



# Graham Cox

Natural, or what?

**A**NYTHING NATURAL, LIKE MOTHERHOOD and apple pie, is good news. All the word's connotations are positive: so already you are thinking of something wholesome, worthy and without contrivance. With things natural we are, in short, firmly camped in 'what you see is what you get' territory.

Consider it for a moment, though, and things are not so simple: not least because the natural game-finding mantra is so often used as a stick to beat those who try to combine game-finding and handle ability. It is an argument that has ever been with us: writing in his 1947 book *Retrievers*, B. B. Riviere talks of those who write "disparagingly of 'Field Trial Dogs' as compared with 'ordinary shooting dogs'".

However misplaced, that disparaging argument never goes away. Part of the reason, surely, is that it is so much easier to define natural game-finding in terms of what it is not. So it's the dog which is not one that is over dependent, lacking in drive and initiative, and where the handler rather than the dog typically finds the game. Whilst control at the service of game-finding can enhance performance in the field, control so comprehensive that it stifles any hint of flair is rightly condemned.

But, if too much control, or rather inappropriately deployed control, is an absolute disaster, does it mean the absence of it is unalloyed good news? Somehow, I don't think so. If natural game-finding consisted of dogs doing what comes naturally they would just be running about. In

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relation to gundogs, the notion of 'the natural' as something devoid of contrivance, something which is just as it comes, is thoroughly misleading. As we educate our gundogs we go in for a great deal of contrivance. And I don't just mean all the things encompassed by that marvellous old phrase 'yard training': I mean natural gamefinding as well.

But, just as hounds have to be entered and learn their craft, so the celebrated 'runner getter' has to start somewhere.

Although the performance ends up by looking the epitome of doing what comes naturally, in reality it's the outcome of the care we took early on to introduce and develop the notion of working a line. Balls, dummies, cord and so on are the contrivances which we use to produce the natural. If that seems paradoxical, it shouldn't. Something which we regard as characteristic of natural game-finding proves to be a potential or capability which the dog already has.

Take any quality which we admire and we'll find, more



often than not, it's the result of carefully nurturing, sometimes subverting and invariably re-directing in some way a dog's natural impulses. We greatly value, and rightly so, a dog that will hold ground: that is, persist in its work in a controlled way, even though success is not coming its way. Our efforts to encourage that in early training include getting the dog used to the idea of hunting again a piece of ground it may think it has already thoroughly done. Admirable it certainly is: but it's anything but natural. A dog left

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to its own devices would be off to try somewhere else.

In fact, persistence, so often a precondition for displays of natural game-finding, really has to be built up over a period of time in a gradual and very conscious way. Initiative and drive can both, to a degree, be nurtured and will make the attainment of high levels of persistence easier. The important thing to appreciate is that many manifestations of natural ability in the mature dog will be the happy outcome of early efforts to nurture and direct the potential which decades and decades of breeding has created.

So, taking 'natural game-finding to be of first importance' proves to be a vitally important statement of priorities, rather than a literal truth. Natural game-finding is not something entirely different from training and control. It's part of a package where all the elements are utterly inter-dependent. As that great dancer Gene Kelly put it, "If it looks like you're working you ain't working hard enough." Not for nothing do the Field Trial Regulations say that, "Usually the best dog seems to require the least handling. It appears to have an instinctive knowledge of direction and makes a difficult find look simple and easy."

You might almost say that it just did things naturally. But, with Kelly's dictum in mind, you'd probably have to add that it was the product of much hard work. ■