

# 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.

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