



# Graham Cox

New tricks for old dogs - keep them listening.

**W**E ALL LOVE OUR older dogs. After all, they've grown into our ways and probably developed a fair few more or less endearing ones of their own. Where gundogs are concerned the advantages associated with getting older are so obvious they barely need to be spelled out. As Brigitte Bardot once wistfully mused: "It may be sad to grow old, but it's nice to ripen."

The gundog that has ripened is familiar to us all. With that admirable experience, and the competence that goes with it, comes a no less familiar tendency to develop a mind of its own. Extreme versions of this tendency, of course, result in the dog which 'runs itself.' But that's another story. I am concerned for now with the basically steady dog which becomes very confident that it can find things 'on its nose'. The upside of this, of course, and one we rightly applaud, is the ability to demonstrate real game finding ability: the downside, if we acquiesce in its happening, is a progressive decline in responsiveness.

With gundogs, whether or not physical decline is an aspect of getting older, independence of mind almost invariably is. However, if independence of mind translates itself into total self reliance and the disregard of the human part of the partnership that typically goes with it, we are nowhere. For, however much we may admire some of the qualities of such dogs, we certainly do not have an agreeable shooting companion.

Let's try to get to the heart of what I am saying by introducing a word I haven't used until now: secure. It occurs in an interesting observation by a great conductor about his orchestra. Although Christophe Von Dohnanyi finds it difficult to describe the 'Cleveland sound' he suggests that: "It was always very clear, with a tendency to dryness, and perhaps a little too focused on the beat. I have tried to get them to forget about barlines and become more responsive. If

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musicians are too secure, they stop listening. The great need is to get them to listen to one another."

Substitute the word gundogs for the word musicians in that last sentence but one and you have, I suspect, the nub of the problem with older dogs. They, in short, feel secure and are all too inclined to stop listening. The signs of this are apparent enough, even when training with canvas dummies. Instead of marking the fall of a thrown dummy carefully, the secure older dog may content itself with getting a general fix on direction and range, confident that if it hunts the area for long enough it will succeed. That sort of security is often missing in field conditions where birds can plane on considerable distances and complacency is really misplaced. The dog that hunts its way out to a retrieve, refusing to pay any heed to help that might be offered, wastes time and energy and, if walking up, will probably disturb ground as well.

That is why with older, experienced dogs periodic refresher 'courses' in basic obedience are a sensible idea. The word is in scare quotes because otherwise it would seem too grand and formal. Five or ten minutes a day for a few days can work wonders: the whole point being to put brakes on that process of stopping listening. All dogs, especially older ones, are doing it all the time so never mind that the season is well underway. It's not something that has to be put off until next spring. When it comes to making sure that the dog handler relationship stays worthy of the name there is no time like the present.

The world of field trials has furnished some spectacular examples of the way quality, temperament and, above all, responsiveness can be sustained, and even enhanced, with advancing years. In retrievers one thinks immediately of two dogs: both black labradors. Tony Parnell's FTCh Blackharn Jonty qualified for five successive Championships and was still running in the English team in the CLA Game Fair International at the age of 10. More recently the late Mrs Heywood Lonsdale's FTCh Ulstare Style, campaigned so effectively by John Halsted, qualified for the Championship seven years in a row, twice coming second. And he too was anchoring the English team long after most dogs have developed cloth ears.

Such dogs may be splendid exceptions: but they are, by that very token, beacons of possibility. By taking eternal vigilance seriously even our older dogs can stay sharp. And they'll thank us for taking the trouble. □

**Older dogs can suffer a decline in responsiveness as they age. Keep them refreshed with basic training.**

