



Dogs learn from other dogs but basic training comes first



GETTING 'MATCH' FIT...

Lez Graham offers her top tips on how to ensure you and your gundog are ready for the season, both in terms of fitness and control

It's not long now until we need to think about scrubbing off the shooting gear and preparing for another season. Which is all very well for the seasoned campaigners, but what if it's your first season, or rather your first season with this gundog? What do we need to do to get our dogs shooting fit and ready to rock?

If want your dog to work on the peg, forget about it for his first season out and think about picking-up. Your dog will learn what's expected of it alongside a handler who's paying attention to it and teaching what is required from it, rather than looking for the next shot.

When we take our dogs out on the shooting field it's essential we've trained them to come when called, stop on the whistle, walk to heel, follow hand signals, relax by our side when we're doing nothing and have a good retrieve with a soft mouth and a nice delivery to hand.

One of the most common complaints

during the shooting season is about dogs that are out of control or taken out without solid training. Dogs do learn their craft from watching other dogs, but they need the basic training first and to be under our control at all times - they learn the bad habits from other dogs as well as the good stuff.

Aim to go into the shooting season with a very well-trained dog. Come the end of it, he will only be half-trained because he will realise early on that when it comes to tracking, hunting, finding game, flushing and retrieving, he's much better at it than you. If you go into the season with a half-trained dog, you will be out of control very, very quickly.

Two things that you can (and should) start doing immediately are increasing the number of your daily walks and practise doing nothing while you're on them. On a shoot there's going to be lots of stopping and starting, stopping again, bursts of activity, loading up into cars or wagons, doing nothing, and then getting out and starting again. This cycle repeats itself between four and seven times, depending on how many drives you have on a day.

Your dog needs to learn that when you stop, it's their job to do nothing. Yet it's one of the things we are least likely to teach. When we're training or walking that's



Your dog needs to know the drill when picking-up



Unless you start with a very well-trained dog, you'll find yourself out of control by the end of the season

what we want to be doing - the exciting stuff such as hunting and retrieving and directional control. However, they won't be much good to you if your dog's not steady and calm while not working. Structure your walks so they start and end with on-lead and off-lead walking to heel, with training, free time and time standing still and doing nothing in the middle - your dog will then know the drill when you go beating or picking-up.

Take a stick with you on your walks. If you haven't walked with a stick, a dog and carrying something before, now would be a very good time to try it. It can be quite tricky to manoeuvre birds, dog, stick and yourself over fences and through wire. Try it when you're out and about on your own rather than being watched by the Guns on the line...

And start "off-roading" with your dog. Get walking over not-so-smooth areas where there is longer grass, tufts, divots and furrows. It will get you and your dog fit and you can teach him to walk reasonably close to you over



Take a stick out on walks so you can get used to using it before going out on the shoot

"Start increasing the number of your daily walks and practise doing nothing while you're on them"

rough ground. You can also establish a good place for him to be rather than getting frustrated with his wanderings the first time you go out. You might give him a "looser" heel command for these situations - something such as "with me" works well.

Finally, take your dog to new places. Taking your dog to the local park and just sitting back and watching the other dog walkers with their dogs is great for teaching him that just because dogs are running around, it doesn't mean that he needs to join in. This is an absolute must in the education of a working gundog and a very good way to train steadiness. Doing a bit of dummy work in this situation is an excellent idea and it will help to keep your dog focused on you and the job in hand.

Walking your dog through a town, as odd as it may sound, is excellent preparation for the hustle and bustle that happens at the beginning of a shooting day - just like in a town, there'll be lots of cars and people coming and going. And if your town has a butcher's shop (or a fishmonger's),

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Got a question for Lez?
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Walk your dog over not-so-smooth terrain to teach him to stay close when on rough ground

even better - go and loiter outside with your dog sitting quietly beside you. Don't be surprised if he finds it a bit overwhelming as the smell can be quite mindblowing for his 220million-plus scent receptors. If he shows signs of it being too much (crouching, drooling, lip licking, panting or walking with his head low) then please take it back a notch and don't get so close - rather build up to it over a few sessions. **SG**



Walking your dog through town will help it get used to hustle and bustle

NEXT MONTH:

Next time Lez looks at preparing for the shooting season...