

# Break it Down- by Tok Mostert

There is no doubt that seeing a well trained dog doing everything right is a pure delight to owner/handler or observer, not to mention a judge. The seamless way they cut up a field missing no ground, the sudden stop and lock up on point, the flush on command, the stop, the marking of the fallen bird, the glance for permission to retrieve, the retrieve and the delivery all flowing like a gentle mountain stream over smooth rock. Pure dog poetry in motion!

What few understand is how exactly you get a dog to that level. Many fail due to their lack of experience, the experienced fail due to their lack of adapting. There is nothing more heartbreaking to watch than a handler train one dog after another in the same way, and making the same mistakes, dog after dog. For the novice it is a minefield of advice and methods, some good some totally disastrous!! Some novices will seek advice from the old dog hands, other will shun all help.

I have my own way of training a dog, most of it is old school, some of it is purely my way of doing things, I still do things wrong, but I learn from that pretty quickly when I fail my dog. Yes, I fail my dog, not the dog fails me. If I have not trained or exposed my dog to certain things, I am failing my dog, but that is another topic.



Getting back to watching a dog do everything right. To get to that level a good handler/trainer would have broken down every single step in the opening scenario and then he would have

also compartmentalized the individual steps into single separate training sessions. Don't get it?

**The retrieve can be broken down as follows:**

1. Dog sitting steady by your side
2. Dog looks at you when you whisper his name or click your tongue
3. Dog takes dummy, or bird, from your hand on command, does not chew or play
4. Dog stays sitting as you walk away, does not drop the bird or dummy
5. Dog comes straight in when called, still holding the dummy
- 5.1 Dog does not keep circling you with dummy or bird
- 5.2 Dog does not drop the bird/dummy at your feet
- 5.3 Dog sits calmly with dummy in his mouth until you give him the deliver command
6. Dog holds steady on a cast, waits for command
7. Dog does not lift on the cast
8. Dog marks cast
9. Dog does not move when you walk and pick up dummy or bird
10. Dog does not move when you place multiple dummies out
11. Dog does not switch dummies/birds when they are placed together

This gives you a general outline of how small the different steps can be broken down into. It is the same for every single thing you train. The point, the flush, the way the dog works a field, everything. I have said times before, sit down and decide what signals you will use, whistle, hand or verbal, train them into yourself long before you try and teach them to the dog, this is crucial!

Do not be in a hurry to weave this all together into your invisible leash. Once the dog can 100% of the time complete

these micro exercises you can start putting 2 together, then 3 and so on. This is the only way to forge a unbreakable invisible leash. Few dogs fall apart during trials, most of them fall apart under high volume high pressure shoots and hunts, this is exactly the time you can least afford it or correct it.

Many people wait for the season to open so they can let their dogs run on field and find birds, this is foolish when you can train so many other aspects before the field season opens.

Keep it fun, keep it focused!

**Are you interested in gundogs? [Check out the Gundog Research Project!](#)**

*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.](#)*

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## **There is no off season, just time off- by Tok Mostert**

Spring is drawing ever closer and our field season has pretty much closed down. It has been a long hard season for Flake, many hours, many miles and many birds. Off days where non existing: we always had a trial or a hunt going on, that was in between the training.

A season like we had takes its toll on a dog, mentally and physically. No matter how well conditioned the dog may be at the start of a season, he is likely to lose weight during the peak of the season. Just like losing weight, a dog will also lose some discipline, it cannot be helped, or prevented,

unless you cut way back on hunting time. As said before, an over disciplined dog does not hunt well, neither does a dog without any discipline. No matter at what level you start at, discipline levels will deteriorate during a field season. Prolonged periods of time that the dog spends away from you naturally make the dog rely more on himself, this is normal and part of the learning curve for a dog, but it also brings complications. Spotting it is pretty easy if you had a baseline for discipline when the season started. Tell tale signs are the need to repeat commands, the dog taking a extra second to respond to the whistle, or ignoring commands completely.

Fixing the issues that came up during the season cannot be done effectively without resting the dog and taking a step back from hunting or trials. Most of us cannot afford to do this without missing out on many opportunities to hunt with the dog. All we can do is try and limit the amount we lose during the season. What compounds things even more is that there is no real off season. Once our field trials end, along with hunting, our water training and tests start, so does our tracking tests. It is common that a dog does well during the first year and progressively slides away the year after if attention is not paid to the issues that came up. How do we fix this? The short answer is to go back to basics, some will have to go way back and others may start in the middle, how do we know this, a simple but extensive way of judging where your dog is at, is to do a "end of season" evaluation. A simple series of "tests" with increasing levels of difficulty to establish a baseline from which to start and to highlight the areas that need more focused training.



Tok & Flake!

## How do you establish a baseline

1. Control the environment, leash, no leash, fenced area, unfenced area, no distractions, many distractions.
2. Here is the only place and time you DO want the dog to fail.
3. Keep it simple, heal, sit, stay, come and stop. Increase the time or distance or both gradually until the dog becomes uneasy, that is your limit.
4. Balls, caps, dummies can be used to distract or entice the dog into breaking, do not let them retrieve anything, you are not evaluating that part of their work now.
5. Use other people and or dogs to distract your dog, see how your dog keeps contact with you.
6. This is not the time to correct the dog, this is a evaluation.
7. Make notes of the problem areas, there will be more than one.
8. You will have picked up bad habits too, focus on yourself and see what habits you need to break.
9. If you have to, break up the evaluation over several days, but focus on every aspect you can.
10. Be prepared to be disappointed.

