

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](#).