

# Does a gun-shyness gene exist?

I wrote about this on several occasions and, usually, I do not like re-writing about things I already wrote about but, last week, reading an online forum, I realized that gun-shyness is still a mystery.

People buy dogs, mate dogs, collect dogs but never “waste” time trying to educate themselves about dogs or, more simply, trying to switch their brains on. I am not sure whether you are familiar with Patrick Pageat, he is a French veterinarian and animal behaviourist who wrote the book “L’homme et le Chien” (The Man and the Dog), he writes: *“How can a gun-shyness gene exist? How could nature have foreseen gun powder and shotguns?”*

## Le mythe du gène de la peur du fusil

On trouve dans de nombreux ouvrages la description du gène de la peur du coup de fusil ou encore du gène de la peur du bâton, etc. Le gène de la peur du fusil pose cependant un énorme problème théorique qui est celui de l'extrême prévoyance de la nature qui a bien sûr imaginé qu'un jour l'homme inventerait la poudre et le fusil ! On imagine assez difficilement l'ADN préfigurant l'existence des armes à feu... ou alors on entre dans le domaine de la théologie et non plus de la biologie. Ce qui est moins drôle, c'est que des chiens ont été euthanasiés parce que considérés comme porteurs d'un gène qui les rendrait inaptes et donc impropres à la reproduction.

Aujourd'hui, il existe, dans le cadre des épreuves de qualification pour les chiens de défense, ce qu'on appelle le TAN, le test d'aptitude naturelle – notons qu'« aptitude naturelle » sous-entend que c'est inné. Lors de ce TAN, les chiens subissent une épreuve de réaction au tir du pistolet à amorce. Si le chien a peur, c'est *gravissime*, et le chien est considéré comme très mauvais. Or il faut savoir que le TAN a été créé par des gens qui sont eux-mêmes éleveurs et qui vous expliquent froidement que, si un chien a une mauvaise note, c'est qu'il a été mal préparé pour son test. Ce qui est pour le moins étonnant car soit il s'agit effectivement d'aptitudes naturelles et le chien est comme il

est, soit c'est un examen qu'on fait passer au chien après apprentissage et il s'agit donc d'un acquis, ce qui signifie purement et simplement que le gène de la peur du coup de fusil ne peut pas exister.

Obviously, nature could not have predicted shotguns, but some dogs are indeed gun-shy, why? Are they faulty? I hate seeing dogs labelled as "faulty", their behaviour can be explained through a more refined explanation. These dogs are not "faulty": did you know, for instance, that some dogs are more sensitive than others? This has been demonstrated in humans as well, some people are more sensitive to noise, light and so on and this has been proved scientifically. So, yes, some dogs might be more sensitive than others. Is this genetic? I think so and, in my experience, I found gun-shy dogs in some breeds more than in others. These dogs, and more generalizing these breeds, were also more difficult to rehabilitate. Generally speaking, again, these dogs were quite reactive, fast and somehow nervous and... sensitive! It is selection, it is how we want dogs to be: let's try to compare an English Setter (or a Border Collie) and a Neapolitan Mastiff: they are not exactly the same thing.

We should not, however, talk about fear, analyzing sensitivity would be much more appropriate. Are there dogs who are more sensitive to noise? Yes, but being sensitive to something, does not mean being fearful of something. Yet, some dogs are afraid of gunshots, but fear came after sensitivity and was triggered by something external to them. What do most of the fearful dogs have in common? Could environmental factors play a role? Most of the gun-shy dogs I met (in about 20 years spent around gundogs), had indeed something in common: they all had been poorly socialized.

I am not going to write about puppy socialization in this article, but I am going to point that, sometimes, hunters, as well as dog breeders, do not pay enough attention to this fundamental process. The "average" hunting dog is born in the countryside and grows up in a kennel, an environment which tends to be rather silent and lacks of natural stimuli. These quiet, rural settings do not fully prepare the pup for his future life.

Furthermore, once adopted by the new owner, the pup continues living in a similar environment and tends to be left there until he turns 7 or 8 months old. Only a few hunters start training pups early, as they fear they would get “ruined”. Once deemed old enough, the pups are put in the car (so far they had generally been in the car only to go to a veterinarian) and are taken somewhere to be tested on a bird (that is going to be shot), generally on a quail, or, even worse, to a shooting party.



Having had no exposure to gunshots, two things might happen: 1) the dog has a very strong temperament (and his owner is very lucky!) and he does not mind the noise or 2) we witness a disaster and the dog becomes gun-shy. Unfortunately, these things happen and... frequently! I did not invent anything and, sadly, I have seen this happen more than once and I can tell you about people who keep repeating these same mistakes. There are people who end up owning only gun-shy dogs: each pup they purchase will turn in a gun-shy adult. Some of them realized this and now only purchase adult dogs. Some other people, on the other hand, had never owned a gun-shy dog despite having purchased all their dogs as puppies, from different sources..