Personally I will be taking a break from any type of training but discipline as soon as our season is completely over. I have estimated that I will need 2 weeks of intensive obedience training before I will see a noticeable difference in

sharpness, that is for both the dog and myself. It will take at least 6 to 8 weeks before I will have Flake back to her pre season level of obedience. This is with training at least 45 to 60 minutes per day on obedience only, dogs don't make mistakes when they are fresh, they make them when they are tired, mentally.

Be confident, be firm and never forget that you and the dog should enjoy what you are doing.

[Next article here](#)

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## **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](#).

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# **We are Losing Legendary Methods (Obedience and Discipline) – By T. Mostert**

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## **We are Losing Legendary Methods (Obedience and Discipline) – By T. Mostert**

This is purely my opinion, what I believe and have experienced, there are many other opinions and beliefs when it comes to training obedience. Clickers, treats, positive conditioning, e-collars, positive – negative training, in the end there are as many methods as there are dog breeds. Everyone sells their method as the gospel, as the only way to train a dog. Then you have the other side of the coin where trainers believe the dog should be as raw as possible, sticking close to his instinct and breeding as possible, with little human interference.

Now I can tell you that the best bird finding dog I have ever seen is a English Pointer that had non existing obedience, the only time the dog would stand still was when pointing, he was wild!

Blood trackers do not care if the dog pulls or pushes, as long as he is tracking and finding game, no recall or stop signals are needed because the dog is restrained all the time.

Unfortunately, if you have a HPR dog and you will use it in all the disciplines he was bred for, you cannot afford to have little, or no obedience. You may get away with it competing in young dog classes, but you will never, I repeat, never make it to the top 10% of elite dogs without proper obedience. To be at the top of every discipline consistently, you need a dog to

listen and obey commands. To have a dog hunt in areas with main roads and rail tracks, you need obedience; to ensure your dog does not go after game you may not hunt, you need obedience and discipline. In short if nothing else to keep your dog from getting hurt or killed you need obedience.



As said before, I spent many, many, hours with Jeppe Stridh and I believe in his methods. My own conclusions run parallel to his training and the 95% – 5% rule (praise- correction ratio) is what I stick to, in all my training, not just obedience. As Jeppe clearly states, dogs see a red or green light, there is no amber warning light for them, it is yes or no, keep it simple. A leash is a restraint, when you start training a leash is a great tool but, unless the dog learns that you are a mental and physical leash right out to beyond where the dog can see, you will never have full control. Your " presence" needs to extend to the limit of where you are willing to let the dog go, this is also the limit at where you should work the dog! If you cannot control the dog at 20 meters off leash why, why try and control it at 300 meters? You are simply allowing the dog to say fuck you!

Mistakes, or inappropriate behaviour, shall be corrected immediately and swiftly, is everything. Do not hang over the dog or extend the corrections, it places more pressure on them and has more negative effect than correction attributes. Also

once the correction is done, give the dog space, take a step sideways away from the dog. He will close that gap up by himself, which is exactly what you want! Always, always be friendly with the dog right after any corrections, always!

I have a problem and I have had it for a while, I am working on it and I try to keep it in mind everyday. I want to keep touching Flake to reassure her and calm her down, it is wrong. Your voice ,attitude and general body language should be enough to do all of these things, save the touching and stroking for when you are not training (you are always training, I know).

Flake was a unsure puppy and needed more encouragement than most other dogs. Lucky we got over that quickly, but the touching habit has not been broken by me. A dog is low, or insecure, when his tail is tucked, ears and whole demeanor are low, won't look you in the eyes, keeps exposing his stomach to you and follows behind you. Then you need to be extremely careful and give him all the support you can. Opposed to that, is the strong bullhead dog that needs progressively harder correction until they toe the line.

It is all a balance, fine adjustments in voice, movements and commands both positive and negative should be made all the time, until you find what is best for you and your dog. Repeated useless corrections are only going to make things harder for both you and the dog. When the dog does something right, praise him immediately and excessively, once he understands, tone the praise down bit by bit until a simple click of the your tongue is all the praise the dog needs, I don't even do that anymore a simple nod, and silent good dog

is all she needs to acknowledge me



I get asked how often I train discipline and obedience My answer is always the same ,I don not train it I live it, it never stops. Feed the dog, sit, stay, okay you can eat now. Door open dog still waits for a command to indicate it's okay to go out, finished outside door still open, dog sits and waits for my command to say she can come in. Open her crate in the back of the car, she waits for a command to get in, same for when she gets out. It is a never ending process. Why? The dog keeps evolving, new experiences, new places,new faces and hormones as they age, but they need to understand the same rules always apply.

