

# A few more words on gun shyness

The [previous article](#) on gun shyness triggered many reactions. This had pretty much been forecasted, but I hoped to find a larger number of open minded people. In the end, however, I must admit hearing that you, owner, can be deemed responsible for your own dog gun shyness is not pleasant. Modern ethology is not being kind here, and it is much easier to blame the genes, the bitch, the stud or the breeder. Acknowledging the role of environment, upbringing and training is tough, it can make us feel guilty.

What did the readers say? I was told stuff like *"I never introduced the pup to noises, but when the first day of the shooting season came, I brought him with me and shot a whole covey of partridge on his head and nothing happened! The dog is fine! Socialization and all that stuff, bullshit."* If these people had carefully read the first article, they would have realized I wrote that sometimes people are very lucky, and a dog can survive such intense experience, without any prior training. Is luck often that blind? Not really, what most likely happens is that the dog has been exposed to noise and other stimuli, the owner is simply not aware of this. Maybe the pups grew up by the house, or on a farm, where he learnt to recognize the tractor, the lawn mower and other sounds, maybe they were born during a stormy summer and learnt not to fear thunders. Dogs living near humans are generally exposed to noise and this could prevent gun shyness.

It is now time to discuss the second objection *"In the past dogs were not socialized, nor exposed to noise, yet, they were normal"*. This is a false myth. Let's think about the past: about one century ago, almost all the hunting dogs used to belong to rich people. These people had professional staff taking care of the dogs, it is highly unlikely that these dogs

were poorly socialized. What about ordinary people? At a certain moment in history, people with lower incomes started to become interested in hunting dogs. These people were mainly farmers and, usually, had some mixed breed dogs who could work like a hound, a spaniel or a terrier (their contemporary equivalent would be the lurcher). These dogs used to live on the farm, close to their owner, to other humans and to human made noises.

In Italy, lower and middle class hunters began being involved with purebred hunting dogs after WWII, more vigorously from the sixties. At the time, the idea of breeding dogs as a business had not yet been developed and most of the litters were homemade and raised by amateurs. It could be the rich man with his staff or the plain hunter, sharing the burden of raising a litter with his wife and children: dogs and humans, whatever the wealth, used to live close to each other.

Things changed later, as soon as people realized that breeding and selling dogs could become a profitable business. Dogs began to be seen as "livestock" and raised as you would raise a farm animal. Separate living quarters with kennels were built and sometimes multiple litters were raised simultaneously. Pups are nowadays sometimes raised at a distance from human made noises and sometimes experience less interactions with humans. Commercial kennels, however, are not the only ones to blame, hunters have changed as well. Some hunters now live in the city, they do not want to share their apartment with muddy dogs and send them to live "in the countryside" (locked in kennels) paying someone local human being to go feed and clean them. Some hunters have a detached house in the suburbs, but pups destroy gardens so they end up in a kennel far from the house. Hunters return home late from work, they are tired and they do not feel like interacting with their new pup, even if he has a great pedigree and was paid a lot of money.

If the pup would not be such a thoroughbred but just a farm

mutt, things could maybe be easier for him. Some modern purebreds are not that different from thoroughbred horses and are equally nervous and sensitive. We selected these dogs taking speed and reactivity in great account, well... they can now be highly reactive even when we would prefer them not to be. Times and contexts have changed, why people refuse to acknowledge this? I think we should pay more attention to the dogs' needs and remember that the dog is "man best friend". We should put the pup first and do our best to make him grow into a happy and fearless adult. We should no longer bring a gun shy pup back to the breeder asking for a replacement or a refund, we should, in a few words, be responsible of our actions.

PS. Don't forget to take a look at the [Gundog Research Project](#)!

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## Does a gun-shyness gene exist?

I wrote about this on several occasions and, usually, I do not like re-writing about things I already wrote about but, last week, reading an online forum, I realized that gun-shyness is still a mystery.

People buy dogs, mate dogs, collect dogs but never "waste" time trying to educate themselves about dogs or, more simply, trying to switch their brains on. I am not sure whether you are familiar with Patrick Pageat, he is a French veterinarian and animal behaviourist who wrote the book "L'homme et le Chien" (The Man and the Dog), he writes: *"How can a gun-shyness gene exists? How could nature have foreseen gun powder*

*and shotguns?”*

## Le mythe du gène de la peur du fusil

On trouve dans de nombreux ouvrages la description du gène de la peur du coup de fusil ou encore du gène de la peur du bâton, etc. Le gène de la peur du fusil pose cependant un énorme problème théorique qui est celui de l'extrême prévoyance de la nature qui a bien sûr imaginé qu'un jour l'homme inventerait la poudre et le fusil ! On imagine assez difficilement l'ADN préfigurant l'existence des armes à feu... ou alors on entre dans le domaine de la théologie et non plus de la biologie. Ce qui est moins drôle, c'est que des chiens ont été euthanasiés parce que considérés comme porteurs d'un gène qui les rendrait inaptes et donc impropres à la reproduction.

