

# All dogs go to heaven

We need to address our own shortcomings before blaming the dog, as **Graham Cox** neatly explains.

Sometimes cartoons can go right to the nub of something with a telling image and a line to match. Over the years *The New Yorker* has been special in this regard. It first appeared in 1925 and by 1930 was well-known for its one-panel comedic commentaries. The topic that soon became more prevalent than any other was the relationship between humans and their pets, and today readers can find at least one dog or cat cartoon in almost every issue. A master of the genre, who became a staff cartoonist in 1970, was Charles Barsotti, who died aged 80 in 2014. His dog character became well known and, in 1996, it appeared on one of three UK postage stamps featuring Barsotti's cartoons. His dog cartoons are in a collection whose title, *They Moved My Bowl*, is one of those utterly simple but great lines that says so much about dog psychology.

One of his most perceptive has an older dog talking sagely to a younger and much smaller version of himself. His message, the one line, is as significant as it is simple, and junior is listening with rapt attention: "All dogs go to heaven, because we're not the ones who screwed up."

As a guiding principle for the training process it could hardly be bettered. Why? Well, because it encourages us to look carefully at our own shortcomings when things begin to go wrong, rather than seeking immediately to deflect attention from

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those inadequacies by blaming those around us: in particular that young dog for whom we entertain such high hopes. It's a useful corrective to the tendency that we all have to suppose that everyone else is wrong except 'thee and me'. And it should be with us at all times, not something that we recollect only when things are going wrong.

## THE WISDOM OF MOXON

It is also effectively exactly the same as the three-word one-liner that the late Peter Moxon, who died in 1995 at the same age as Charles Barsotti, used to repeat regularly. Peter was one of the

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most influential champions of sanity and basic common sense in the training of gundogs. His first article for *The Shooting Times* appeared on October 30, 1943, and for most of the next 50 years he was the magazine's gundog editor. His *Gundogs: Training and Field Trials*, which was first published in 1952 and ran to no fewer than 17

editions, quickly became a 'bible' which many kept by their sides as they set out on what would become illustrious careers. The likes of Jack Davey, Gabrielle Benson, Diane Ryan, among many others, have acknowledged their great debt to an approach which sought to encourage readers to appreciate the problems faced by both dog and trainer.

So, what was the three-word one-liner? It was the clear advice, issued as an instruction, to: "Always blame yourself."

It couldn't be simpler, and yet its import could not be more significant, for it bears on everything we do. There's a whole philosophy in those three words, and it is one which is wholly consistent with the message proclaimed in Barsotti's cartoon. Our first impulse, when something goes a little awry in the education process, should be to ask: "What did the pupil not understand sufficiently well?" And when we have analysed what has gone wrong, our second impulse should be to 'show' the pupil what we want. We need to resolve any confusion that may be evident so that clarity of purpose can replace uncertainty. Of course, there are certain preconditions for such a philosophy to work really effectively, and if we neglect to establish them thoroughly we can expect to 'screw up' big time and the training process will be characterised, to a greater or lesser degree, by struggle and frustration.

## MONEY WON'T BUY A WAGGING TAIL...

Nothing is more vital to future success than the responsiveness which we can build up before any formal training begins. That old line is so true: "Wealth may enable you to get a very fine dog but it won't buy the wag of his tail." Indeed, however much biddability and responsiveness may be there in the genetic inheritance of your dog, the sort of relationship that expresses itself in the wag of a dog's tail has to be worked at. It doesn't



We all want an agreeable shooting companion but to achieve this there can be no shortcuts in training, and no rushing into the field either.

just happen: it builds up over time and feeds on all the nuances of your interactions together. That's why questions about the appropriate age to start training are so hard to respond to. It is because the foundations for the training process are laid continuously from day one. How responsive your youngster is to the more formal elements of a training programme will depend crucially on the sort of relationship you have established together.

Mutual 'trust' and 'respect' will be crucial throughout the training process and they too will be more likely to be evident if the foundations of the whole edifice are not skimped and rushed. The consistent application of the words H.W. Carlton wrote more than 100 years ago – "the first course is by far the most important" – means that no time spent on basics like 'sit', 'stay', 'heel' and the recall is ever wasted.

Remember always that the scent of game and 'battle conditions' will

put the connection you have with your dog under the utmost strain. That elastic which links you will, inevitably at some point, be stretched to breaking point. So it must not break. That will only be avoided, though, if the key building blocks have been conscientiously laid.

### PATIENCE IS PARAMOUNT

But first we must avoid succumbing to the temptation which is linked to the most prevalent way of 'screwing-up'. Indeed, it is so common that we could justifiably consider it the norm. The temptation is one we are all prone to. It's that desperate desire to see the results of our educative efforts. Fired with enthusiasm, we are inclined to 'test' our dogs just to see if they will do something we have been working on. There should be no 'if' about it. We should be so confident that all the preparation has been thoroughly done that the 'performance' is pretty much a foregone conclusion.

The most prevalent way of 'screwing-up' is, I suppose, that temptation writ large. We see it all the time when young dogs are exposed to 'battle conditions' – whether it be shooting, beating or picking-up – before the basics have been satisfactorily instilled. Such 'learning on the job' works, again and again it has to be said, to some degree. But it's only minimal: for that sort of wild and untutored competence is as often disruptive as it is constructive. Excuses become the order of the day while the occasional success is endlessly lauded and exaggerated. An agreeable shooting companion, which is surely what we all want, is something else again. Patience and thoroughness when seeking to produce one are not an option. They have to be at the heart of the whole process if we are to have any chance of not screwing-up. What was it Eric Baldwin used to say? "There's many a dog that's ruined before it's three." He'd still be saying it now. 🐾