Between Dogs and Grouse (Sentieri di Caccia November 2016)

Between Dogs and Grouse — Originally Published in Sentieri di Caccia — November 2016

Disclaimer: This is the first 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.

I cannot tell when it all began. When I was a little child I used to refuse milk and kept begging for tea for tea to be put in my bottle, no wonder I could not sleep! At the age of four, I was given a Scottish kilt and a book on Queen Elizabeth, I still treasure both. At six, I began studying English and at 11 I asked for an English Setter. The setter came many years later, together with a master degree in British Literature. It was the Setter though, and not the books, that made me aware of the art of shooting over pointing dogs, of field trials and more. A mosaic tile, however, was still missing. I love the English Setter and I am sincerely happy that it is so popular in Italy (12.000 puppies were registered in 2015) but, at the same time, I have mixed feelings about how it is perceived, trained and bred by my fellow countrymen. The same happens when it comes to field trials. I have always felt there was something else, something hidden, something to be discovered. I was "feeling" rather than "thinking", there was nothing

rational about my perception. In July 2015, however, I had the opportunity to watch the Champion Stake and it gave me some little pieces of evidence that proved my emotional beliefs were right. I was not crazy, just a little odd, and there was a whole new world ready to be explored: British pointing dogs could be trained and used in a different way.

Once back home, I began training my dog according to what I saw. My training style was perceived by the Italians as "different" and more traditional, a very polite way to tell me it was outdated. The method I chose forced me to work hard but at a slow pace, I did not see any fruits until spring 2016. My original plan was very modest: I was going to use the British "enlightenment" to prepare Briony for Italian Field Trials, in the meantime I would have gone back to the UK to watch more trials and learn more. Things, however, took an unexpected twist which made me change my plans: in April the dog suddenly became very reliable and, one day, while I was driving back from the training grounds a light bulb went on: why not to go back with her and compete?



difficile dire quando tutto abbia swuto inizio. Rizordo solo che ab bumbina rifinativo il latte e the il nici biberce sea improprieto di C. ferra per quanto in modernito man. All'etal di critica pri quanto di C. ferra per quanto modernito man. All'etal di critica di C. ferra per quanto modernito man. All'etal Regina Elizabetta, conserve succes estrambi, a sei ho iniziato il mierra primo corso d'inglese. A il ami violevo un setter inglese tutto il mierra primo corso d'inglese. A il ami violevo un sette inglese tutto il mierra prezio dimensio continuava a mancera. Aboro il satteri para perco dimensio continuava a mancera. Aboro il satteri finglese cume cume da ferram a la sua propiarità in Italia mi rende felico, d'altra parte non conditivo al manuel di sultano sustrani e, e manifestazioni cinolite. Da sempre serven la sensazione che el fossas dell'altro da scoprito. Nel luglio di 2018 he no verso la conditiona con sette re politare e mis il savorre il cane piete di materia sono riuscita ad assistera al Champios Stake inglese da proco di contra dell'altro da scoprito. Nel luglio di 2018 servere il cane piete di contra dell'artro del scoprito. Nel luglio di 2018 avorre il cane piete di contra dell'artro del scoprito. Se dissono abtuata severe, ni l'arrelazionale dell'artro del scoprito della contra in ingulitare con e seguito conservato e per continuare ad apprendere, ma le cose hammo poi preso una piega diversa. Dallo contra il ingulitare con e seguito conservato per continuare ad apprendere, ma le cose hammo poi preso una piega diversa. Dallo contra cin altri mi geograpira il provo. Am parteripare reinteriora dalla cona c'ini si da accessa una lampadina perchà, assirtica da nadra a vedere i canal latina geograpira il provo. Am parteripare reinteriora della cona c'ini si da accessa una lampadina perchà, assirtica della conta contra cin altri mi geograpira il provo. Am parteripare reinteriora della cona c'ini si da accessa una lampadina perchà, assirtica contra la reginitare cin and letti megogenti provo.