Aujourd'hui, il existe, dans le cadre des épreuves de qualification pour les chiens de défense, ce qu'on appelle le TAN, le test d'aptitude naturelle – notons qu'« aptitude naturelle » sous-entend que c'est inné. Lors de ce TAN, les chiens subissent une épreuve de réaction au tir du pistolet à amorce. Si le chien a peur, c'est *gravissime*, et le chien est considéré comme très mauvais. Or il faut savoir que le TAN a été créé par des gens qui sont eux-mêmes éleveurs et qui vous expliquent froidement que, si un chien a une mauvaise note, c'est qu'il a été mal préparé pour son test. Ce qui est pour le moins étonnant car soit il s'agit effectivement d'aptitudes naturelles et le chien est comme il

est, soit c'est un examen qu'on fait passer au chien après apprentissage et il s'agit donc d'un acquis, ce qui signifie purement et simplement que le gène de la peur du coup de fusil ne peut pas exister.

Obviously, nature could not have predicted shotguns, but some dogs are indeed gun-shy, why? Are they faulty? I hate seeing dogs labelled as "faulty", their behaviour can be explained through a more refined explanation. These dogs are not "faulty": did you know, for instance, that some dogs are more sensitive than others? This has been demonstrated in humans as well, some people are more sensitive to noise, light and so on and this has been proved scientifically. So, yes, some dogs might be more sensitive than others. Is this genetic? I think so and, in my experience, I found gun-shy dogs in some breeds more than in others. These dogs, and more generalizing these breeds, were also more difficult to rehabilitate. Generally speaking, again, these dogs were quite reactive, fast and somehow nervous and... sensitive! It is selection, it is how we want dogs to be: let's try to compare an English Setter (or a Border Collie) and a Neapolitan Mastiff: they are not exactly the same thing.

We should not, however, talk about fear, analyzing sensitivity would be much more appropriate. Are there dogs who are more sensitive to noise? Yes, but being sensitive to something, does not mean being fearful of something. Yet, some dogs are afraid of gunshots, but fear came after sensitivity and was triggered by something external to them. What do most of the fearful dogs have in common? Could environmental factors play a role? Most of the gun-shy dogs I met (in about 20 years spent around gundogs), had indeed something in common: they all had been poorly socialized.

I am not going to write about puppy socialization in this article, but I am going to point that, sometimes, hunters, as well as dog breeders, do not pay enough attention to this fundamental process. The "average" hunting dog is born in the countryside and grows up in a kennel, an environment which tends to be rather silent and lacks of natural stimuli. These quiet, rural settings do not fully prepare the pup for his future life.

Furthermore, once adopted by the new owner, the pup continues living in a similar environment and tends to be left there until he turns 7 or 8 months old. Only a few hunters start training pups early, as they fear they would get “ruined”. Once deemed old enough, the pups are put in the car (so far they had generally been in the car only to go to a veterinarian) and are taken somewhere to be tested on a bird (that is going to be shot), generally on a quail, or, even worse, to a shooting party.



Having had no exposure to gunshots, two things might happen: 1) the dog has a very strong temperament (and his owner is very lucky!) and he does not mind the noise or 2) we witness a disaster and the dog becomes gun-shy. Unfortunately, these things happen and... frequently! I did not invent anything and, sadly, I have seen this happen more than once and I can tell you about people who keep repeating these same mistakes. There are people who end up owning only gun-shy dogs: each pup they purchase will turn in a gun-shy adult. Some of them realized this and now only purchase adult dogs. Some other people, on the other hand, had never owned a gun-shy dog despite having purchased all their dogs as puppies, from different sources..

Let me tell a short story: M. Smith purchased a high quality puppy and raised her in the kennel. Once she turned 7 months old, he introduced her to birds and gunshots with the fore mentioned techniques and she became gun-shy. During the

following YEARS she overcame, more or less, her gun-shyness but her breeder donated a second pup, a sister to the previous one, to Mr. Smith, as a replacement. Mr. Smith, after committing the same mistakes for many years, had the chance to meet some properly socialized puppies and decides raise her differently. The new pup grows up experiencing noises and living different experiences: she is not gun-shy and she is much much bolder than her older sister.