Let me tell a short story: M. Smith purchased a high quality puppy and raised her in the kennel. Once she turned 7 months old, he introduced her to birds and gunshots with the fore mentioned techniques and she became gun-shy. During the

following YEARS she overcame, more or less, her gun-shyness but her breeder donated a second pup, a sister to the previous one, to Mr. Smith, as a replacement. Mr. Smith, after committing the same mistakes for many years, had the chance to meet some properly socialized puppies and decides raise her differently. The new pup grows up experiencing noises and living different experiences: she is not gun-shy and she is much much bolder than her older sister.

PS. Don't forget to take a look at the [Gundog Research Project](#)!

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## Gun Proofing your Dog by Tok Mostert

Introducing a dog to gunfire is and will remain a critical element in his training. Many good dogs have been ruined by a wrong use of gunfire and some develop problems later that are not easy to solve. Having a gun shy dog is frustrating and leads down a long path of re-training and sometimes a dog that cannot be hunted at all. The dog becomes so frightened by gunfire that when he does scent a bird he will avoid pointing, as this will lead to a shot or even more shots being fired.

I have a somewhat different approach to training my dogs, gundog or lapdog all receive the same training. Once the puppy has developed a bond with me and has settled in well in our home, but most of all, trusts me I start "Boom Proofing" him. Even though our lap dogs have never been around gunfire, they react the same way (or do not react at all) to loud noises or fireworks, exactly like a gundog. As said above, the puppy must trust you and understand that you offer protection and

support, both mentally and physically. I start by "scaring" them a little by dropping a magazine flat on the floor, it should make a slapping sound, not a overly loud banging sound. I do this when the puppy least expects this, a surprise if you will. The natural reaction is for them to scare, run or hide, sometimes both. Here two things are extremely important, your response and the timing of your response. I respond immediately, the puppy has no time to figure out what made the noise, I immediately give both verbal and physical support to the dog. *"Come girl, oh there you are, what a good girl"*. I also offer my physical support by kneeling down and opening my arms to the dog, inviting him to me while giving verbal support. 99% of the time the dog responds by coming to me immediately, I then heap praise on the dog. As said before, be overly friendly! This is a negative-positive training technique. Always, always respond the same way, immediately, positively and friendly!

Eventually you will have to move up to heavier books! I go around slapping the outside of cupboards ,doors and any flat surfaces too. My response and the dogs always stays the same, eventually they come straight into me at the slap or bang sound, this is what I am aiming for. I do not stop there however, someday I may sneak up behind them and grab a leg or tail (I never hold onto the part I grab, it is a light touch) once again my response is the same, immediate, positive and friendly. Eventually the dog will respond positively immediately, even as you start your response, this is what I aim for. Do not overdo this, every other day or twice a week, once a day, is enough! I still do this and my dogs are between 1 and 7 years old.

Now please understand that to you it may sound like I am terrorizing my dogs, far from it, the incorrect reaction by the trainer is what would be categorized as terrorizing the dog.

Keep in mind we expose dogs to many "surprise" noises, doors slammed, cars backfired, plates and glasses breaking,

fireworks etc there are thousands of examples.

A dog that is not accustomed, nor trained, for this often has a hard time when things go wrong. Dogs hang or impale themselves on fences, run through glass doors or run in front of cars every year with the fireworks, my dogs either look for birds or lie sleeping through it. As said before in another article, break down your training, a dog should be able to retrieve before you introduce gunfire like training with the retrieving training. I start with a cast and clap of the hands, move on to a cast and blank pistol (plastic revolver with very low charge caps). When you start with the blank pistol it is a good idea to have another person doing the cast and the shooting, Shoot 10-12 meters away from the dog, keep the dog steady and offer a lot of verbal support. If the dog shows discomfort at the shot, move further away with the blank pistol, if it does not bother the dog, move closer. Do this for every type of "gunfire" you introduce, . 22,9mm and shotgun should be started at least 20-25 meters away from the dog, further is better. Increase the caliber progressively, do not go from blank pistol to gauge 12 shotgun directly!





## Blank pistol first

Read the dog, if he is uncomfortable offer more verbal, or physical support, if you do the blank pistol training right, the dog will already know that following the shot comes a retrieve, which you made a fun thing during the retrieving trainings, that is if you followed my advice. Once you get to the shotgun with the cast and shoot, your dog should be steady to the shot and cast, never let the dog break at the shot, never. Go back a step without the shot to get the dog steady again.

As said clearly before, hunting amplifies any little problems the dog has 1000 times. Get it right in training and you will have less disappointments during hunting (problems always come up during hunting).

Keep in mind that any negative inputs from you after the shot is going to affect the dog, you may not even realise you are being negative! It only takes three of such sessions to turn a dog gun shy, always, always end on a positive note when training, go back a step if you have to! Remember to have fun when training, the dog must enjoy what he is doing, and his desire to please you must be greater than his fear to fail.

It is so easy to get caught up in getting one thing right that you forget it is only a small piece of a incredible dog you are building, see the bigger picture!

Next article [here](#).

*Tok Mostert, a Professional Hunter from South Africa, now living in Sweden, is sharing his writings on dog training with us. [You can start reading them from Part 1 here.](#)*