La caccia con il cane da ferma: solo per pochi

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del proprietario i che è ticolare della selvagginal e l' luoghi in cui si rivanoo generalmenti e sidvatici sono ciravere di ecceia private, a cu a vulte è possibile accoderva pagamento. Ho acritto "a volte" perché non tutte le infere dei cenzi sono appert al pubblicio, in a sicure cerciano solo i proprietari. L'accesso a una riserva, incitre, nun è legate emplicament el defiarro la gestioni e "attività ventorità sono semplicamente di denarso la gestioni e "attività ventorità sono si che possano decidere se ammettere, o men, un ortro tipo di cliente. Aclusure riserve, per esempio, prateziono solo lo horborità in controli della co

stesse jud in Inghilburra che in Soudia seeo molto numerose, ume contra può distriburio in podi metri quantta i el essere seguita da un altra covaza, vicinissiana. The case non corcurto al Prullo e no perfettamente sotto cuntrollo diventa ingestibile e può ostacolare il laworo di urate dei selvatici messo in atto dai guardiazaccia. Viste le condiziosi famistiche dei territori italiani, e difficilissimo preparare un cane come preteno di carciaciari d'Oltre Manifesa. In delicitoro quasi un anno all'obbedienza ferres, ci sono riuscita, mai statto estremamente impegnativo.

La grouse viene prima di tutto

La difficienza nel confronti dei cuni è legata al grande rispetto per i selvutici. Il grandicacio ha il potera seabuto sul utritori o il suo primo pranieno è tutchiere la selvaggiani Se partitimo di grouze, esse nascono e i ripoduccoso in anturu, non soca all'acubidi. Il levo ciclo di vita è initiamamente legato al clima e al territorio. Il lavrovo del guardianeccia comunica in primavera coni cominamida di ripodutorio, consistenti che possono essere osterochisti da difficili condizioni climatiche. È proprio il clima a sescre la griama minarcia per la grossure puest'anno, per esempio, ha futto relativamente poco freddo in inverso, ma ci sono state nevirante primaventi e goi molta poggia, eventi che in talbane sone della Sozia hanno decimato il numero dei morei mat. Ogni morei è cuzianti di agrantificanti in emglo di una testi di guardiarenticati come un giarcilino si effettua il controlto del predatori, si organizza la presenta tutto per pranetta il controlto del predatori, si compilaria la presenta tutto per pranetta al inonati grouse le suglidori conditioni ambienta. Il 'inti ne cuntun nel dettaglio e spesso sono piccole stratire a fare la differenza una riservacio achieva crobbendi di conde hande



20 / SENTIERI di CACCIA / NOVEMBRE 2016

NOVEMBRE 2016 \ SENTIERI di CACCIA \ 21

Only a few: shooting over pointing dogs

To better understand British Field Trials, it is useful to know something about indigenous wildlife management and about how pointing dogs are worked. The information you are about to read relate only to grouse and British pointing breeds, things for HPRs (Hunt Point Retrieve/Continental Pointing Dogs) are slightly different. People asked me about HPRs and grouse: there are grouse trials for them as well, but they take place during the shooting season. The only HPR I saw working on a moor was a GWP (German Wirehaired Pointer): she was fine, but I cannot get used to the sight of a HPR running in the heather. I know I am not going to be politically correct here but... these dogs look out of place! I am sure they can work grouse properly, but they do not belong to this world. The sight of an English Setter jumping fences with a fox in his mouth would trigger in me the same feelings. In Britain the interest in HPRs is increasing, and I am sure they would do very well on pheasant and other game.

Shooting over pointing dog, however, is fairly uncommon.