Now for a crucial part that relates directly to field work and obedience. It is a contradiction, but a vital part of turning a well trained HPR into a bird machine! You cannot have a good field dog if you have too much discipline! The two do not go hand in hand! It is no use having a remote operated dog that will only do what you tell it to do on a field, for a dog to find birds it has to rely on its senses and experience, not on the handler. Here and only here do you need to back off on the obedience! Your dog needs freedom to make the correct choices and gain experience.

### **Example 1:**

*Trainer and dog arrive at a field test. Dog has no leash from the moment he gets let out of the vechile. Trainer and dog follow after the pairs being released, dog is never more than a arm length away from the trainer, never. Time comes for the pair to run their beat on the field. Dog is released/sent out*



*to work the field, runs left 50 meters, switches, runs right 50 meters switches, goes out 30 meters, cuts back to pass a meter from the trainer. This continues for 5 minutes, until the dog is maybe 70 meters deep and 50 meters wide, dog stops looks back at the trainer and waits for a command. Same scenario plays out the whole 15 minute beat, often accompanied by the trainer blowing on the whistle every minute. This dog is focused on getting it right, it is getting it all wrong!*

## **Example 2:**

*Trainer arrives at a field test, gets out of the vehicle with a leash, is forcing the door open, but also blocking it at the same time until he can slip the leash on the dog. From there he is a weight being dragged after the dog until he and his dog have a beat to run. Leash off dog runs up down, left right finds a hare and 4 hours later the retainer still has not managed to get hold of the dog. This despite blowing himself blue in the face for at least 2 hours on a whistle that has never worked on the dog.*

They may be two extreme examples, but they are real examples of both too much and too little obedience and both end the same way, no birds no score.

There is so much more I want to write on this topic, but it is better to find a Legend and train with him.

While testing dogs may be hard, hunting with them is going to multiply any lack of or excess of obedience. No matter how much of a simulation you do while training, it is nothing compared to the real thing. I have picked up more mistakes under high pressure hunting situations than I ever will simply training, if your HPR is just going to do the circuit of trails you have it easy. If however you are going to use the true potential of the dog and take yourself and your HPR to the limit of your and their abilities, make sure you have a solid foundation in obedience and discipline. *You cannot let*

*go something you never had, you can only let something go if you have it, simple rule for obedience and discipline.*

[More on fieldwork here.](#)

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# **We are Losing Legendary Methods 1 – by T. Mostert**

*Brief intro: here at Dogs & Country we are often looking to publish good articles, articles dog people can benefit from. I (Rossella) was therefore very happy when Tok Mostert, from Sweden, accepted to share his writings with us and our readers. At the moment, unfortunately, I do not have time to translate them in Italian, but if anyone wants to help out with the translation, I'd be happy to share that as well ☐*

## **Part 1: We are losing legendary methods**

Two years ago I came into the hunting dogs world, I knew nothing, I could not make a dog sit or stay, much less retrieve, track or hunt birds. Sure I tried and watched videos and read as much as I could, but it is not the same. I saw a man handle a dog in the field one day, and I understood that I needed help. Needed may be the wrong word, craved is more in line with what I felt.



Flake in Sweden...



You ask opinions on trainers and you get maybe 10 different opinions on every trainer, good, bad, asshole you name it, for everyone that had a good thing to say, there was 10 others with bad things to say. Screw it, I thought, I will find the right help by simply looking at whose dog I see doing what I want my dog to do and ask who help to train him or her. I did not ask for opinions anymore, I set a goal and found a trainer that suited this goal. When I wanted my dog to have discipline, I went to a man called Jeppe Stridh. Almost two years later, I still go to him, because a dog is never finished, you evolve, the dog evolves, you want to test the limits and see how far the dog will go, and most of the time it is the handler that holds the dog back by not challenging him more. This and reinforcing the old commands again and again is a never ending journey, get use to it and enjoy it.

**A few things I remember, sure I forgot many:**

1. *Train the owner to train the dog, much harder than it sounds.*
2. *Learn how to read your dog.*
3. *95% Praise, 5% Correction, always time the correction perfectly.*
4. *Make sure you understand the commands before you try teaching the dog, otherwise keep your mouth shut.*
5. *A collar and a leash are restraints, they can only control a dog by your side. Respect and trust are what makes an invisible leash that stretches as far as your voice, or whistle, carries.*
6. *Do not train with a attitude, dogs do not respond well to assholes (yeah, I heard that a lot).*
7. *If your dog keeps making the same mistake you are doing something wrong, not the dog.*
8. *If you are always doing something wrong, get help.*
9. *Different dogs need different touches while training.*
10. *No matter how good is the trainer you are working with, if you do not put in the effort yourself, you are*

*wasting your time and a good dog!*

I can write a hundred more points to ponder, but that's not the point.



Flake goes to school

Men like Jeppe are few and far in between and we are not taking the opportunities to listen and learn from them. They are the here and now Legends of the dog world that we need to learn from, so all that knowledge will not disappear one day. Not to make us better, but to keep future generations at the top of the game. Yes, dog training evolves and people keep reinventing the wheel, but in the end its results that count and he is one of the Legends who's methodology always works if applied right.

Books, DvD's and video clips are great, but they lack the essential personal touch that a true Legend brings to training a dog. One Legend's method may not fit you or your dog, but there is always one who's method will.