PS. Don't forget to take a look at the [Gundog Research Project](#)!

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## **A Gem from 1956: an Italian at British Trials**

As some of you know, I inherited part of Dr. Ridella library and archive. Dr. Ridella was a veterinarian and an important English Setter breeder, his kennel name was Ticinensis. I feel really honoured to have been chosen as a custodian, but I hate to admit... I dusted and cleaned only half of the materials I have been given. Fifty years of canine magazines (1900-1950), however, are now readable and carefully stored. Knowing about this collection, a friend asked me to look for two peculiar articles written respectively in 1938 and in 1954. I could not find them but, while checking out nearby years, I found something absolutely unexpected, beautiful and fascinating. In the 1956 spring issue of the Rassegna Cinofila (the official name of the Italian Kennel Club Bulletin at the time), I found an article by judge Giulio Colombo (1886-1966). The man was a well known breeder (kennel della Baita) and judge for Setters and Pointers, he also imported some dogs from the UK and tried to keep the connection between Italy and Great Britain alive.



Among his imports we shall remember **Lingfield Mystic** (who won the Derby); **Lingfield Ila**, **Lingfield Puma** and **Bratton Vanity**.



I discovered that, in 1956, he was asked to judge a partridge trial in **Sutton Scotney** (Hampshire – UK) and wrote about his experience. I am not going to translate the full article, I am just summarizing the most important points. (Those interested can see large pictures of the article [here](#) and download the [.pdf file](#)– which can be translated with google translator).

He opens his piece mentioning Laverack, Llewellyn and Lady Auckland (with whom he was judging), and then explains how and why Setters and Pointers were created. He underlines that the game (grouse and grey partridges) and the waste, open and rough grounds forged these superlative breeds so that they could better suit the hunter. He tells us things I still see in the UK: Setters and Pointers are not expected to retrieve; Setters and Pointers must be very trainable and biddable, and that down and drop are fundamental teachings. Dogs must honour the bracemate and must quarter properly: Colombo explains the practical reasons behind all these expectations, this part occupies almost half of the article. His words make me miss what I saw, experienced and learnt during my time in the UK. As I often say, my dog would be very different if I had not seen their trials, and I would also be a much different trainer and handler. But I really like what I am

now!!!

He then informs the reader about the differences (rules) between Italian and British trials: in Britain there is no “minute” (here all mistakes made during the first minute are forgiven); there is no established running time (here is 15 minutes) and good dogs are asked to run a second (and maybe a third round). He also lists the pros and cons of these choices. [You can read more about the differences between Italian and UK trials in my older articles.](#) It is interesting

that he points out that judges, in the UK, do not comment on the dog's work (on the contrary, they are expected to so here) and that explaining what the dog did, in public... often leads the public to believe they know more than the judges.

This proved to be true in my limited experience, watchers (Italian and foreign), despite being several hundred metres away from the dog, see – and foresee- mistakes that handlers and judges, despite being right above the dog

“miss”! I thought, that people in the fifties were more considerate, but, apparently, the art of attributing inexistent faults to other handlers’ dogs has a long standing tradition.

Colombo then describes what he saw during the "**Derby**". I do not know if that Derby is like the current Puppy Derby (for dogs under 2 years, running in a brace) as I cannot understand whether the dogs were running alone or in a brace. He says he saw some back castings, some dogs who needed more training and some dogs who sniffed on the ground/detailed around the quarry too much. Rabbits, hare and pheasant further complicated things. First prize went to **Lenwade Wizard**, Pointer dog owned by Mr. Arthur Rank, 15 months old described as stylish, good gallop, good at handling birds; second prize **Lenwade Whisper**,

Pointer dog owned by Messrs P. P. Wayre's G. F. Jolly, aged 15 months. In the **Brace Stake** he noticed two Irish Setters **Sulhamstead Bey d'Or** and **F. T. Sulhamstead Basil d'Or** who eventually got second prize. As for the **All Aged stake** (which should be like the modern Open Stake), a Weimaraner was supposed to run with setters and pointers but was eventually withdrawn. Colombo was asked by Lady Hove to express his opinion: he seems to have had mixed feelings about what he saw. Let's not forget that he later writes that pointing dogs are no longer common and popular in the UK, that people prefer spaniels and retrievers and Setters and Pointers are decaying. How are things now? Spaniels and retrievers still outnumber pointing dogs and this sounds a bit weird to Italians, being the average Italian hunter/shooter the owner of a pointing dog, most of often of an English Setter. [But... the two realities are very different.](#)