Italian hunters are crazy about pointing dogs: the average hunter here owns one or more pointing dogs and leaves the house alone in the morning, a dog and a shotgun are his only company. They hope to bag a pheasant, a woodcock or maybe a hare: British people hunting in this manner (they call this rough shooting) are fairly scarce. Why? I do not know, maybe it does not belong to their tradition and perhaps the legislation discourages this. In the UK, the game belongs to the landowners (in Italy wild animals are considered a public good — we have private estates but 90% of hunting/shooting takes place on "common ground") and to hunt on these grounds you need the landowner permission. Furthermore, most of the places in which you can find birds suitable to pointing dogs are private estates. Some of these estates accept paying clients, but can be selective on which customers to allow on their grounds: money is important, but proper game and land management are even more important and are therefore strictly regulated. Most of the estates offer shooting days (with beaters, pickers up and shooters), but are not organized to offer shooting days over pointing dogs. Before coming back to Italy last summer, I stopped in Kent and through a friend, I had the opportunity to run Briony on grounds belonging to a local estate. Well, she was the first English Setter who had put her paws on these grounds, they only offer formally organized shooting days with spaniels and retrievers. Scotland is slightly different, as some estates organize grouse shooting over pointing dogs, but the dogs at work are selected by the estate and professionally handled: it is uncommon to see shooters bringing their own dogs. I am not stating it cannot be done but, from what I could gather, gamekeepers allow only "safe" (well trained and obedient) dogs on their grounds. Italian shooters like to go abroad for hunting holidays with their dogs, I think British hunting tourism focuses more on men than on dogs.

How should a pointing dog behave to please the average British gamekeeper? The Brits want their dogs to be under control. A dog MUST be steady to flush, drop on command, obey orders and

come back when recalled. These skills are vital if you run a dog on grounds rich in birds, rabbit, hare, sheep and maybe something else. Grouse are abundant, a whole covey can be scattered in a few square metres, followed closely by another one: a dog unsteady to flush, who likes chasing birds, would be a nightmare. Unfortunately, due to the lack of birds Italian dog lovers have to face, is very hard to train a dog to be biddable in these conditions. I eventually succeeded, but I spent one whole year working on obedience, it was incredibly demanding.



Larger photo by Maria Jacques

Grouse come first

Gamekeepers, those who rule on shooting grounds with absolute power, tend to be wary of dogs because... love their birds and want to protect them. Grouse are wild birds, they reproduce in wilderness and cannot be artificially reared. Their life cycle is intimately linked to climate and grounds. In spring the gamekeepers are busy counting adults birds which are going to

mate. Difficult weather conditions in the spring can hinder the counts and, most of all, decimate births. Winter 2015, for example, was fairly mild but spring 2016 brought snow and much rain: these conditions negatively affected the newborns. Each moor is being cared by a group of gamekeepers: they pay attention to pest management; organize sheep presence; plan heather burning and more. A newcomer might think that moors naturally look like the way they do they but, in reality, moors are not so different from gardens and their features are the results of proper care. Small details can make a difference: an estate that was infested by ticks (Ixodes ricinus ticks, those that carry Lyme Disease) minimized its problem through sheep. Sheep were sent grazing on the infested areas, they picked up the ticks which later died thank to the products applied on the sheep. Removing, or at least reducing tick presence, on the moor is important as these arthropods they can infect grouse with deadly diseases. In the spring, as already mentioned, producer birds are

counted and in the summer other counts are carried out to assess the number of young birds: estates need to know the number of birds to plan the shooting season. Pointing dogs are often used to count birds, some estates also take in account "presence signs" such as grouse faeces and so on. Only biddable dogs are used for counting, they are trustworthy dogs, handled by trustworthy handlers. Some counts are very formal and demanding, therefore the handlers get paid; other estates have a more laidback approach and accept volunteers: they are given specific area to work on, but the counting schedule is less tight and more flexible. Dog lovers are really happy to go counting as this allows them to train the dogs and let them gain more experience on grouse. Sometimes handlers work in team with gamekeepers who take note of the birds found, placing them on the estate map. Some other times the dog handler has to do everything by himself but, in both cases, grouse counting is taken extremely seriously. Dog handlers can sometimes take other people with them, but they are deemed responsible for their friends (and their dogs!)

