

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 you 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.

Do you click with your dog? – by Tok Mostert

Just in case folks think I have forgotten about training dogs☐

Do you click with your dog?

It normally took years for trends to reach African shores, that was until Africa discovered the worldwide web. Information and training techniques spread like wildfires over a sun-dried African savannah, for good or for bad these techniques were spread like the gospel and seen as the miraculous training method. This, unfortunately, does not only apply to Africa, but to many parts of the world.

To break it down, you need to have a comprehensive understanding of how a dog's mind works.

A dog understands his name by repetitive training and positive reinforcements. A dog understands commands several ways, you can force it like with force fetch training (negative – positive response training) working on a leash is something I consider force training too, although a more positive less negative form of training. You can also use condition training like with a clicker and treats. Then there is the method I believe in, as taught by Jeppe Stridh, the 95% positive reinforcements /praise and 5% correction method, using the red light- green light principles. Although during the initial training phase it would be more correct to say it is a combination of the order of the principles. Right at the start of the training, the very beginning, treats may be used to teach a sit command to a puppy, but it is also the only phase they may get used in. This initial treat is more a bonding exercise, than a treat training exercises as you are replacing the bitch in the feeding cycle.

I could have titled this article *How to confuse your dog and frustrate yourself* because this is exactly what we are doing blending training methods and techniques. The secret, that is no secret at all when training a dog, is and always will be consistency. Besides the verbal and whistle commands a dog responds to tone and body language (as well as hand signals) of the handler too. Keeping everything consistent is what turns a good dog into a better one. Why do I not use the clicker method? Read for yourself and decide.

It is my belief and opinion that a dog that works for respect and affection (praise) within a pack type environment will in the end outclass and outlast any dog trained by clicker and or treats. If you use a clicker and treats, the only reward your dog receives is the treat and limited freedom. My preferred method rewards the dog with unlimited freedom, praise and a understanding of where it fits into the pack, it also teaches the dog respect. Besides all of the above, it builds confidence and trust in both the dog and the handler while

forging a stronger bond between them. Contrary to what people believe my hunting dog is not kept in a kennel and then cut loose every now and again. My dog lives with me, on the couch, on the bed, in the car, but I can at anytime give my dog a command when I no longer wish for him to be on the bed or couch and he will comply!

You do not need skills to train with a clicker, neither do you need confidence or ability. You are solely relying on the clicker and treats to train the dog. With limited skill and ability, you are no leader to your dog, you are a treat dispenser! When a dog lives in the wild, there are no treats to teach him, there is a pecking order within the pack environment to which every dog adheres or gets rebuked by one of the pack members. It is a simple and common language that dogs have developed over hundreds of years, why change what the dog understands?

It is common knowledge that the level of control/discipline during trial competitions have decreased over the past 40 plus years, the reason has nothing to do with the ability of the dogs but rests solely with the trainers who either train using "new" methods or prescribes to the philosophy that wilder dogs hunt better. A multidiscipline hunting dog needs a multidimensional training method using consistent commands and corrections executed at exactly the right moment.

A good trainer, or handler, will plan every single detail of his training sessions down to the finest details. He will know exactly which commands to use, when to apply more correction or when to give more encouragement. He will have a confident body posture and language, he will anticipate an error by the dog and correct it at exactly the right time. His tone will be steady and simple without repeating commands or physically touching the dog. There will be no confusing, or contradictory, commands given. The dog will clearly understand what is expected from him during these sessions. If you lack the confidence and ability seek help, training in front of the

mirror by yourself is a good start, so is writing down your commands and memorizing them.



Flake

Many clicker trainers find themselves frustrated and confused once they have to work a dog in a uncontrolled environment. Dogs that run after rabbits and chase cats are common. Dogs that do not socialize well with other dogs and people are not uncommon either. Once the dog reaches a distance away from its handler where the clicker is no longer effective, it is pure chaos. Making it even worse is that now the handler tries to “speak” to the dog using other methods with disastrous results. You cannot speak Afrikaans to a Chinese dog and expect it to understand you! Why start training with the clicker if you know it will not be effective once the dog reaches a certain distance from you, why go and teach a whole new language to the dog if you could have used one language right from the start?

Working a dog out to 300-400 meters takes more than skill. The invisible lead that runs between dog and handler is woven from skill, ability, respect, praise, trust and glued together by the bond of interaction forged by hours and years of work. I have unfortunately seen more dogs getting trained with e-collars after clicker training. I will be humble and say this, if a dog is happy and you can control his three basic

instincts (to hunt, to mate, to fight) when the dog is off leash then no matter what method you have used, you have succeeded.

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.](#)