

STRIVING FOR PERFECTION

In esteemed canine company, Will Pocklington joins gundog expert Ben Randall to learn more about the value of gundog training days as a platform for polishing your dog's performance in the field.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ALISON SPIERS

Think of the final stages of preparation in any sport: zeroing in the rifle before stalking, practising that bogey target at the clay ground, even polishing one's short game from a bunker in golf, or running through a drill on the rugby field so that it becomes effortless during the match. The groundwork has long since been laid, the training regime followed closely, and all aspects ingrained through practice. The final step is 'fine-tuning' – and, when applied correctly to gundog training, can turn competitors into champions, and good dogs into great dogs.

And so was the theme of a recent training day I attended, run by *Fieldsports* gundog guru Ben Randall. A chance to polish performances, iron out problems, and prepare both dog and

handler for field trials and shoot days.

After meeting Ben and the team of seven other Guns – all hand-picked 'dog men' themselves – at the new Beggarbush Gundogs shoot room, slurping down a quick cup of coffee and running through a low-down on the general format of the day, we drove to our cider orchard rendezvous point with the team of handlers, the rows of trees offering natural parking bays. Welcome to Herefordshire.

A fat slice of fruitcake and a snifter of sloe gin was followed by a briefing for both Guns and handlers, and we were soon ready for the off. It became increasingly clear why the handlers see these days as the perfect opportunity to bridge the gap between fully trained prospect, and bombproof gundog in the field – the atmosphere had a distinct shoot day feel. Given the mixture of excitement of other dogs, people and game thrown in, it couldn't get any closer to the real thing.

Ben has been running these training days for five years now on the same ground, by kind permission of landowner Derek Lloyd. Hosting 18 days this season, throughout September and October, a diverse range of dogs and handlers attend – many of them returning clients and several of them making the trip from overseas.

The day of my visit was no different. Cockers, springers, labradors, and HPRs – even a brace of korthals griffon – interspersed the line as we walked through the first field of turnips. The majority of the dogs walked to heel, off the lead, with a few spaniels quartering the ground closely ahead, helping to flush the partridges which were our quarry for the day. The different breeds of dogs made for an interesting mixture of styles – from the quick quartering spaniels, zipping from side to side, to the Danish Retriever Championship winner – a five-year-old powerhouse labrador dog, who was a true pleasure to watch as he thrashed through the turnips under the direction of his handler, Carsten Nissen.

The cover was thick and the land gently undulating, rendering visibility between dog and handler variable, and testing the communication between them. With only a little rain the previous night, the cover was dry, more so as the day progressed, which made for tricky scenting conditions. The dogs really had to work hard for a number of the retrieves.

Split into three parts, walking two fields each session, dogs and handlers alike were able to rehydrate and refuel at a mid-morning break and then again at lunch – well-earned in the warm weather.

Retrieves ranged from close-in to long distance, offering a variety of options for handlers who wanted to hone specific areas of their dogs' performances. The steady pace of the day meant that handlers could take their time and correct mistakes, something that a field trial or even a shoot day would not allow. Indeed, there are similar days run by gamekeepers and shoot captains across the country, but how many of these have a professional gundog trainer on hand to help identify, advise on and correct mistakes, with time allowed for actual training? The term 'surround yourself with those on the same mission as you' could not have been more fitting. On this particular day, in the same line was a two-time Cocker Championship winner, the European Cocker Championship winner and the Danish Retriever Championship winner. But make no mistake, this is not by sheer coincidence.

TRAINING FOR TRIALLING

Run in a very similar fashion to an official field trial, but without the judges and with





Ben directing his dog Duke to a marked partridge along the line of Guns and other handlers

more time, this type of training imitates the exact challenges that the handlers are likely to encounter during field trials. It soon became clear that striving for perfection is key in the final stages of a gundog's development. With his own young black lab, Duke, Ben addressed every minor fault, offering a clear example of how to take advantage of the opportunity to do so on such a day. Upon marking a shot bird and sending Duke for the retrieve, if the dog strayed slightly from line set for it by Ben, he would recall the dog and start again, until he was inch perfect. This is how field trials are won. "Many handlers will wait for the dog to go wrong and then go out to it before letting it resume hunting," said Ben. "It is almost like saying – that's fine, you've gone wrong, but I'm going to let you have it anyway. "By recalling the dog back as soon as it goes wrong – hence all the time practising the recall and repeating this until he is bang-on – it tells the dog that until he goes exactly where I say, he is not going to be allowed the retrieve," he continued. "Of course, if he'd done that in the first place it would have been an excellent retrieve, but you have to practise – and that's what these days are all about." Another experimental retrieve saw a dog sent the length of the line to pick a bird over 100 yards away, a few feet away from another dog and handler. With the wind direction masking scent, distraction was rife – a tough test. But it's not just beneficial for the dogs. It is important that the handlers, too, can hone their communication skills with their dogs whilst



