understand teamwork, and most of them are very happy to pick

up and retrieve a fallen bird. This is how most of the Italian hunters “control” their setters. Things get more complicated when you do not carry any weapons: the setter (or the pointer) does not get any benefits from your presence and... This is the part I love the most! Because here relationship, training and MUTUAL trust enter the picture.

Relationship: well... Relationship, you need to have a relationship with your dog! No amount of training can make a dog can back to you if he does not want to. He shall trust you (mutual trust, see below) because he knows you are not going to affect his freedom, at least not that much. He will return to you, of follow your directions, and then he will be free again.

Training: the importance of training shall never be underestimated. Teaching a free spirited dog a reliable recall is not easy! But I am the living proof that the plain, basic, human being can do this.

Trust: it is the key. It what allows you to let your dog free, being certain he will come back to you. You really have to trust your Setter: some people panic when they see how far and how fast these dogs can go. But you really love “something”, especially something /somebody that thrives on freedom... let him free!

Entering a trial Italy vs UK part II: UK

After discussing Italy [here](#), what about the [United Kingdom](#)? How do you enter a trial? First of all, if you do not live in the UK and your dog is not registered with their Kennel Club,

you have to go through the Kennel Club website and fill out an application form to get an ATC (Authorization to Compete) number. You can choose between two options: getting an ATC number alone; getting an ATC number and register your dog microchip number at [Petlog](#). This second option is more expensive, but worth: if your dog get lost, having his microchip been registered in the Petlog database, would make a reunion easier. Once you have an ATC number, you can formally enter the dog in trials. Warning: the whole procedure might take up to three weeks.

I do not know how things work for HPRs (Continental Pointing Dogs, but trials for British Pointing Breeds take place only during specific times of the year. There are two weeks on grouse in March; one week on partridge in April; almost a month on grouse (mid July/mid August) and, finally one more week on partridge in September. The total number of trials is therefore extremely limited, if compared to the number of trials taking place in Italy during a year (hundreds!) and makes getting a run quite complicated. With the calendar at hand, you have to find the contacts of the club organizing each trial, get a specific entry form, fill it out and return it to the club secretary before the deadline, together with the entry fees. The most complicated thing, for those abroad, is paying the fees in advance. All the clubs accept cheques but it is impossible to send a cheque in sterling from abroad, which makes things complicated for a foreigner. Some clubs accept foreigners to wire money through a bank, others are ok

with you paying at the venue...



In the form you have to fill out you have to write the dog's name and date of birth; his/her parents names; the breeder, the owner and the handler names and so on. You should not forget the breed and whether he has already gained any awards in British trials as this would allow him to enter the Open stake more easily. British trials have three option when it comes to stakes: Puppy; Novice and Open. Puppy Stakes are for dogs younger than 2 years who had never qualified; Novice Stake is for dogs of every age who have never won a 1st or 2nd place in a Novice Stake (or Puppy Stake) and Open Stakes are for those who did! To become a Field Trial Champion, a dog must win two Open Stakes. Field trial rules remain the same regardless of the stake, but judges can be "kinder" towards dogs who run in Puppy and Novice Stakes. Is it difficult for a foreign dog to enter a trial and, more specifically, run in an Open Stake? I think it depends on the trial and on the time of the year: whilst Open Stakes are Open to all dogs, the dogs who had qualified 1st or 2nd in Novice and Puppy Stakes are allowed to run only in Open, hence are given priority. Trials run in Northern Scotland are usually less crowded that those run in England and, I was told, March Trials are less popular. Are Puppy and Novice Stakes easier to get in? My experience is extremely limited, but I think they are. What we shall remember is that stakes usually accommodate a maximum of 40 dogs (and each trial has ONLY one stake, not three, four or more like in Italy), and the extra dogs become "reserves" (= they are placed on a waiting list). Reserves that cannot get a run will get their money back. Being member of the club organizing the trial and having had placements in the past proved more chances to get a run.

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