

DON'T ACCEPT SECOND BEST

Alan Thornton and the Willowyck Academy are two names firmly established on the honours board of British gundog training and trialling over the last 40 years, and rightly so, as **Graham Cox** explains.

My book *The Gun's Dog* is driven by a philosophy, itself based on the distinction between two contrasting accounts of how we acquire competences. The first supposes there can be a set of formal instructions – a 'complete recipe' if you like – which enables a range of tasks to be accomplished. When we are dealing with the acquisition of skills, though, a second more culturally based account makes more sense. Here knowledge is seen as

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based not so much in the words and symbols as in the community of expert practitioners. Individuals must acquire their knowledge by contact with the relevant community rather than by transferring programmes of instruction.

It was teaching case studies in the history and philosophy of science over many years at the University of Bath that, more than anything else, convinced me of the force of the distinction. So, when I encountered Willowyck in Gloucestershire 30 and more years ago, it was natural for me

almost immediately to characterise it as 'The Willowyck Academy': here was an expert practitioner who was a gifted communicator as well. And as the years passed it became more and more apparent just how appropriate the title I had given it was. Indeed, the list of those who have passed through its portals and benefitted from Alan Thornton's insights is a long and illustrious one.

A VERY PURPLE PATCH

This genius in the transference of skills honed his own in the early 1970s when he handled dogs in trials for the late Roy Blake whose Flightline Gypsy he qualified for the 1972 championship. Philip White of Swinbrook Labradors, with whom he trained and picked-up, was a great mentor at the time and in 1977 at Sandringham Alan won his first championship award, a diploma of merit, with Mr Blake's Combe Samba of Chilbrook, another bitch. After Mr Blake's death he took over the Chilbrook kennels and started running his own dogs.

Asked about them the name he will always mention first is 'Patch', whose portrait hangs above the Willowyck dining table. Bred by his sister, FTCh Shinshail Apache is the foundation dog behind Willowyck lines and with good reason because in the 1980s he qualified for the championship five years in a row, taking a reserve place in 1981 at Arniston, third the following year at Sandringham and second in

the 1985 torrents at Welbeck. That, of course, was the first of John Halstead's three successive wins with FTCh Breeze of Drakeshead and their rivalry was as keen as their friendship.

Those whose eyes are trained on the record books will likely mention the 1990 Retriever Champion FTCh Tasco Dancing Brave of Willowyck. Sired by Patch and bred by the late Mary Rountree out of her Swinbrook Stonefly, he put together a record to match that of his sire, running in four successive championships. He took a third in 1989 at Keeper's Quick in Devon and then, the following year, eclipsed his sire with his win at Kinpurnie, by Dundee. Alan always acknowledges his luck in getting Brave from Mary Rountree as a young dog who Mary had found uncongenial. Hours of dedicated training followed before Brave was ready for trials: this from a man who often remarks that "there are trial dogs and dogs that go trialling".

EASIEST IS NOT ALWAYS BEST

Brave's consistency and gamefinding excellence certainly made the effort worth it. But his success exemplified the care that Alan takes to 'read' dogs as a basis for bringing out the best in them. Certainly, his favourite dogs to work with are not the ones that are necessarily the easiest to train but, rather, the ones in whom he can see an underlying ability and responsiveness that he wants to work with.

That's the approach he takes with his endless stream of human pupils, too. He certainly wasn't at the meeting of field trial men held in the Kennel Club a few months before the outbreak of the First World War, at which one of those present said that the supporters of retriever trials were committed to 'the good discipline of aiming at excellence', but he would have wholeheartedly agreed, for his own brilliant one-liner, 'if you don't accept second best, you'll get the best' embodies that same commitment to work. In his case the 'work' always



Alan Thornton and Shinshail Apache at work in the mist at Sherfield English during the 1984 IGL Retriever Championship at Stratfield Saye.

involves understanding the dog so that it can be 'shown' what is required. It's a philosophy he's ever ready to share with humans. Indeed, that word 'share' epitomises his whole approach.

LEARNING FROM THE CARDS

Nothing exemplifies the approach more than the Field Trial Game which he devised and promoted many years before the Kennel Club had even thought of the Judges' Education Programme, which is now in its 10th year. Alan's 'game' involved packs of cards, on each of which were written some typical or not so typical trialling circumstance. With cards shuffled they were turned up, one by one, and various scenarios were created with those acting as judges having to decide how the situation should be handled and assessed. It was testing and fun, often with the extra challenge of having numbers of very experienced judges in the room. Alan, himself, judged the IGL Retriever

Championship four times between 1993 and 1998, and playing the game with him and Philip White who judged it seven times between 1974 and 2005 in the room was a privilege.

As an educational experience it could hardly be bettered. Awareness of the importance of 'order of sending', for instance, was considerably increased and no-one did more to emphasise that than Tess Lawrence, Alan's partner at Willowyck, who would win the championship herself in 2007 with FTCh Willowyck Ruff. A hugely significant sire himself, he was a great grandson of Patch on the bitch side. Previously second, third three times and the recipient of four diplomas of merit, Tess qualified him from 2003 to 2007 missing out only in 2005 when she herself judged at Drumlanrig. Ruff was three before things really came together so his career was tribute to the studied application which characterises the Willowyck approach.

NO SUBSTITUTE FOR EXPERIENCE

True to his country roots Alan, when asked about his training, seems - if anything - unassuming. He recognises that each dog is unique and does not believe that 'one size fits all' rules about training are the best way to help people. He's a gifted and often counter-intuitive problem solver and his ability to be that is based, of course, on a lifetime's experience and the insight it makes possible. That culturally based account of our knowledge acquisition, that *The Gun's Dog* is based on, foregrounds craft skills: skills which are utterly vital to success and which cannot easily be encapsulated in sets of rules. Words matter, too, of course. How could I not believe that? And, that's why I really hope that Alan - himself an enthusiast who has a fantastic collection of sporting books - will set down some of his own thoughts. 🐾