He writes that the "search" in the UK is no longer how it should be, and how it used to be. He states that, previously, the British wanted the dogs to run wider and faster. He says that that was the "ancient" way of interpreting the Grande Cerca. Whereas I read both Laverack and Arkwright, I do not recall anything like that and I am not familiar with other British authors advocating this working style. Also, I have not witnessed the Setter & Pointer early years, so I cannot say if what Colombo claims is true. I would like to remember, however, that Giulio Colombo, besides breeding and judging, in 1950 published the book "**Trialer! An Essay on Gundogs**" on Setters and Pointers. The book became a bestseller, it is still a bestseller indeed, and deeply influenced Italian breeders, judges and fanciers. Giulio Colombo ideal dog was a fast and furious super dog made of



speed, deep castings and excellent nose. He called him *"the pure"*, *"the fool"*, then described him with these words: ***"The Trialer is the producer, the Masterpiece, the famous Artist's painting, the fifty carats diamond, the pure gold"***. ***He is New Year's Day, not the remaining 364 days."***

So, I really wonder whether any British authors had ever outlined such a dog, or whether Colombo just believed an hypothetical British author did or, again, whether he misunderstood some writings (he did not read English, as far as I know). So, basically, I think he was [expecting something different](#) and he did not entirely like what he saw. He complains about "interrupted" runs, short castings, slow runs, small parcels of ground to be explored, searches that gets "limited" by the judges and dogs forced to back on command. He writes that a British sportman defined some of the runs *"Springer Spaniel work"*. Some of these things still happens and might be even more noticeable if you come from Italy, where dogs are asked to run as much, as fast and as wide as they can (the pure, the fool...) and dogs usually back naturally but, our trials have other faults and he admits that, maybe, a British judge attending one of our trials, on a particular unlucky day, would not be impressed by what we show him. Giulio Colombo, however, was skilled enough to see recognize good things at British trials, he admits, for instance, having seen some dogs he really liked. Yes, he says some dogs were "low quality", but equally admits others were outstanding. I share his opinion: some British dogs lack of class, style and pace to compete successfully here but others... are absolutely not inferior to some Made in Italy dogs. I really, really liked some dogs I saw in Britain, and I am sure they would make our judges smile. Colombo mentions **Seguntium Niblick**, Pointer owned Mr. J. Alun Roberts who got

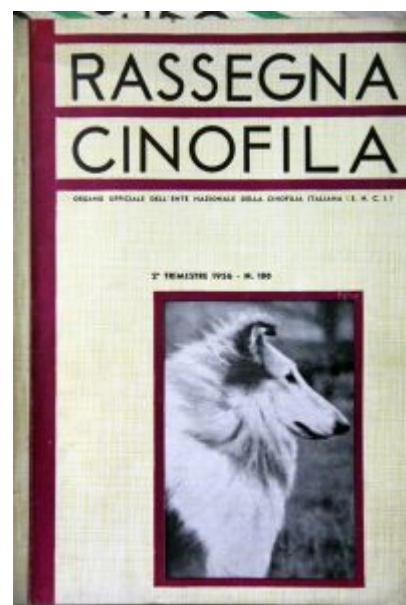


first prize in All Aged Stake; **Scotney Gary**, Pointer owned by Mr. Arthur Rank, second prize; **Scotney Solitaire**, Pointer owned by Mr. Arthur Rank, third prize; **Sulhamstead Basil d'Or** Irish Setter, fourth prize; **Ch. Downsmans Bracken**, English Setter, fifth prize; **Sulhamstead Nina d'Or**, Irish Setter owned by Mrs. Nagle e Miss M. Clarcks and **Flashaway Eve**, English Setter owned by Col. A. S. Dalding. I think he really liked the Flashaway Eve as he describes him as very avid, stylish and very a typical low set gallop, he thinks he has all the features a dog needs to become a FT. Ch. He concludes with a note on **Dero 4° del Trasimeno** who was exported to the UK and is ones of the ancestors of **Scotney Gary** (and of some American dogs) and **Blakfield Gide** stepsister of the Italian **Fast** and **Galf di S. Patrick**. Author tanks those who made his experience possible: **Mr. and Mrs Bank, Lady Auckland, Mr. Buckley, Mr. Binney, Mr. and Mrs. Mac Donald Daly, Mr. and Mrs. William Wiley, Mr. Lovel Clifford**

