

Let us train our dogs

I cannot stop wondering why, in Italy, shall be so difficult to train your pointing dog. You can train basic obedience everywhere (but none is really interested in teaching obedience here) and you can legally plant birds in specific places but, if you want to train on wild animals, things get incredibly complicated.

Let's start from planted birds: they can be released in some (not all) private estates during the hunting season (3rd week of September to Jan 31st – or until December 31st in some areas). When the hunting season is closed, you can still run your dog on *B training grounds* (these are no kill areas) and on *C training grounds* (killing is allowed here). To enter estates and B and C training areas, you usually have to pay a fee and pay for the birds you are training on. I am fine with that and *B areas* can also be quite wide, while *C areas* are usually no bigger than a “field” and overcrowded with people wanting to shoot something when the hunting season is closed. These areas, moreover, are quite rare and dogs are not stupid: they learn to recognize the place and know what is going to happen there so... they sometimes are not really very serious about finding birds, they act suspicious and so on. You cannot train always in the same place, with the same people and with the same birds, is simply too artificial, dogs are smarter than we think.

Crystals are not diamonds, the same is true with wild birds and released birds. Released birds can help you a lot during training, they allow you to set up specific situations, but your dog needs to meet some truly wild birds, in wild, unpredictable settings. During the hunting season, again, you can go to estates and work on semi-wild birds or hope to find something on public/unkept grounds which makes up 99% of Italian hunting grounds. These grounds, unfortunately, due to

poor wildlife management (& chronic poaching) are usually empty but maybe you can find the occasional woodcock, the snipe which got lost, or the smart pheasant that defeated many hunters. But, there is another problem here: you can train your dog on public grounds from late August to the opening of the hunting season, after the season opens.... Our laws say that you cannot longer train your dog, only hunt with him. This means you have to pay high taxes, get a hunting license and go around carrying a shotgun pretending to be out to kill, and not to train. I adhere to the law, again, but it does not make sense.

When the hunting seasons ends, you are no longer allowed to roam around with your dogs. Our law is clear: the ONLY dogs allowed to run off lead are hunting dogs, owned by a hunter (aka person who pays hundreds euros in taxes, year after year) and only from the end of August to the end of the hunting season. So, the fact I now let Briony run on an empty ground by my house, with nothing nesting there and almost no wildlife, makes me a poacher. How to make simple things complicated!



If you want to find some useful game, you have to be bolder and become an advanced poacher entering protected areas like parks and the so called “red areas”. Are these rich in birds and other animals? It really depends, I do not think these places are well cared, in most instances they are not cared at all. Our politicians treats these areas as they were museums, forgetting they need to be taken care: a park is not a figurine you can place on your furniture, wildlife needs

nurturing. So, while us, with our dogs, cannot legally set foot on these areas, families, bikers, joggers and often bikers, I was forgetting pet dogs! So, while gundogs are not allowed, because they disturb, scare and kill game, none notices Mrs Rossi off lead shepherd who had just retrieved a hare or taken down a roe buck, because he is not a "hunting dog". Hunters have a bad reputation "because they kill animals" and anything associated to them becomes automatically negative and dangerous.

I do not like doing illegal things, and I am never successful at exploring protected areas: I shrink to gnome size and stay maybe 10 minutes, then go away while other loud people arrive with packs of kids and dogs. But, of course, my obedient/steady to flush/droppable on command dog... is the nuisance! Not being good at "poaching", I do not have any interesting stories to tell, but I can tell you I witnessed some protected areas' decline: less game, more garbage and more "un-respectful people". Other trainers told me funny stories about being chased by police at 7 AM (such a waste of public money!), or being forced to swim away from guards because they had a hunting dog off lead. There are people, city people usually, who clearly cannot grasp the difference between dog training and hunting. They skip the dog in the "gundog" word, they can see invisible shotguns and panic as soon as they see a hunting dog running free (other breeds are fine!). I was told about a man, quite a good handler indeed, who trains setters wearing football (soccer) shoes to run faster in case police get called.

