

HOW NOT TO HAVE A LUMBERING CLUMBER

A series of four articles by James Darley, giving insights into his success with the breed at work and in field trials. Published 1999 – 2000, they remain relevant to trainers and handlers today.

WHY BEING NAUGHTY IN CLASS MAKES A “GOOD BOY”

Max listened attentively as I told a class of teenage boys about schooling spaniels and the subtleties of achieving a balance between control and enthusiasm.

“I want a spaniel pup that’s spirited, full of fire, barely under control, really exciting. I want one that’s naughty in class.”

Max, a Clumber spaniel just past his first birthday, rose to the invitation. The two large black paw-prints he promptly placed on my shirt front were a source of some amusement to the boys. I laughed along with them. But he had helped make my point.

“It’s OK to let him leap up, if that’s what it takes to keep him excited – and to keep him exciting. I can always add more control later. So I don’t slap him down. Better to be dirty with an uplifted dog, than clean with a spaniel that’s repressed. I can wash earth out of the shirt. I can’t put fire into the dog.”

This new angle on adolescent behaviour went down well with the boys, gathered in a semi-circle on a woodland ride within the extensive land holdings of Ampleforth College in North Yorkshire. They were members of Ampleforth’s rough shoot club, an admirably politically incorrect initiative for a leading independent school. While most of the group had gundogs at home, and took an informed interest in training matters during holidays, the club encourages participation in field sports even by boys from non-sporting backgrounds. They learn about keeping and rearing, shoot management and gun safety. Boys in their early years beat on shoot days for the older ones, all under firm but benign supervision. Game is not plentiful and has to be worked for.

Now that Max and I had their full attention, the message I wanted to impart was that in training, tactics can be adapted to serve the long-term strategy. The objective of a fully finished spaniel takes time to develop, and can be reached with tact and guile as well as conditioning.

It is not enough to aim for a dog that is perfectly obedient. The fascination of spaniel work is that it demands a much more elegant solution. The goal is for a dog with all the behaviour and control needed to work him – be it at covert-side, in the beating line, below the tide-line or when rough shooting – but with all his spirits intact, full of initiative and confidence, and capable of acting independently yet in harmony.

At its best, the spaniel and the gun enjoy a remarkable relationship. Not of equals, of course, although a good dog could possibly make as good a fist of shooting as most of us could of game-finding in the worst conditions where spaniels come into their own.

When one reflects on what a spaniel contributes to that partnership, the dog’s job description can seem surprisingly complex. The handler decides when they will go out and where, guides him over the ground being worked, and keeps his manners under check. All that is easy compared with the spaniel’s part. He employs his pace and his punch to discover and capture game, forcing it to risk escape within sight and range of the gun. Then there are his retrieving skills, over land and water, without which too much of what we shoot (and fail to kill outright) would be lost.

And as well as using his eyes and ears, he practises a magic denied to man, in the scenting power of his nose that we can only wonder at. He can thereby make fine distinctions we may not

always fully appreciate. The classic example is a rabbit winded, found and followed in the thick, flushed, shot, wounded and still moving. The sequence, maybe none of it in view of the dog, involves him in a series of decisions, each of them on the cusp of what is required and what is forbidden.

What, then, is the spaniel's prime task? To hunt, be steady and retrieve. Yes, all these make up its job. But its first purpose is to give pleasure. Efficiency and productivity are very important, but it is style, above all, that we look for. So, what does *style* mean? What is this quality that counts for so much, especially in field trials where fine distinctions between equally excellent dogs are made? Quite simply, it is what makes working a spaniel such a delight, such a fascination: it is the ability to get the handler's adrenalin flowing and put a lump in his throat even when the dog is not finding the stuff it is looking for and his barrels remain clean.

Fostering that elusive quality is the prime function of the spaniel's trainer – just as a good schoolmaster is looking to give his pupil a broad and full education for life, rather than merely to cram him with academic information.

USING THE FEMININE TOUCH TO COMMUNICATE

The boys at Ampleforth College, listening to my lecture on schooling spaniels, had done their homework. They had read about Venaticus Duncan, my best Clumber to date and the breed's most prolific field trial award winner born in the 20th century. They knew of the Clumber spaniel as a rare, ancient and unlikely-looking working breed, and also as my personal obsession for 25 years. And they knew something of my success with Clumbers. I was keen to explain it.