So which are the key points for contemporary readers? Giulio Colombo outlines the Setter and Pointer history and explains why these dogs should work in a given manner. It is a matter of grounds and of birds: before trials ever existed, these dogs were hunting dogs and had to work all day long for the hunter who wanted to go home with a bag filled with birds. Setters and Pointers were tested in difficult and real hunting situations and it soon became clear which behaviours and attitudes were useful and which were not. The most sought after traits and behaviours were later coded and field trials were born, not viceversa. Dogs used to be tested during real shooting days and then, the best of them, were trialed. Things were like this during the early Pointer and Setter days and, in my opinion, they should not have changed. Nowadays, there are, at least in Italy, FT.Ch. who have never been shot over and, most of all, are trained, handled or owned by people who had never hunted, and never hunted on grounds and birds suitable for these breeds. People therefore do not understand some of field trial rules, nor how the dogs should behave but



they consider themselves “experts”. Colombo mentions steadiness to flush and the commands **down** and **drop**, some of the most misunderstood things in my country. People think (and probably thought, already in 1956), that these commands are taught “just to show off”. On the contrary they can make shooting safer (a steady dog is not likely to be shot) and the drop and the down are extremely useful on open grounds. I am not sure whether Colombo attended grouse trials and, if so, how abundant grouse were but I took me only a couple of minutes to realize the importance of these teachings on a grouse moor. He then remembers why Setters and Pointers are supposed to work in a brace and to quarter in “good” wind while crossing their paths. Dogs should work in a brace to better explore the waste ground and, in doing so, they should work together, in harmony, like a team. Teamwork is very important, yet a dog must work independently from his brace mate and, at the same time, support his job and honour his points, these things shall be written in the genes. Dogs shall also be easy to handle so that they could be handled silently (not to disturb the quarry too much) and always be willing to cooperate with the handler. I don’t think I ever read these last two recommendations on any modern books on Setters and Pointers, have these traits lost importance?



*I think you can now understand why I find Giulio Colombo’s report on Sutton Scotney intriguing and fascinating, but there is more, something personal: like the author, I had the privilege to watch and to take part in British trials, [they mean a lot to me](#), I came back as a different “dog person” and they made me have a “different dog”.*

[You can read more on British trials here.](#)

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# Too much of a gundog – by Tok Mostert

As I walked through the door of the large gunshop, the familiar aroma of gun oil mixed with freshly ground coffee filled my sense of smell. The well stocked bookshelves drew my attention and I headed to the dog training section, maybe hoping to find a quick fix to training a better gundog. With a pile of books under my arms, I settled in the plush leather couch to learn a thing or two, I did learnt something, but not what I wanted.

The generic layout is one thing, but every chapter in every book that covers selecting a puppy may as well have been plagiarism, it is way too one dimensional and generic. Pages and pages of breeders and breeds, what dog does what and how to select your puppy. You can speak to several top trainers and breeders and you will get a diverse opinion on how to select a pup, almost everyone has their own way of picking a dog from a litter. The basics is and always will be, reputable breeder and pure bloodlines. That is a good baseline start, but I have seen untypical dogs that do not adhere to the breed standard hunt circles around the show pony dogs, the same for breed royalty.



## Flake

There is no guarantee that even with the best breeder and the best litter, you will get what you want in a dog, besides the dogs personality there is one essential thing that is going to determine whether the dog turns out to be what you expected, YOU!

As a ex Professional Hunter I'll tell you we used the term over gunned when a client arrived with a large caliber rifle that he could not shoot well, it happens more often than I like, but too much gun is a bad thing, just like too much dog is. The very first consideration anyone should have when selecting a breed or puppy should be their ability or level of experience with training a dog. Hard dogs will find every single weakness you have and exploit it to the fullest! Many, many handlers eventually turn to the e-collar for help out of despair, they should have made it easy on themselves and picked a dog that could suit their ability. I fully understand the wish, need or desire to have a huge, hard working and strong male dog, but can you handle his stubborn manner and contain and channel his exuberance? Anyone that has ever trained two dogs from the same litter, knows that the two individuals need individual training methods and adjustments.

Take a long hard look at yourself and acknowledge your ability and skills, then select a puppy to suite your ability. A first



time owner that knows nothing about training dogs is far better off with a mild mannered dog than a wild spirited dog. Nothing wrong with either, as long as they match your ability.

Too much dog for your ability will simply frustrate and infuriate you, along with making you negative. It is also the reason why some handlers only train what the dog is good at, a sure way of wasting the dogs potential and true ability. Running too much dog that does not listen or obey you, is far worse than running a mild dog that follows your commands and responds to your instructions. You are also more likely to succeed on field and retrieving with the mild dog, blood tracking being the exception were the hard dog may be better.

*Personally I believe even a average breeder can deliver a top dog, it all depends on the handler and trainer. My method may not be conventional or rational, but it works for me. Choose wisely, train smartly and hunt well!*

*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.](#)*

[Next article here](#)