The team

improving their ability to mark shot birds with pin-point accuracy. After all, you can own the best dog in the world, but if you're sending it to the wrong place it will struggle to find the bird. "One of the greatest advantages of these training days is learning how to 'jockey' your dogs," Ben emphasised. "I'll often stress the importance of proper handling. You must assess the wind, the ground, any obstacles, and handle your dog in a way that will result in the easiest retrieve possible. "It is often the simplest of things. For example, if a bird has dropped at the 12 o'clock position, and the wind is blowing strong, left to right, cast the dog to the 1 o'clock position and it will pick up scent much faster, resulting in an easier retrieve."

PRIMED FOR THE SHOOTING FIELD

This calibre of training day is also the ideal introduction to the shooting field for gundogs and is equally useful for reinforcing training with older, more experienced dogs that are to



The perfect introduction to the shooting field

be stood in or behind the line of Guns. The dogs have to learn to watch half a dozen birds being flushed, shot and then retrieved before they are sent for one. And many will wait even longer. "Restraint and patience are key characteristics for a gundog," continues Ben. "By the time a dog joins us on these training days, it will have been through its full training regime and so you know that it can work to the whistle, stop on command, retrieve and present the bird properly. But here you can demonstrate to the



Carsten Nissen handling the Danish Retriever Champion

dog that not every retrieve is for him, which is why those here today alternate between retrieves, and some won't even allow their dog a retrieve in the morning. We want to make sure they are absolutely bombproof when they work in the shooting field. The more the dog has, the more the dog wants, and the harder he is to control."

BRIDGING THE GAP, BY PROFESSOR SIMON ALLISON

Walking up partridges in roots takes me back to my boyhood and early shooting days with my father after the war. I still recall my excitement as the covey we were pursuing whirred into the air. In recent times, however, such days devoted to dog training have provided a great opportunity to initiate young dogs into the shooting field and to bridge the gap between basic training at home and the demands and temptations of 'the real thing'.

Training days of this sort fulfil several important functions in a gundog's development. A young dog is often bewildered and confused when first taken out in company. One of the main purposes of such days is to accustom the dog to other people and dogs, and to all the noise and activity of the shooting field. Formal shooting, whether driven or walked-up, is dominated by the interests of the Guns, who may be impatient to get on to the next drive rather than waiting for a young dog to be guided patiently in its hunting or retrieving.

When the day is run by a good trainer, it is not only an opportunity to initiate young dogs and to brush up the training and steadiness of older dogs at the beginning of the shooting season, but also a chance for amateur dog-owners to be coached in their handling skills. It is a golden rule that, before training your dog, you should get yourself trained, since problems in the field are more often due to bad handling and deficient basic training than to any intrinsic fault in the dog itself. It is axiomatic that no dog should be taken out on a training day of this sort without having completed a thorough basic training at home.

In contrast to practice on a formal day, the shooting on these days is secondary to the training. Handlers, guided by the trainer, are given every opportunity to correct their dogs, and, when a bird is shot, everything stops until the bird is successfully retrieved, which may



Professor Simon Allison is an A Panel spaniel judge and vastly experienced gundog handler. After 50 years of training using his own way, at the age of 76, Simon won a field trial with springer spaniel, Max, having followed the principles of Ben's foundation training, based on canine psychology.

require attempts by several dogs in succession. Working in roots may not involve every aspect of gundog training but it is ideal for teaching a dog to mark, for developing a good hunting pattern and steadiness in spaniels, and for handlers to be able to see and correct any errors, i.e. running in or disobedience to command.

Having spaniels and retrievers working together is also ideal since they complement each other and enhance each other's training opportunities. It means that you can work on the spaniel's hunting pattern and the steadiness to flush and shot, without the unsteadying effect of having to send the dog for every retrieve. One or two retrieves in a day is sufficient for a spaniel to practice marking and retrieving. On other occasions, the spaniel is kept on the drop and should remain steady while a retriever or another spaniel is sent for the bird. Being denied the retrieve of the majority of birds it flushes teaches it to 'switch off' and stay on the drop, knowing that the retrieve is unlikely to be his. On the other hand, this provides an ideal opportunity to teach retrievers to mark as well as to practise long blind retrieves in clear sight of the handler, who should be able to get the dog quickly to the fall and make it hold its ground as it hunts the area.

To book a place on one of Ben's training days, held near Ledbury, Herefordshire: Tel. (01531) 670960 or 07771903367. Email. beggarbush@btinternet.com