The most common comments I hear from judges these days is that dogs lack discipline. This is where I started with Flake and thus Part 1, Part 2 will cover retrieving and [tracking](#) with a Legend that flies under the radar.

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# 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?



Briony, setter inglese di proprietà di Rosella Di Palma, in guida durante il suo primo censimento a Muggleswick

**È** difficile dire quando tutto abbia avuto inizio. Ricordo solo che da bambina rifiutavo il latte e che il mio lillipese era invece pieno di tè, forse per questo non dormivo mai. All'età di circa quattro anni mi hanno regalato un kilt e un libro sulla Regina Elisabetta, conservo ancora entrambi, a sei ho iniziato il mio primo corso d'inglese. A 11 anni volevo un setter inglese tutto per me e qualche anno dopo lo ho avuto, insieme a una laurea in lingua e letteratura inglese. Grazie al mio primo setter ho scoperto la caccia con il cane da ferma, la cinofilia venatoria e molto altro. Però un pezzo del mosaico continuava a mancare. Adoro il setter inglese come cane da ferma e la sua popolarità in Italia mi rende felice, d'altra parte non condivido alcuni metodi di utilizzo nostrani e, alla stessa stregua, ho sentimenti misti nei confronti delle nostre manifestazioni cinofile. Da sempre avevo la sensazione che ci fosse dell'altro da scoprire. Nel luglio di 2015 ne ho avuto la conferma: sono riuscita ad assistere al Champion Stake inglese (la prova di eccellenza per setter e pointer) e mi si è aperto un mondo nuovo sull'utilizzo e sull'addestramento dei cani da ferma britannici. Una volta rientrata in Italia ho cominciato a lavorare il cane alla luce di quanto avevo visto lassù. Era, il mio, un tipo di addestramento diverso da quello che siamo abituati a vedere, più "tradizionale" probabilmente e più lento nel mostrare i suoi frutti che, tuttavia, come ogni buon raccolto, hanno iniziato a spuntare in primavera 2016. In tutta franchezza il mio obiettivo era semplicemente quello di preparare il cane per le prove italiane e, nel frattempo, tornare in Inghilterra come semplice osservatore per continuare ad apprendere, ma le cose hanno poi preso una piega diversa. Dallo scorso aprile, Briony ha fatto grandi progressi e, un giorno, mentre rientravo dalla zona C mi si è accesa una lampadina: perché, anziché andare a vedere i cani altrui impegnati in prova, non partecipare alle competizioni con la mia setter?

#### La caccia con il cane da ferma: solo per pochi

Per meglio comprendere le prove di lavoro britanniche è necessario avere qualche nozione sulla situazione faunistica locale e sul tipo di lavoro che è normalmente richiesto ai cani da ferma. Mi limiterò a parlare di cani da ferma britannici (i quattro setter e il pointer) e di grouse. Alcune persone mi hanno chiesto informazioni sull'utilizzo dei continentali sulle grouse e se ci siano prove di lavoro su questi selvatici anche per loro. Sì, esistono alcune prove di lavoro su grouse anche per i continentali, ma sono diverse da quelle per inglesi e vengono proposte in numero ridotto, nonché dopo il 12 agosto, giorno di apertura della caccia alla grouse. Quanto all'utilizzo dei continentali, dal vivo ho visto solo un drabhaar allenarsi su un moor, per il resto solo fotografie e video ma, perdonatemi, l'opinione molto franca e poco diplomatica: trevo i cani da ferma continentali fuori luogo in quel contesto! Non metto in dubbio le loro capacità venatorie, anzi, ma non riesco ad accettarli in quel passaggio e con quella funzione, mi fanno lo stesso effetto che mi farebbe un setter inglese intento a riportare una volpe saltando recinzioni. In Gran Bretagna c'è un crescente interesse nei confronti dei cani da ferma continentali, che loro chiamano HPR (Hunt Point & Retrieve), ma il rischio meglio impiegabili sul fagiano o su altri selvatici. Devo poi dichiarare che la caccia con il cane da ferma, in Gran Bretagna, è praticata da pochissimi appassionati. Per gli italiani il cane da ferma è il cane da caccia per eccellenza, per noi è normale uscire di casa con cane e facile e andare a cercare un fagiano, una beccaccia o una lepore, per un inglese questa condotta è molto insolita. I britannici chiamano il nostro modo di andare a caccia rough shooting e sono pochissimi i cacciatori che lo praticano. Forse non è tradizione e, forse, la loro legislazione venatoria non agevola tale pratica: per accedere a un terreno di caccia occorre il permesso

