



JAYNE COLEY

Jayne is a labrador and retriever expert and top level field trialer. She has been both a competitor and a judge at the very pinnacle of the sport, the IGL Retriever Championship. In 2012 she came third with FTCh Waterford Ganton and competed again in 2013, once again making it through to the final day.



BEN RANDALL

Ben runs Beggarbush Gundog Kennels and Ledbury Lodge Kennels where he breeds and trains dogs for the shooting field. He is a two-time winner of the Cocker Spaniel Championship and is the 2013 Gundog Trainer of the Year.

CANINE QUANDARIES

Our panel of gundog experts answer your questions.

Q: My labrador retrieves well except for one issue. When she has given me the bird, she snaps at it again, grabbing at the tail feathers. How do I stop her from doing this?

JAYNE: Practise at home with a cold pheasant to start with, but I suspect she will only do this in the shooting field, when her excitement levels are up. When she brings the bird to you, calmly take it with one hand. Have your other hand ready to push her away should she try to grab the bird and, at the same time, say: "No". Keep calm and focused when you do this.

Have your free hand ready to push your dog away if she tries to grab the bird



Q: My springer is great at retrieving birds she can see in the open, or birds she has seen fall into cover, but she really struggles with blind retrieves, quickly losing interest in my hand signals and looking elsewhere for easier birds. How do I combat this?

BEN: This is a tricky one. Firstly, one must try to identify what has gone wrong in order to establish how to resolve it. It would suggest that some stage in your dog's training has been rushed.

In training, you should always

start with easy, seen and marked retrieves to gradually build up the confidence of the dog. The idea is to build your dog's trust in your hand signals. So, in the same way that we start with the easy seen retrieves, we must progress with easy and short blind retrieves in cover. A blind retrieve, or retrieve in cover, is very different in that the dog must rely a lot more on its own natural ability and the directional work from the handler. So if you start short, where the dog will quickly find the dummy, it will build confidence and stop boredom from setting in.

Also, progress from open to lightly-covered areas and then progress gradually into more dense cover. The key is not to rush any stage of your dog's training.



Start with short, seen retrieves in cover

Q: On the first drive of a shoot day, my three-year-old lab shivers with excitement and is somewhat erratic in her obedience. She improves as the day goes on and she calms down and listens more. Is there a way to keep her calm from the off though?

JAYNE: Put a lead on her when you get her out of your vehicle and walk to your peg. Dogs soon twig that once the horn is blown, work commences, so just slow everything down. She needs to learn that she retrieves in your time, not hers. If you have several birds down, especially if any are close to one another, leave her sitting up and pick up a few by hand. Quietly and calmly send her for the other birds. Put her back on a lead when you walk back. By doing this, you know she is at your side behaving herself, and you can relax and chat with the other Guns. If she calms down during the course of the day, gradually keep her off the lead, but see how she goes. Leads are so useful – always have one in your pocket.



Always have a lead with you

Q: My young cocker had a bad attack from another dog while in the field this season and now acts very nervously around bigger dogs. How do I build her confidence?

BEN: Sadly, this can be fairly common on local shoots where dogs are out of cars, free-roaming. More often than not, a pack mentality develops and an aggressive alpha male might assert its authority over younger dogs. This is really frustrating as it can undo a lot of the hard work you've done in building your dog's confidence.

To avoid this happening in the first place, I would keep any younger dogs on the lead in a controlled way, away from other dogs. However, as this has already happened in your case, I would suggest taking your dog to group training sessions where all dogs will be kept under control. This will gradually build your dog's confidence back up.

Q: Can a lab bitch in the early stages of pregnancy still do a day's work?

JAYNE: Yes you can still work her – indeed she is better off keeping fit – but be sensible.

I would avoid putting her in water, especially ponds, in case she picks up an infection. If she is a hunting machine, make sure she does not overdo things, especially if it's a big day, the terrain is hard and/or the weather is warm. Be careful about her jumping fences and always have plenty of fresh water in your vehicle to offer her inbetween drives.



When introducing your dog to the gun, begin with a starting pistol or a .410

Q: I have a young lab who is coming along brilliantly with his training but am yet to introduce him to gun shot. At what point is it best to do this, and how should I go about it?

BEN: This really depends on the individual dog. Only once your lab is completely confident in its training and retrieving, would I recommend introducing a loud clap every time you throw a dummy to simulate a shot. But start doing this at a distance, away from him.

Build this up over a couple of weeks while gradually reducing the distance between you and the dog until it is confident, comfortable and not distracted by the clap. Then introduce the starting pistol, again, at a distance. Once the dog is confident with a starting pistol, I will then gradually progress from a .410 to a 20 bore and finally a 12.

Once you feel that your dog is ready for the real thing, start on a small walked-up shoot where there will not be a huge amount of shooting. The key is gradual progress, don't rush. If you rush this, you could ruin him for life.

JAYNE: I completely agree with Ben. I do not introduce the gun until my young dog is steady and consistent with thrown or placed dummies.

Another thing that can be useful is taking your young dog to your local shooting school or a clay shoot. If you also have an older dog, take him along too for reassurance. Park at the far end of the car park and open the back of your vehicle. See how your young dog reacts. If he is quite happy and relaxed, put him and your other dog on leads and quietly walk them around, gradually getting closer to the shooting as long as your young dog is happy, relaxed and unfazed by the noise.



A quick, clean way of dispatching a bird

Q: When your dog retrieves wounded game, what do you find to be the most effective and humane way of dispatch?

BEN: First and foremost, the dog must be trained well enough and capable of retrieving injured or wounded game. You often see dogs struggling to retrieve wounded game, often losing the bird in the process.

All gundog handlers should have the means to kill a pheasant. I recommend using a humane dispatcher which is like a pair of pliers, a very quick and clean way to dispatch a wounded bird.

JAYNE: I agree. Alternatively, if you do not have a dispatcher, simply hold the bird by both wings above its body, which makes it extend its neck, then give it a sharp tap on the back of its head with a suitably heavy priest or stick.

Q: When training to heel, is it always best to teach your dog to stick to one side?

JAYNE: Yes, it is important to keep it simple. If your dog constantly changes sides you could end up with it under your feet, which could prove unsafe should you be carrying a gun.

BEN: I agree with Jayne. In my experience, most right-handed gundog handlers prefer their dog to walk on their left-hand-side, especially if you are shooting/carrying a gun. And as Jayne says, you do not want the dog moving across you and swapping sides as you walk, particularly if you are carrying a gun.

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Q: When on a shoot, do you like to retrieve wounded birds during the drive or wait until the whistle?

BEN: All shoots are different. The general etiquette is to wait until the end of the drive. However, it is our moral obligation to pick a wounded bird as quickly as possible. Particularly if it is a runner. My own personal belief is that, while I am picking-up, irrespective of what is going on during the drive, if I see a wounded bird and

know that my dog can make the retrieve quickly, I will do so.

JAYNE: If it is a peg dog, the quickest way to make him unsteady is to send him for runners while the drive is on, so if it is a young dog that is still learning, the answer would be no. Leave it to the picking-up team.

However, if you are picking-up and stood well back from the Guns, some birds need to be picked and dispatched as quickly as possible, otherwise you might never catch up with them.

