

The ties THAT BIND



Peter Ryan ponders why we bother with gundogs -- because "bird dogs are all about hope -- and hope springs eternal".



THERE IS NO GREATER ACT of hope than bringing home a new puppy. This soft little creature wriggling in your arms, mouthing your thumb and watching your eyes, summons up dreams of crisp autumn mornings, of a handsome dog quartering in the mist. There! The steam is rising gently from heaving wet flanks, tendrils of it rising slowly into the brilliant sunlight. It's a dream that never fades.

It's also our oldest partnership. Dogs threw their lot in with us long ago and it's still the best brotherhood to bridge the gulf between species. They have hunted with us, guarded our homes, gone to war, served as willing companions for the lonely and old. Sure, others have come along since, but it's not quite the same. We always have a farm cat or two mousing

around the wood shed, but I know their limitations. There are no 'seeing eye cats'.

Some people are wary of dogs but, if you think ours isn't a completely natural partnership, try showing a young boy, say four or five years-old, a litter of puppies and watch what happens. Even if he's never seen one up close before, he'll be all over it -- and so will they.

This thing runs deep.

On a practical level, coming home with a puppy has a major advantage over a new gun. If you show a shiny over-and-under to your wife, it won't improve your case one bit. Try the same thing with a squirming eight week-old springer and watch the ice melt. If it doesn't, there's only one thing to do. You need a new wife.

I like to give them a simple two syllable name because their ears seem to pick it up better (we're still on puppies, not wives). Many agree, which is why Lady and Major are perennial favourites and

Sebastian is not. You never really know if he's going to turn out a hard case, or a soft, but talented genius. Each has to be handled differently, but for many the hard-headed ones are simpler to work with.

You can say any nonsense you like to a pup and he'll look at you like you're a god. No wonder they're so popular. The charm and mischief of a puppy will always raise a smile, but their real gift is to let us see the world through their eyes for a little while. Everything is a new discovery, and every discovery is wonderful.

The adolescent is another ball game. A bird dog with young blood in his veins feels life rising in him like the coming storm. He can scarcely be stilled and in the first moments after being released might yelp for sheer joy. With the wind in his face, he stops for nothing, save birds. He is drawn by that breeze, the voice of a thousand generations in his mind telling him to follow it ever upwind. He loves to run, revels in the simple joy of speed, of hard muscle eating up the ground between him and the horizon. He's a creature truly born to seek, to find, and not to yield.

To purists, a bird dog is a pointing breed, but for me the net goes wider. Birds can be hunted over a pointer, spaniel, retriever, or just a family dog with a bit of flair. Experts might look down on the last (and admittedly quality can be variable), but I was raised from barely walking with one just like that. When you find a good example, they're great, in part of course because they catch everyone by surprise. More often than not, they don't play by the ordinary rules of the game...but character goes a long way and perfection is over-rated anyway.

It's true that a few high strung bird dogs

have only three speeds – waiting to run, running, and asleep. Some unkind critics have even said that a pointer is just a life support system for a nose (and I did meet one like that, just once, but what a nose it was). It is true that there's nothing like a young pointer or GSP to expand the vocabulary and strengthen the lungs. You won't need a gym membership; they'll exercise you even when you're standing still.

Our adolescent doesn't have many manners, but was born understanding more about wind and scent and sound than I'll ever know. At times that deep knowledge almost seems to puzzle him. A young pointing dog locking into that first solid find is a picture of passion and confusion.

To be fair, we ask pointing dogs to do ridiculous things. Right boy, let's get really excited, rush around to find a hidden bird...but if you do find one, I want you to stand absolutely still. That thing I asked you to chase around for, whatever you do, don't catch it, okay?

Still with me? Now just when it's flying away and at its most tempting, 'stand stock still again'. And here's the best bit – once it's lying dead as a doornail, go out and get it with loads of enthusiasm – that's it, go boy! Faster! By the way, if the other dog should go on point, you point 'him' even if you don't have a clue what's going on. Got all that?

I'm surprised pointers even hang around with us. A bustling spaniel – bustle, yes, that's exactly the right word – doesn't know why every nook and cranny must be investigated, only that it must and right now. Tail constantly flickering, into, over and under everything, no stone unturned, no thorn too sharp. A brief pause, head up to find the boss and fix the horizon and off again, the bonny but implacable seeker personified.



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A BEGINNING - A GRANDSON DESTINED FOR THE FIELD

LABRADORS ARE DIFFERENT again. Generally stable, even kindly, they are the most accessible of sporting dogs. At times, a young untrained pup will start retrieving things for no other reason than it pleases him so much, and it isn't hard to build on that. They are hard to beat for water work, both temperamentally and in physique. Many can sit quietly waiting for ducks and most of the ones I've known have been great company, almost knocking themselves off their own feet with the famous full body tail wag.

At their best, Labradors are brave, reliable, and biddable, possessed of a dignity that makes most people look shoddy. Even at their worst, they're still pretty good. You might have figured out by now that for a guy who runs pointing dogs I've got a soft spot for Labs.