del proprietario (che è titolare della selvaggina) e i luoghi in cui si trovano generalmente i selvatici sono riserve di caccia private, a cui a volte è possibile accedere a pagamento. Ho scritto "a volte" perché non tutte le riserve di caccia sono aperte al pubblico, in alcune cacciano solo i proprietari. L'accesso a una riserva, inoltre, non è legato semplicemente al denaro: la gestione e l'attività venatoria sono organizzate da ciascuna riserva in maniera piuttosto rigida, il che fa sì che possano decidere se ammettere, o meno, un certo tipo di cliente. Alcune riserve, per esempio, praticano solo lo shooting (caccia in battuta all'inglese) e non prevedono alcun tipo di caccia con il cane da ferma: ho avuto modo di allenare in Kent in una riserva dove un setter inglese non aveva mai corso, starnè e fagliani lì si cacciano solo in battuta. In altre riserve, soprattutto in Scozia, è prevista anche la caccia con il cane da ferma, ma i soggetti impiegati vengono procurati dalla riserva stessa, non è previsto che un cacciatore porti il suo cane. Non è impossibile in assoluto ma, fonte la mia esperienza, sono accettati solo eventuali cani conosciuti e ritenuti "sicuri". I cinofili italiani sono abituati ad andare a caccia all'estero con il proprio cane e in alcune nazioni vi sono riserve e strutture organizzate proprio per questo scopo; nel Regno Unito è diverso. Esiste il turismo venatorio, ma è mirato al cacciatore più che al cinofilo. Come deve essere un cane per poter cacciare in Gran Bretagna? Per i britannici il controllo sul cane è vitale. Il cane deve essere corretto al frullo, deve eseguire un terra (o un seduto) a comando, deve seguire le indicazioni del conduttore e deve rientrare quando chiamato. Vi sono territori in cui la densità di selvatici è tale da rendere indifferente un cane simile. Dove si cacciano le grouse ci sono spesso moltissimi conigli (Inghilterra) e lepri (Scozia), greggi di pecore (che il cane deve ignorare) e può capitare anche dell'altro... Le grouse

stesse più in Inghilterra che in Scozia sono molto numerose, una covata può distribuirsi in pochi metri quadrati ed essere seguita da un'altra covata, vicinissima. Un cane non corretto al frullo e non perfettamente sotto controllo diventa ingestibile e può ostacolare il lavoro di tutela dei selvatici messo in atto dai guardiacaccia. Vi sono condizioni faunistiche dei territori italiani, è difficilissimo preparare un cane come preteso dai cacciatori d'Oltre Manica, lo ha dedicato quasi un anno all'obbedienza ferrea, ci sono riuscita, ma è stato estremamente impegnativo.

#### La grouse viene prima di tutto

La differenza nei confronti dei cani è legata al grande rispetto per i selvatici. Il guardiacaccia ha il potere assoluto sul territorio e il suo primo pensiero è tutelare la selvaggina. Se parliamo di grouse, esse nascono e si riproducono in natura, non sono allevabili, il loro ciclo di vita è intimamente legato al clima e al territorio. Il lavoro del guardiacaccia comincia in primavera con i continenti dei riproduttori, continenti che possono essere ostacolati da difficili condizioni climatiche. È proprio il clima a essere la prima minaccia per la grouse: quest'anno, per esempio, ha fatto relativamente poco freddo in inverno, ma ci sono state nevicate primaverili e poi molta pioggia, eventi che in talune zone della Scozia hanno decimato il numero dei naschi nati. Ogni moor è curato dal guardiacaccia (o meglio da uno staff di guardiacaccia) come un giardino: si effettua il controllo dei predatori, si organizza la presenza del bestiame, si pianifica la bruciatura degli appezzamenti di erica, il tutto per garantire all'anatra grouse le migliori condizioni ambientali. Il tutto è curato nel dettaglio e spesso sono piccole astuzie a fare la differenza: una riserva che aveva avuto problemi di scoche (hades



Dennis Longworth durante un censimento a Eggleston

## 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.

## Cani da caccia



ricinus - la stessa zecca che può trasmettere la malattia di Lyme - ha usato le pecore come raccogliatrici di zecche: in pratica venivano mandate in zone infestate, in modo tale che le zecche si attaccassero agli ovini e potessero poi essere uccise con dei trattamenti sugli animali. Il controllo delle zecche è importante, perché possono trasmettere patogeni letali per le grouse. In primavera, come già detto, vengono censiti i riproduttori e in estate si rifanno censimenti per aver chiaro il numero dei capi in vista della stagione venatoria. Per censire vengono normalmente utilizzati i cani da ferma, alcune riserve analizzano anche i segni di presenza degli animali, come fette e altro. I cani impiegati nei censimenti sono soggetti "fidati", in mano a conduttori "fidati", ovvero persone che hanno il cane sotto controllo. Alcune aziende organizzano i censimenti in maniera molto formale e a volte, a fronte di una richiesta di impegno notevole, pagano i cionofili che conducono i cani, riconoscendo la professionalità. In altre realtà, i censimenti

sono meno formali e vengono svolti su base volontaria. L'incaricato sa di dover controllare un dato territorio in un dato periodo, ma vi è più elasticità su tempi e modi. I cionofili sono molto contenti di poter censire gli animali, anche senza retribuzione, poiché i censimenti consentono di addestrare ed allenare i cani. In alcuni casi ai censimenti è presente un guardiacaccia che aiuta a contare i capi individuali e segna su apposite mappe i punti in cui sono stati trovati. In altri contesti invece, il cionofilo è solo e ha la responsabilità di annotare tutto. In entrambi i casi tuttavia, i censimenti vengono presi molto sul serio: la persona a cui è affidato il compito può, a volte, portare con sé altri conduttori e altri cani, ma sotto la sua totale responsabilità. Ho avuto il piacere e l'onore di partecipare ad alcuni censimenti. La prima giornata si è svolta a Meg-glenwick, sotto la responsabilità di Steve Robinson che allena, addestra e conduce setter irlandesi. In mattinata e in presenza del guardiacaccia,

1 Eggleston, Briony in ferma. Terry Harris controlla l'operato di cane e conduttore

2 La grouse si riproduce solo in libertà e in un piano di abbattimento "sbagliato" può compromettere più di una futura stagione di caccia



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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!

