



A difficult **BALANCING ACT**

Exercising complete control over your dog but also letting it think for itself is one of our biggest challenges, as **Graham Cox** explains.

The old journalistic adage has it that one picture is worth a thousand words. But what of cartoons? They can have that special quality of really nailing it by combining amusement and genuine insight. They can capture in a single line the universe of challenges and dilemmas that we all wrestle with.

Where dogs are concerned, none does it better than *The New Yorker* which scores so regularly that prints, t-shirts and calendars feature their offerings. One example by Peter Steiner has two dogs in conversation and with an exasperated look one says to the other: "It's always 'Sit', 'Stay', 'Heel' ----- never 'Think', 'Innovate', 'Be yourself.'"

There surely could be no more succinct characterisation of the challenge that lies at the heart of any training programme, whatever the breed. That's because we want our dogs to combine prompt and reliable responsiveness to basic commands with the initiative and flair which makes for effective work in the field. And, if

that work is consistently stylish into the bargain, so much the better: as Colonel Thornton said more than 200 years ago, the 'pleasure and elegance' of shooting depends on the 'good order in which the dogs are kept'.

The bedrock of education

It would be easy to present it as the contrast between control and game finding. That would be too simple by half. Because with gundogs these two elements are assuredly not an either/or matter. On the contrary: they are intimately connected. So much so that one is a precondition for the other. Organised and systematic work in the field, with the possibility of demonstrating real flair, rests on a bedrock of basic education which must be thoroughly instilled if it is to be equal to the challenges of 'battle conditions'. Such truths have long been recognised. That's why H.W. Carlton, in *Spaniels: Their Breaking for Sport and Field Trials*, which ran to five editions between 1915 and 1931, stated 'the first course' is 'by far the most important'.

What makes educating a gundog such a fascinating challenge is the line between responsiveness and flair we are treading continually shifts during a dog's lifetime. We are likely to give older dogs more latitude. So, our progress consists of an often uncertain balancing act. What we have to recognise as well is over time the conception of the proper relationship between the elements we are trying to combine changes too. We can think of it as a moving consensus whilst recognising in the case of field trials - at least so far as stated priorities are concerned - the consensus is a remarkably stable one.

Getting the right balance

To illustrate both of these points, the shifting balance between persistence and change if you like, we can go back almost a century to some notes produced by one of the most prominent figures of the time. H. Reginald Cooke published his *Short*

Suggestions for Judging at Retriever Field Trials, just eight pages, because he felt that on some occasions people, who were not sure of their ability to fill the position, might be called upon to judge. He hoped his suggestions might afford encouragement.

Published when trials were in their infancy, he begins by stating the object of field trials, emphasising their original object was "to encourage the breeding and training of retrievers and to develop and bring to perfection their natural qualities for shooting purposes". And, if the layout and some of his phrases sound familiar, it is because they prefigure in an almost uncanny way successive drafts of the Kennel Club's J Regulations which are with us now. In a bench and field career that spanned 60 years Cooke made up many champions and in trials he won 15 firsts, 10 seconds, 11 reserve prizes and 21 certificates of merit. We can therefore reckon his views were broadly representative.

He writes the judge must approach the task openly, discounting what may have been seen on other occasions. Then, in the paragraph *The Dog Should Find the Bird not the Handler*, he writes: "A Judge should not countenance what may be called trick handling. At recent trials it has become the practice of some handlers who know where a dead bird lies to stop their dog by a series of whistles and so manoeuvre the dog on to the spot where the bird lies. In other words, the handler is finding the bird for his dog, instead of the reverse. This is not true dog work, though it may be evidence of clever training".

The changing definition of good dog work

Notions of what counts as 'true dog work' have clearly changed, though the basic injunction that the dog rather than the handler should find the bird is very much there in today's regulation J (A) 4.g. As is the phrase 'Game Finding the First Importance' which is the title of Cooke's paragraph that urges a judge to give credit to dogs

which work systematically and find a large proportion of dead or wounded game: adding such dogs should not be penalised heavily even if they are "less perfect in small technical points".

Whilst applauding that sentiment, we can recognise Cooke's strictures against 'trick handling' would not be entertained today. The change in attitude came about gradually. In the 1970s I asked Audrey Radclyffe, whose family had first bred the yellow labrador, what the main differences were between trials when she began in the immediate post-war period and now. "Dogs were expected to work their ground out to a retrieve: not so now," she said.

A little booklet, published in 1974, shows just how slow such ideas were to change. *Gundog Training with Andrew Wylie* told the training story through line drawings by Frederick St. Ward and, when it reaches *Unseen Retrieves*, the words in the speech bubble include "a dog must also properly quarter and make good its ground...some dogs when sent on an unseen retrieve will quarter their ground instinctively; others will just run blindly forward". The gulf between such notions and current practice is vast - with handlers regularly guiding the dog straight to the retrieve.

How to reach Nirvana

How best to combine control and game finding flair, so pleasing and effective dog work results, is constantly being reconsidered. That's as it should be. Because what's for sure is there are two outcomes that are easily achieved: though neither is what we want. It's easy to produce a dog so mindlessly obedient it is utterly dependent on the handler and devoid of initiative. The flip-side is the dog runs itself; wildly following its own inclinations and deaf to any command. We have no choice but to think about and take up that challenge: seeking to educate our charges so they are happy to hear the words 'Sit', 'Stay' and 'Heel' while being able to 'Think', 'Innovate' and 'Be themselves'. 🐾