Many dogs eat garbage, throw up, lie around and fart, but then again so do a lot of people. No, that's not the worst of it by any means. Ever seen a big male Lab exit a hide after a fallen duck... straight through the wall? A few simple quotes sum up the war stories. Where did the quail go? They were in the truck a moment ago. I was only away for five minutes and someone trashed the car. Good thing they didn't steal Murphy as well!

Having said that, I've never known a bird dog that didn't have some special talent hidden away, though I've met many guys who hadn't worked hard enough to find it. Manners and instructions are fairly easy, but nobody can actually teach a dog to hunt. Much misunderstanding arises from that simple fact.

That first bird - not in training but the first real one of his career - might just stay with you forever. In the back of your mind, one

hope echoes over and over...please let him get this one. If he does, there'll be no stopping him.

Too many guys snatch retrieved birds without a thought or a word of praise either. Yet the passing of game from dog to man is a pretty big deal, if you think about it. A dog might growl and even fight if someone tries to take his food, but here he is carefully giving you something edible that took a lot of work to get, even wagging his tail to boot.

In full adulthood, he's a professional, knows when to relax and when to turn it to full volume. In the field, he's a picture of pure and absolute focus. Confident and competent, he's now at the peak of his life, but doesn't know it. To him today was great, tomorrow doesn't exist. Time means nothing unless there is too much of it between birds.

The fine balance between experience and physical stamina is now at its best. He's as good as he's going to get and working with him at this level stirs something that's hard to put a name to. More than anything dogs are born to hunt, and they know exactly what's happening when we hunt with them. That teamwork is a rare thing. For those who have experienced it, no explanation is necessary - and for those who have not, none is possible.

There is no perfection that lasts. Gundogs are a series of almost realised hopes, interrupted by occasional flashes of perfection. You have to grab those moments and hold onto them, or go crazy. There is no feeling quite like it and it makes the hundred little cares that go into keeping a working dog fit for the field worthwhile.

It's at this point that his main weakness is

likely to be the boss. The chief attribute of a really great handler is that he knows when to shut up. The dog doesn't tell you how to shoot, so you don't insist on telling him where the birds are hiding. It can go the other way too. It's easy to get romantic about bird dogs and to credit them with things they don't really have and can't really do, especially late in the evening after a dram or two.

The truly great times with a field dog tend to be short. By the time they've learned a few things a couple of seasons have come and gone. When they finally come into their own, they have a handful of years - no more - before old age starts to creep in. It passes in what seems like an instant.

Like all of their kind, gundogs are brief. It's their only real fault.

Some never suffer much at the loss of a dog because to them their companion is a tool, like a hammer or a chainsaw. By staying distant, these people never really get much pleasure from the friendship. Others enjoy every moment knowing the terrible price that one day must be paid. In this way, dogs unknowingly teach us about life in general, and how we choose to live it.

He's grey now and the muscles that were once so young and hard have grown tired. A slow, tottering walk in the fields leaves him limping and sore. The soft ears that once heard the whisper of wings from far up the river are dull to sound. Few people would understand what I'd give to have just one of those days back. I regret my impatience with him, so often wrong, and hours caught up in some useless thing that would have been better spent in the fields, or on the water.

He's fading now before my eyes and there's nothing I can do. Yet if I were to stir even a little, that grey muzzle would rise up and he would try to be with

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me, to go anywhere, face anything.

I do my best to be with them when they go into that gathering twilight, even though it's sometimes grim. It's sentimental, but I prefer to believe that if the tables were turned they would not abandon me at the last. As they fade, I hope they dream of running, of the days when they were young and strong, and the world was theirs.

We tell ourselves that it's a mistake to grieve for an old friend, that we should be glad that such a great heart ever lived. That's true enough but soon – too soon – I'll have to brace for another of these moments and the gallery of lost friends will be a little bigger.

When you lose a dog, you discover that there

are two kinds of people, those who say "it's just a dog", and real people. It's easier if you accept that you never really stop missing them and that a certain chapter of yours has closed.

Given the harsh price we must pay, why do we continue to put ourselves through this miniature of our own life, this unsubtle allegory of the span we too are given? Because no other creature invites us so freely into their inner world, and no other wants so fervently to be part of ours. Because when Odysseus returned to his palace dressed in rags after years of war, he was taken for a beggar. Only Argos, his hunting hound – now old, broken and despised – recognised him with joy, and the soldier king turned so none would see his tears. Because to

a dog, 'friend for life' means exactly that, to the last heartbeat.

Perhaps one day when the hollowness has faded, when the whistle hanging on its hook by the door and the empty kennel seem less forlorn, there might be another puppy with sweet breath, pouncing on your hand and staging mock fights with your fingers. Not the same, of course, but you never know how this one will turn out. He'll have his little peculiarities, to be sure, but right now all he wants is to be with you and the world is a brighter place for it.

Why do we do it? Because bird dogs are all about hope – and hope springs eternal.

Here we go again.

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