Canidascacia



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 can be read [here](#).

Still curious about British trials? Check the section A Month on the Moor or [click here](#).

Slideshow below:

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## Save room for dessert

I like not-so-sweet desserts, and I always save room for them but, in this case, Briony, who came last, was the dessert.

This shooting season, for me, this year is quite quiet... With the exception of today, I had only one proper shooting day, the opening of the shooting season. Then nothing but for two micro-walks in the countryside carrying a shotgun, alone, no boar hunting yet. I really enjoy shooting, but this year it seems to be impossible to keep up with everything. I continue training Briony, attend some trials, work and prepare demanding university exams, sadly is really hard to find any free time to go shooting. Furthermore, nobody wants to come shooting with me, I must be an awful person! No, let's put

jokes aside, the problem is that Briony is steady to flush and fairly obedient, while the average Italian pointing dog is not steady and is usually... well... WILD! It would not be fair to pretend her to be obedient and steady when other dogs are encouraged to misbehave .





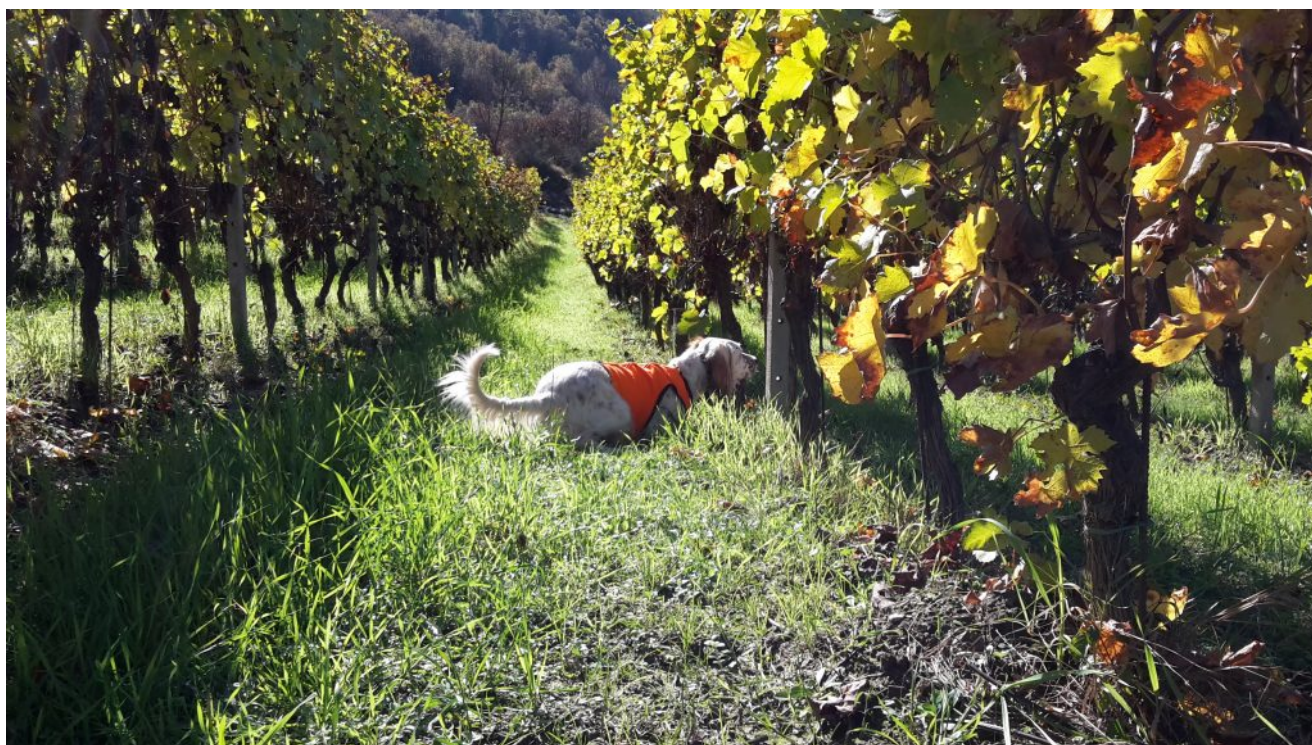
Biting the dessert!

Yesterday night I was commenting a Facebook post by my friend Andrea Vaccari (he has a [nice blog](#) on the Bracco Italiano, if you are interested in the breed). Andrea is a good hunter and a reasonably good trainer: he was complaining because almost all of the Italian hunters, who shoot over pointing dogs, feel the need to have a GPS tracking collar and/or a beeper to locate their furry friend. I agree with Andrea, this is nonsense and often equals to a lack of sportsmanship. People throw dogs out cars, let them run like wild horses and then go looking for them using some high tech device. Some people are really proud of having dogs who hunt (obviously for themselves) one mile ahead of their handler. I found this rather stupid and sometimes even annoying as beepers are extremely loud and can be heard from afar. Also, how can you test important qualities such as trainability, cooperation and connection to the handler? I am not attacking GPS and beepers because I do not like them: technology can be useful but it should not be used as an excuse to avoid training a dog.

