

Brothers in Arms



It starts where it always does, on the rocks. Ochre figures on a stone wall, spears and bows poised. In some caves there are deer in front of them, in others wild sheep etched into the living rock. And around them are shapes with sharp muzzles and curled tails, hunting dogs of the ancient past, leaping with their masters.

They still sing, these images of our most ancient partnership. Dogs threw their lot in with us long ago and it's still the best brotherhood to bridge the gulf between species. They will sit and watch a fire by our side, have hunted with us, guarded our homes, gone to war, served as willing companions for the lonely and old. This thing runs deep.

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 hunting 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 game. 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.

An 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 bird dog working game for the first time is a picture of passion and confusion. I've never known a gun dog that didn't have some special talent hidden away, though I've met many owners 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.

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. Gun dogs 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 great handler is that he knows when to shut up. The dog doesn't tell you how to shoot, so you don't tell him where the birds are. 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, gun dogs are brief. It's their only real fault.

I do my best to be with them when they go into the 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 mate, 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 pet', 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 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 seems less forlorn, there might be another pup 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.

When you bring a working puppy home, you're striking a deal that will, with luck, last a decade or more. Dogs already know in their bones what the contract is; it was written on stone walls long ago — *brother, there is no adventure too big for us, I will follow you until I can follow no more*. The rest . . . well, the rest is up to you. We don't own these dogs, we live up to them.

Here we go again.