It was not, I began, what I discovered long ago, that a Clumber is outstanding as a picking-up dog. Take one into a pub (where you still can) or other public place, and in no time the prettiest girl there will have her arms around him.

No, no, that was not it at all. I had anyway been banned from using a Clumber for such introductions for as long as I could remember. And you should not be thinking that way about success, lads.

Look at Max, I suggested. He's just 13 months, a big puppy. He's really promising: see how he looks at me. By nature, the Clumber is inclined to be independent. In practical terms, he's happy doing his own thing. But self-employment in a spaniel is at odds with our aim of a productive partnership. So the Clumber has to be kept dependent. It is what to look for in selecting a puppy, and it is a quality to be preserved thereafter. It can easily be lost, and by many handlers it is, even through simple errors that may seem unimportant. All it takes is for the habit of eye contact to be weakened, early commands (once learned) to be ignored, the handler to appear less interesting to the pup than playing with litter mates or other dogs, the dog allowed the habit of ranging too far, or exercise to be unaccompanied.

The fundamentals of training a Clumber are no different from other spaniels, but it helps to recognise the characteristics of the breed where they are peculiar. These go beyond its size, shape and appearance. I will have more to say about these in a later part of this series.

For a start, it is essential to appreciate how dogs communicate – and to use their language. It is the same for all forms of effective communication: use the language of the audience.

So, the trainer needs to be transparent, demonstrative and physical in praise, even exaggerated by the standards of human social conventions. This is to separate pleasure from displeasure, which must also be obvious, but restrained, and expressed by voice, dominance and use of the hand – again in dog language. Smacking is a human response. To be a dog, the handler has to stiffen, stare, growl, snarl, scruff and hold-down. I nearly added bite, but do not often own up to that. All this may seem unnatural to inhibited people; and it may look foolish to an observer, but better seem silly now, during

a training session, than be made to look stupid when it counts, under fire and the gaze of others on a shoot day.

People talk about dogs as pack animals, and imagine it enough to assume the mantle of pack leader. With young dogs, it is better to replicate the role of the mother of the litter, not the father. This particularly involves the eloquent use of the hands: to begin with they resemble the dam's pendulous teats, attracting the pup's attention to mouth the fingers; they then become the equivalent of a dog's mouth, particularly the dam's – which tells puppies of her mood and gives grooming, food, play, pleasure, warnings and pain. Make pups look to the hands for guidance. For example, raise the palm for dropping and suppressing over-exuberance, easily done when giving an edible treat; raise the whole arm when at any distance. Show the pup when changing direction, point to cover, click to attract attention, clap to demand it. From earliest days, cup hands low when recalling the puppy – he responds to them before ever learning the command. Allow the pup to play bite the fingers. Gently “bite” him back, particularly his face, around the scruff of the neck for light dominance, harder if he is too rough. Caress his face; wipe his eyes. Hold a biscuit in a closed hand for him to investigate. Use a toggle-less puppy dummy the same way. Later (much later if possible) it is a ready matter to teach heeling, without recourse to a lead, just by having the puppy follow the hand: the advantage here is that if he has not been taught to heel by use of a lead, he never pulls on one when it is introduced.

When to start training is a perennial question. It depends on what is meant by training. Handling in the garden, chasing, playing, adding light controls while feeding and managing around the kennel or indoor cage where the puppy is housed – all is good conditioning. The key is repetition and association.

Serious training, imposing any kind of pressure, is for later, but there really is no need to delay kindergarten lessons as long as they are all paint and play-dough. Unlike other spaniel breeds, with their almost irrepressible sharpness and responsiveness, with the Clumber training cannot afford to wait. If it is delayed, there may be little left on which to build: he can become self-centred, slow, indolent and withdrawn. But if an early programme of structured training is adopted, the need for a light touch is no less, and perhaps more, essential than with any puppy. The aim is to preserve the spirit, the gaiety, the lack of inhibition, the initiative, the fire.

My Clumbers are not slow. They are no “dogs for old men”. When I exercise a young dog, I am running as much as he is. I keep him going at the double only, and then put him away. His is not the only tongue that is then lolling. People comment on how happy my Clumbers seem. That is part of why they go well, but while the springer is dependent by nature, even the cocker too, the Clumber is not, and it is essential to make him so. The trainer has to be the centre of the dog's life, the most interesting and surprising being he knows, the inspiration for new experience, the single source of all excitement, pleasure and confidence.