When you say something against beepers and GPS collars, people get quite defensive and claim that they have purchased these devices for "safety". Yes, it is true, a GPS collar can be useful if a dog gets lost or something happens, but we are talking about pointing dogs, not about hounds. A pointing dog should hunt close and visible enough to be useful to the gun, which means you have to train the dog to hunt at a reasonable distance from you. If you keep the dog at the proper distance, you can see him and see what happens around him, you do not need a GPS tracking collar. Furthermore, a GPS tracking collar cannot save the dog if the dog is too far: last spring a young setter drowned in a river. He was wearing a GPS collar and the owner witnessed the whole tragedy through the device, he was one mile away from the dog. I think GPS collars give you a false illusion of safety: people think that knowing the dog's location they can save him in case of need, what they do not



consider is that they can be too far. This false illusion, in my opinion, indirectly encourages owners to give more and more freedom to dogs, in the false hope to bag one more bird, and yes birds are scarce here. I was also told that a GPS tracking collar is almost compulsory if you have a German pointing dog because they like chasing deer, people cannot not believe that you can drop a properly trained Deutsch Drahthaar when a deer is present. If you hunt woodcock, however, the beeper is even better – they claim- as you can locate the dog without checking the GPS screen constantly and... Brown dogs cannot be seen in the wood! What about a high visibility orange vest? It is cheaper and it does not make noise.



When I first got involved with pointing dogs, I used to train with Deutsch Drahthaars (German Wirehaired Pointers), these dogs were trained for German Hunting Tests and obedience was incredibly important. I used to admire these dogs (I have a soft spot for these rugged hunters) and their people, I never thought any English Setters could learn the same things. In 2015, instead, I went to England and I saw some English Setters behaving like the Germans I knew, what an awakening! I can candidly admit that for me there is a BE (Before England)



and a AE (After England) era, as my views on dog handling and training radically changed. I eventually came to the conclusion that there are two pointing dog training methods:

- ***The Italian Method: aka let the dog run and do whatever he likes and... chase him;***
- ***The German (but also British, Scandinavian...) Method: aka the dog has to do what you ask him to do, no matter what.***



As a consequence, I now feel a “**little**” out of place and none of my friends has a dog who can go shooting with Briony. The last time she went shooting with other dogs was last year, I was invited to a nice estate and I brought her: huge mistake. Dogs were running all over the place, no obedience, no steadiness nothing AND... guess what, a group of incredibly disappointed dog owners. They could not get close to the birds in time to shoot, birds were flying out of the estate and taking the dogs away with them. It was terrible, Briony was doing well but, being the only dog still around she became an easy target, all that was happening was our fault! Exhausted, I took her back the car and began picking blackthorns, shooters then calmed down, came to me and sincerely apologized. I went back to the grounds, but left Briony in the car, it was the wisest thing to do. This year... I got invited



to the same place again, by some of the same people. They are good friends, I like them and I did not want to disappoint them in any way: we have been shooting together for years and, when Briony was younger, it was thanks to the birds they paid for that she gained experience. I really owe them much, but I did not want to find myself in unpleasant situation again. I kindly accepted the invitation, but I told them I was not going to run Briony. They offered to give me ground for myself, but I refused, I told them I was happy to be their guest and I would have enjoyed their dogs. Briony was going have a run at the end of the shooting day, alone.



When I reached the lunch hut at 9 AM, they had already left so the gamekeeper told me where to go. A pack of SIX English Setters was running all over the hill: I could quickly locate everybody. Two men were on this side of the hill, and two more on the other side. Two shooters were following two (randomly chosen) dogs and the other two were following the remaining three. The sixth dog had disappeared. I joined the first two shooters that passed by me, their setters were wearing a GPS collar because, I was told, they tended to roam. The men disappeared as soon as they came, the two white dogs told them

it was time to move to a different place. The gamekeeper gave up and remained with me for a while: the missing white dog was running wild in a different part of the estate. An "important" client was shooting there, and other keepers were busy trying to catch the white wild dog, I bet he was having a lot of fun. The other friends eventually passed by with their three setters, I followed them for about three hours. The dogs were nice but they worked like a pack. Vento is the leader and the other ones, humans included, follow. These dogs could find birds, point them, honour each other's points and retrieve killed birds, but this game had no rules. Dogs were not steady and did not make a good use of the ground, I could see no logic behind their running but, most of all, they did not mind the owner. Yes, they waited for him as they wanted to retrieve the birds and they knew the birds had to be shot first but, after the bird had fallen and being grabbed in their mouths, they would quickly forget any humans.





Keeping an eye...