I would like to make it clear that I, nor anybody who has a pointing dog under control, are damaging wildlife. Our dogs do not chase animals, we just need to find animals, then the game ends: none gets hurt and my dog is surely less disturbing than a group of loud cyclists. Most of us would be happy to pay a fee to be allowed to train where some wildlife exist and, I think, would also be happy to pass an exam to prove our dogs

are under control. So if you see anyone suspicious with an off lead gundog, watch what they are doing and maybe go to talk with them, don't panic and don't generate further panic, please don't call the army!

About 15 years ago, it was possible, paying a small yearly fee, to train in a regional park. I used to go there, there were a few pheasants and the whole area was continuously patrolled by dog trainers coming from several parts of Northern Italy. As big as it was, you always ended up finding someone with another pointing dog and... feeling safe! Now, for some mysterious reasons, this is no longer possible and, again, game presence and place itself, dramatically declined. People who used to come here, now go training [abroad](#) and their money is no longer going to local restaurants, hotels and service stations, not a happy ending.

A Time to Reflect (on Training) by Tok Mostert

I am busy packing for a long holiday, Louise, my companion, says she is actually taking me away so that Flake can get some rest. There is truth in that, sometimes we get caught up in pushing so hard and trying to get to the next level with our gundogs that we forget to have fun, so should your dog. What few of us realize is that the "next level" holds more problems, more challenging training situations and that often we made a mistake in our initial training and that we now have to go back and fix that before we can move on.

If you are serious about your hunting or trial dog, you will always strive for perfection, but you will also know that

perfection has many faces. What may be perfect for you, may not be perfect for a judge or for other handlers. True perfection does not exist, it is only the strive for perfection that is true. Flake is lying in front of the fire right now, oblivious to what I may think, write or feel, content in just letting go of the days training. I guess I should learn from her and do the same, I wish I could. As the glow of the fireplace dances over her speckled body, so the season dances through my mind.

1. She has developed incredibly over the last 6 months when it comes to fieldwork.
2. She has not had a break in 16 months, maybe one or two days certain weeks, sometimes only a day a month.
3. If I don't do my part she will never get further, just like those flames of the fireplace dwindle down and die if I don't keep adding wood.
4. Her hunting season is over, it may have not been perfect, but she has made me proud.
5. She is not better than other dogs, she has just had better opportunities and I need to keep giving her those.
6. I need to pay attention to the early signals of a problem developing, it is easier to prevent a problem from becoming a habit, than it is to break a habit.
7. Going back to basics often builds a better dog.
8. You have to hit the dogs "reset" button at some stage, take a break leave all training and let the dog



be a dog.

As I said above, our season is over until I get back from Africa, she is getting a break and some time to “reset”. I get time to ponder our season and to break down everything I see as a potential problem or a real problem I picked up during our season together. Some are very small, some are very big, but they all get the same amount of attention and focus.

Some may be happy with a HPR dog that picks up ducks all over the place, I want a dog that picks up a specific duck among the many on the ground, especially the winged ones I select even if there are several. I want a HPR dog that can keep it cool under the guns no matter how many shots go off and how many birds are dropping around her.

I want a dog that takes a straight line into the water on a blind retrieve, in virgin water I want the dog to do this carefully, but straight without hesitation.

I want a dog that follows commands on a blind retrieve, but that can work the thick stuff by himself when I can't help anymore.

I want a dog that does not only focus on the flock of birds he just flushed on command, but also understands to look for the bird that I am shooting at, to make the retrieve easier for him.

I want a dog that can work late season birds and pin them so hard that they don't breath.

Will I get all of this done? Maybe not but it does not stop me from trying or training. It may take longer, It may take new training methods, I can't say for sure. What I can say is that I will be breaking it all down in my head long before I start training and as always, I will start with the basics all over again.

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.](#)

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!

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