RAISING THE MOOD TO RAISE THE STANDARD

With other spaniels, the trainer can afford to be tougher, more suppressive when necessary. They have brimstone in reserve. I generalise of course – every dog needs to be treated as an individual. With the Clumber it is harder to achieve the essential, and elusive, balance between fire and water. It is necessary to get the dog's acceptance of the trainer dominating him, but not being domineering. Few owners seem to achieve the same level of understanding of the Clumber's character, and few capable trainers of other, easier gundogs make the transition. Not many even make the attempt. Hence the success I have enjoyed with so many Clumbers is rare.

I try to explain to handlers the need to distinguish between training that is elevating, and that which is depressing.

Take the “drop”. If the recall is the first essential control in training, this is the second. But it is depressing, unless it signals another task to follow: then the anticipation makes it uplifting.

Confinement, it might be thought, is depressing. Of course it is, if it is unrelieved. But a confined dog is a dog at ease. It can relax and please itself without being nagged. On release it is fresh and on its toes. Self-restraint on a bed or blanket, perhaps perversely, is repressing: the dog has to stay there, when it would rather be doing things like climbing the furniture, chasing the cat or chewing a toy. It will become used to it, but in doing so may lose the gloss on its performance.

Walking to heel, on or off the lead are out, until such time as they can be associated with the impending prospect of work.

Jumping is OK: if the handler needs to discourage it, as he will, he should use the upraised hand, but without being heavy. Naughtiness, I repeat, is good.

Free running and games with the handler, and other dogs, are fine, as long as they take place close, well within what will later become familiar as hunting range: the dog should never get far out without feeling a loss of self-confidence.

Retrieves are uplifting, but they must remain few, and be viewed as a reward, the more so while the dog is too young to correct if he goes wrong. So, picking up and fetching toys is allowed, collecting rubbish and dead things, however unspeakable, is a yes: smile and say thank you, even through gritted teeth.

Steadiness does not need to be depressing, if it is introduced as fun – prompted by hand signals, a word of command, the whistle, the thrown dummy (and later a shot) – all with the element of surprise. And sparingly. And followed by more of what the dog is learning to love best – free running, never mind the cover, with wonderful animal scents to intoxicate him. And in spite of the boss dodging and weaving back and forth in a daft zigzag pattern: oh well, might as well humour him and follow his lead.

It is important that the dog does not know he is being trained. Then he cannot react against it. Commands are part of his routine, not of lessons. Reinforcement comes from the association of commands with events, from play, and from a sense of dependence. If the pup is becoming too cocky on familiar ground, move on to new ground where he will be more dependent.

Early training of a Clumber pup enables the handler to have, at maybe only six months, a lively, responsive, dependent, well-mannered but mischievous infant, ready and keen for his first day at school. And to know he'll do well. Schooling in the subjects he will need can then become a little more serious, more applied. It should involve no sudden change in tempo.

Remembering the discussion about uplifting and depressing activity, minimum schooling is desirable. Three times a week when you are both fresh and eager is preferable to twice a day as a necessary chore.

Walking at heel loose can be depressing, as it requires self-control. It can be enlivened by both of you running, stopping (dog to sit), and changing pace.

The lead when accepted is uplifting for short periods, as the dog can switch off, quietly anticipating release and action; for longer, such as when waiting a turn at a novice test, say, the lead is a restraint and can be depressing, which may explain an uncharacteristically poor performance that confounds his owner.

Hunting is uplifting when free, but intervening to persuade the dog to hunt a close, shallow pattern, invariably necessary with a Clumber, can be depressing, so care is needed. Equally, hunting when tired is a downer, so keep sessions short and sharp. Cover that hurts, like brambles, gorse, thistles and stinging nettles, is not uplifting until it too is recognised by the dog as where game is to be found.

Dropping can be depressing, particularly on a damp backside, and shots at first – unless these controls can be associated with heralding other actions; these should not, of course, be assumed each time to be retrieves, or steadiness will suffer. The norm should be to hunt on. Accurate guns may have

to do some deliberate missing if the dog is not to learn to expect there is game to collect after every shot.

Steadiness needs to be a positive alteration of the instinct to chase. This is easier advised than practised. So the dog needs incentives. This could be a few moments of pure, concentrated, eye-to-eye and mind-to-mind contact to cement the action. It could be clear – even exaggerated – praise, but followed by a call to attention else riot may result. It could be a game as reward, a retrieve, or more hunting to follow.

The closer the Clumber is to the point of breaking his bonds of control, the quicker his mind is working, the sharper his wits, the more receptive he is and the quicker his responses. It may be a contradiction but he can be at his most steady, then, on the verge of unsteadiness. At that edge, he is really living. He is at his most exciting and, for the handler who loves spaniel work, his most stylish.

CLUMBERS AS SPANIELS: SAME JOB, DIFFERENT APPROACH

While the Clumber is a spaniel, and fulfils exactly the same demands as other spaniels, he has peculiarities in his work. And while a good working Clumber is by definition a highly distinctive shooting companion, these differences go beyond the obvious of size, build and colour.

He is inclined to dwell on scent. When he does so, the handler may need to hurry him or himself run. Lining and boring-on are not unusual traits. Teach “No” on animal runs. One particular bloodline was notorious for dogs accelerating away and then hunting with great style – at a distance of three gunshots. In Sweden, which has more Clumbers than any country after the UK and the US, the breed is expected to follow the blood trails of deer, as well as to hunt for game. It is asking much from the same dog, too much, as I found when judging a field trial and dogs were hunting in straight lines ahead.

The dog must learn when he is at the limit of comfortable range, by being dropped or turned. If he is hunting in straight lines, the handler should turn and run. Hunting training should generally be in long grass or light cover, not in the bare open. A big sky and wide horizons can be a lure to running bigger.

Hunting of a pattern seems less natural than with a springer or cocker. But with a Clumber that is relating willingly to the handler, it is readily introduced. The handler needs to be active. He may take as much exercise quartering the ground as the dog. He may look crazy to an onlooker. But he is giving the dog the lead, the direction, making him responsive to body and hand movements.

It is helpful to understand that the Clumber’s nose is his dominant force. It is large and pink and you will soon come to respect it. Where other breeds cover their ground by a mix of pace, pattern and penetration, as well as scent, the Clumber relies more on what his conk tells him. Head carriage is typically low as he is working ground scent more than air. The need to preserve voluntary eye contact is thereby obvious, as part of the overall need to keep the dog dependent.

Thus, the Clumber needs scent to inform and motivate his hunting, unlike those spaniels it is said will quarter up the M1 motorway. So the trainer should not expect great shakes in a recreation ground, or a bed of nasty cover devoid of game, nor in hot and dry or still and humid conditions.

A tendency to slow as scent intensifies and to hesitate before flushing may give the gun time to approach, but it also may allow game to escape or flush out of range. The dog should anyway be within the gun’s comfortable range, and chivvying the dog to move on is an abomination. Handlers should not make excuses for the breed on this score, but instead give dogs under training every encouragement to hunt hard, accelerate on hot scent and flush aggressively.

Marking is often not good – and the trainer may need to teach this skill by, for instance, using dummies, releasing homing pigeons, shooting woodpigeons at flight, even adding a verbal “Mark” when game or songbirds are flushed.

For anything more than a short sprint, the Clumber is not so quick on his feet as more volatile breeds, but he need not be slow if the trainer takes to heart the advice to go only at the double and to keep him excited.

He is prone to be stubborn, but will be less so if dependent, if the handler is honest and trusting and thinking like the dog, anticipating. He is also inclined to be introverted – and needs tact, joy, play and success.

I have yet to come across a Clumber that is not a natural retriever. I have encountered many with retrieving problems, but these were all made by handling errors, whether of commission or omission.

On the other hand, I have yet to meet a Clumber that has never tenderised game, even if only in the excitement of youth or with the first bird of the day or the season. Hard mouth is a danger, but less so with the confident dog accustomed to racing back for effusive praise and more work – the dog developed through the techniques described in this series of articles. Use of a command “Gently”, introduced early to encourage a well-mannered acceptance of biscuits, can be helpful. Carrying is always to be allowed. If he is rough with his work, the object carried can become a wire brush, a bird studded with toothpicks, or simply more game and not less.

Clumbers need more uplifting experiences, and fewer depressing ones, than other spaniels.

By their nature, they have further to be uplifted to be stylish. Equally, they have a shorter distance to fall to be depressed.

If the balance is right there is no more rewarding experience for the handler, and for fellow guns, than to shoot over a working Clumber under full steam. Train a Clumber fit for the field, let alone for field trials, and not only will the handler have gained an experience that is still rare, he will have attained a level of insight and competence such that training any other breed can seem a breeze.