By the end of the morning, 18 birds (pheasants and grey partridges) were bagged but, we had gone up and down the hill and in and out of woods and briars walking at least twice on the same ground. Some grey partridge mini-coveys were also flying back and forth, teasing us. When my friends announced they were going back to the car, I went to mine and let Briony have a well deserved run, this is what happened. As soon as we left the car she pointed, she waited for me and then roaded towards the bird, a grey flew from afar, she did not see her but I stopped her. I then told her to go ahead with the action and she did it again, another grey which flew into the bushes. Briony was steady and we could perform the same action again, on a third bird. I then let her "play" again with the greys (now more hidden by briars) until bushes began to thicken to let me keep an eye on her. In less than 20 minutes, I could have bagged about three or four birds, without running back and forth like a comet, without a GPS and without a beeper. I then moved to a more open ground and let her run left and right, practicing some obedience. More greys, undisturbed by my non-chasing dog – were in a wood below us but she had already done what she was supposed to do, and confirmed me that my sacrifices had been definitely worth! I was very happy!!!





When, over lunch, I told people what happened and why I handled the dog in the way I did, they were happy for me and impressed at the same time. Some asked how I trained her, I simply told everybody that it was just hard work and that everybody could do the same. They vaguely agreed, but underlined they had no time to undertake such an intensive training program, Fishing ad hare then became the main topic until...they saw Briony again in the parking lot. She was on lead and she did not do anything special but for behaving nicely and remaining seated if told to do so. There were other unknown shooters around and many of them came to see the "trained" dog: according to some I am very "lucky" to own such a dog. Of course I have been lucky to find her when she was a plumpy puppy but, what came later was not just luck. Luck played an important role because I had a chance to have my British eye opening experience; had a chance to ask questions and get answers; had a chance to have wonderful mentors, but I was also open enough to discard an old system of beliefs and start working hard following a new scheme.

*Ps. If I could make it, you can do it! Peace, love and happy training! I am in a happy/hippie mood tonight!*



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## On steadiness (... and obedience!)

As soon as Briony became steady to flush I, full of pride, posted some videos on Facebook. The road that brought us to steadiness was a long one, I was extremely happy to have reached what, months early, seemed to be unattainable. Briony was originally purchased to be my personal shooting dog and indeed she became a good one. She knew how to locate birds, point, be steady on point and retrieve the killed ones but, like all the Italian shooters, I did not even think to make her steady to wing and shot. I simply did not care and she spent years “chasing” after the bird was produced, until I realized she was good enough to run in field trials.

The videos uploaded slowly but, minutes after they became visible to the public, I began receiving several private



messages. Those messages, in the weeks and months ahead, became questions asked face to face. People wanted to know if I used an e-collar, or if I shoot her in the butt, a very popular method suggested by many (in)famous trainers. My answer was that steadiness derived from obedience, an answer puzzled most of the listeners. They could not believe that the tools I used were a lead, a check cord and a whistle, and the few humans who did believe me asked me to make miracles: a woman sort of wanted me to make is HPR steady overnight using the internet!



I do not have superpowers, but maybe my mentor does, as a matter of fact he is widely known as the “Shaman”, or as “White Feather”. White Feather (from here on WF) has been knowing me for a very long time: I was one of his students at the three months class (!!!) to become a certificate stalker (deer, roe buck, fallow deer, boar...) and he taught me during the course I attended to become a certified biometric data collector (we measure and establish the age of stalked and hunted game). He saw me and interacted with me several times

during trials, gatherings, conferences and so... yet, before accepting to "train" me, he wanted to meet me again and look at me under a different light. Our first formal meeting happened over a cup of espresso, we were seated at table by the street, Briony was on lead and a cat passed by: I prevented any possible reactions and he appreciated that, a training session was scheduled for the following day.

I have to admit I was a little worried, the man was Elena Villa's (that woman won all she could win with GSPs, in Italy and abroad) mentor, he was a well known retired gamekeeper and he had owned, trained, judged and handled hundreds of dogs and shoot over them, in Italy, Germany, Austria and several Eastern European countries. But, most of all, he, himself, probably had the most amazing mentor Italy gave birth to. Born at the end of 1800, Giacomo Griziotti (in my city there are a street and a college dorm in his name) is still deemed to be one of the best judges, handlers, trainers and writers involved with pointing breeds. His first and only book, despite being expensive and hard to find, is still regarded as the Bible, no wonder I was both excited and worried! WF wanted to test me and Briony, if we had passed the test he would have trained us for free, but we had to be perceived to be a good cause.



After another espresso (we both like coffee), we moved to the training ground and I had my first shocking lesson on the meaning of “obedience”. I opened the car and Briony’s cage to let her out. WF quickly made us clear that she could not leave the cage, nor the car without his permission. During the following months, his permission became “my permission”; she had to learn to sit and stay if I had to cross a ditch and then come later, if and when called. While all my friends were enjoying their shooting season, me and Briony were practicing sit/stay/come/drop to whistle daily, whatever the weather and the place. We trained in the countryside, in the city, in the shops, with or without stimuli. It was hard and even depressing: I spent months studying fish inspection for my veterinary degree and practicing sit/stay/drop!



But then it came the day. Not only Briony was dropping to whistle, she was also steady to game and she had become an obedient and reliable dog (and I passed my fish inspection exam as well). Trials came next and all the hard and boring work brought to fruition, but this is another story. At the moment I am still incredulous and proud to be part to such a long standing gundog training tradition.