behaviour. I am very happy to be able to write that Briony and I were allowed to go counting! It was an honour and a dream coming true. My first count took place at Muggleswick Estate, with Steve Robinson, who breeds and handles Irish Setters, supervising me. In the morning I followed him while he was handling his Irish Setters. Briony was kept on lead so that she could become familiar with grouse (she had never met any before) in a safe setting: as grouse always come first, we had to be sure she would not grab any young chicks. After hours of good behaviour, in the afternoon, she was allowed to work off lead cooperating with some new dogs. There were Steve Robinson Irish Setters, some Pointers owned by Terry Harris, Maria Jacques and Roy Heath; a Gordon Setter owned by Nicky Harris and, finally, a smart English Setter pup handled by John Naylor. I have to admit that these people were trusting my dog more than I was doing. It was nice feeling, they made me feel welcome and accepted. Briony did well, she was very gentle and careful with birds and thanks to this I was allowed to go counting again! On the following days, indeed, Terry Harris, a reputable Pointer and Gordon trainer, took us to Eggleston Estate and carefully monitored our work. There were his Pointers and his Gordons with us and sometimes some English Setters belonging to Dennis Longworth, Anne Maddison and John Naylor. Dennis Longworth, despite being "already" 83, is in wonderful shape and has a very sharp mind: he spent his life with pointing dogs and loves English Setters. It is a real pleasure to listen to his tales, opinions and advice. As said earlier, gamekeepers are really concerned about dogs behaviour during the counts and Terry Harris guaranteed for us: if a dog misbehaves during a count (or even during a trial) it could be banned forever from a specific ground! Things for us were going well and I was invited to go counting in Scotland too but, unfortunately, a kennel cough epidemic made this great opportunity vanish. Nevertheless, two gamekeepers, Brian at Dorback Estate and Craigh at Tollishill Estate kindly allowed me to train on their grounds sending me to the best "places". Brian even spent a couple of hours with me in the rain

enjoying working with Briony... she seemed to like him more than me!



If you have read the whole article, it should be now very clear that grouse come first and that its preciousness makes gamekeepers wary about "unknown" dogs. Nowadays it is easy to travel to UK with your dog, all you need is the rabies vaccines and a de-worming treatment against echinococcus, any dogs can go to Britain but only a few, perfectly trained ones, can be allowed on a moor. Someone might be tempted to

go there and work the dog on grouse in disguise, without asking permissions. I would not do that, it would be dishonest, rude and you could be - rightly so - considered a poacher. Estates need grouse count to assess the quality of game management and decide how to organize the shooting season. Whereas shooting days might be booked in great advance (years!), the final decisions on the numbers of shooting days and on the number of birds that might be shot, will be made at the end of the counts. In 2015, some estates partly cancelled their season and I am not sure about what happened in 2016, I was told that some estates in the Scottish Highlands apparently had less birds than they were supposed to have. Grouse shooting is the result of careful planning and safeguarding the species is the priority. Mismanaging grouse can compromise both the bird and the estate survival. In Scotland and Northern England grouse are very important: they play a big role in local culture and economy. All the people involved in grouse management love this bird and the grouse plays a big role in rural economy. I think I love grouse too, and I know that what I am going to say cannot be considered "romantic" but grouse are money. Moors, as a natural environment, can exist thanks to grouse and the same can be

said about estates. Look at those barren landscapes covered with heather, you cannot grow any crops there. Think about these wide open spaces located in very rural areas of the country and imagine what could happen if there were no grouse. Grouse shooting brings money to these areas and creates jobs; grouse shooting finances moor management and supports biodiversity, these would not be possible without the money earned through grouse shooting. For more information check the website http://www.giftofgrouse.com/

The second article of this series, about British field trials, the Puppy Derby and the Champion Stake cane be read here.

Still curious about British trials? Check the section A Month on the Moor or click here.

Slideshow below: