



Back to the Origins

Many Italians believe, rightly or wrongly, that Italy breeds the best English Setters in the world. Can their assumption be correct?

Article & photographs by Rossella Di Palma, Italy

Maybe, but to be certain they would need to wear some humility and accept the invitation to go and see how things are going abroad. As for me, I was extremely happy I had been invited to the UK to see a field trial!

On the morning of 28th July, the Derby (for dogs up to 2 years of age) and the Novice Stake (for dogs which had never placed first, second or third in a field trial) were supposed to take place. I was anxious to see, for the first time in my life, a grouse and a moor but, well, there was a problem, a huge problem: it had been raining non-stop for 48 hours. Such weather conditions were unusual even for Great Britain and, for this reason, the trial programmed for the previous day, had been cancelled. The Derby and the Novice Stake, therefore, were also at risk of being cancelled but, to discover their fate, we had to drive to the meeting place. There we went, to a large parking lot full of cars and pick ups. The first, huge difference I noticed, if compared to Italy, was this one; in the UK owners handling their dogs are the rule, not the exception. Professional handlers were just two

and they were two breeders handling their own dogs! Yes, I admit there were a few people handling dogs belonging to someone else but they were... a few! How could I discover all this in a few minutes? It is easy: the British write very detailed catalogues that are given, free of charge, to anyone who is interested in watching the trial. In those catalogues we find the dog's name, its parents' names, the owner, the breeder and the handler names. At the end of the catalog, there is a table in which people can insert the numbers of the dogs forming a brace. I learnt all this while we were waiting for the head keeper decision who, eventually, cancelled the trial.

After the gamekeeper's announcement, people moved to a small village tearoom to be offered what should have been the judges' lunch: an unpretentious meal that matched perfectly the simplicity of British dog world. To become a judge, for example, there are no specific prerequisites, of course you need to prove you are knowledgeable, but how you gained this expertise is of no importance. You could have handled dogs at field trials, trained them for shooting or

for trials, worked gundogs at shooting estates, it really does not matter which path led you to become a dog expert! If your knowledge is deemed to be sufficient, you can begin your judging career by assisting an expert judge. Your mentors will teach you from trial to trial and then, according to how you perform, allow you to progress in your career until you will become an A Panel Judge. Becoming a judge, however, does not make people feel superior: all the judges I met during the trials were unpretentious and humble people.

The trend is to help the organizing committees save money and, as a matter of fact, enrolling a dog in a trial costs only 10 £. Judges, moreover, do not usually change their mindset after obtaining this prestigious title: it is common to judge today and be a handler tomorrow. Almost none of the judges cease to compete in trials, nor forget what training and handling a dog means!

The Champion Stake

The Champion Stake was programmed for July 29th and 30th, on Bollihope Moor (kindly made available by the Starshine Management

Co.Ltd.). The Champion Stake is a special trial organized once a year and open only to dogs who have qualified for it by placing themselves during previous trials. I was about to see some of the best dogs of the United Kingdom (and Ireland!). I finally went to the moor, the moor is, well I cannot really find the proper words to the define it.

I might describe it as an immense ground covered by heather, rising across the horizon. This is the moor, or rather its mere physical description but, to me it conveys a different

grouse since 1992.

With a temperature of about 10° C and a strong Northern breeze sweeping the sky, the competition began. I was so impressed by the number of grouse, that the judges hastened to explain to me that, such a grouse density was quite high, even for their standards and that it was a peculiarity of Bollihope Estate.

They wanted to make clear that, normally, field trial dogs do not have so many birds to deal with, these were special circumstance that did not always help the dogs. The fast-

pleasure to work; I witnessed a perfect equilibrium between initiative and control. British breeds are supposed to back the brace mate on point, this should come naturally but, if the handler knows his dog is not a natural backer, he is allowed to give the dog an order. It is often enough to raise a hand and the dog, whatever the distance, will naturally stop his action and stand still (or sit) quietly waiting to be allowed to run again.

While the brace mate points and flushes, the dog and the handler wait.



feeling: it is just the perfect place to be, the one that makes me feel at home!

Thirty six dogs were about to compete: there were English Setters (from the UK and from Ireland), Irish Setters, Gordon Setters and English Pointers. There were two judges for them: the first was Billy Darragh, from Ireland, who had been involved in breeding, training and handling bird dogs since 1968; the second was Dom Goutorbe, who grew up with setters (his family had been running kennel Upperwood). He became a judge at the age of 21 and had been working his dogs on

est and long ranging dogs, who were trying to produce nice wide casts, often ended up losing against slower and more careful brace mates. All the dogs competing at the Champion Stake had more than a chance to produce a point but, for some of them, having to face so many grouses turned into a quick elimination.

Let's now talk about the handlers' competence, I earlier mentioned the absence of professional handlers, and I can now give you the explanation: professional handlers do not exist because the amateurs are extremely skilled and professional. Each dog was perfectly trained and showed

Being quiet is not just a dog thing; handlers too tend to be relaxed and approach their dogs slowly: nobody runs towards a pointing dog screaming. The dog is supposed to remain steady on point and then produce the bird, during the roading the handler is not allowed to touch the dog. He can encourage his dog verbally, but touching it would lead to an elimination.

Those used to the FCI Rules & Regulations, will be surprised by hearing that the Kennel Club Rules do not forgive mistakes made within the first minute after the casting. At the Champion Stake many dogs were

eliminated right after being casted; some other dogs, instead, had to prove they had brain and skills: Shanry con Aurelio (an Irish Setter handled by David O'Neill) was stopped after his first cast, at least 10 times, to allow brace mates falling on point to complete his action. The dog, however, remained well focused and, when he eventually had a chance to run freely, did an excellent job. The length of each run is not standardized and fixed in 15 minutes as it happens in FCI trials: the judges want to evaluate the dog, once this task is accomplished the runs ends.

So, what do I think of British dogs? I liked some more than others but all of them were at least of medium quality. Some dogs were more stylish, some were quartering far, while others worked closer but all of them were skilled and knew how to work with and for their handlers.

Most of the dogs I saw, were field trial dogs AND shooting dogs, used on grouse or partridges during the shooting season. All the dogs I met were dogs that could make a shooter happy: it is really nice (and really important!) to see the British could keep such a strong connection between field trials and real shooting. At the end of the first day, a prize was awarded to the most stylish dog, FT Ch. Ballyellen Cara, ESB owned by B. Connelly and handled by Gerry Devine.

The Kennel Club field trial regulations require Pointers and Setters, who are run as a brace, to quarter ground systematically with pace and style in search of game birds, to point game birds and, be steady to flush and shoot. On the following day, July 30th, the dogs that fulfilled these pre-requisite on the first day of the Champion Stake were going to be seen again. Unfortunately it had rained at night and the heather, soaking wet, made the grouse nervous and unsteady (?).

Some of the dogs, however, thanks to skills, experience and fortune succeed in finding and pointing them properly. Six of them were then asked to perform a third round and in the early afternoon the rankings were

made public. First and Champion Stake winner - Glynlark Aramis ISD handled by David O'Neill – this dog also won the trophy for the Best Natural Backing and the one for the Best Irish Setter; 2nd Fearn Quarck of Burncastle EPD handled by Wilson Young – this dog was also awarded the trophy for the Best English Pointer and, being the gun's favourite dog, got nominated Gun's Choice; 3rd FT Ch. Coldcoats Corbally Boy ISD handled by Steve Robinson; 4th FT Ch. Gerensary Minerva EPB handled by Richard MacNicol.

Dogs awarded Certificate of Merit were: FT.Ch Gortinreagh Eppie ESB F handled by Gerry Devine (she also won the trophy for the Best English Setter); FT Ch. Ensay Tiva of Bringwood GSD handled by Dennis Longworth (he won the trophy for the Best Gordon Setter); Gerensary Starlight of Bitterboom EPD handled by John Naylor and Dalriach Neige, the first Irish Red and White Setter competing in a Champion Stake, handled by Colin Organ.

With the English Setters of England

My last day in northern England came quickly and I wanted to live it at full. Dom Goutorbe, after two days of judging, was now “only” a breeder. The adverb “only” might sound a little inappropriate being his kennel, founded by his parents in 1968, is the most famous and the most productive English Setter kennel of the UK.

Unfortunately, the British trend, forces the kennel to select separately two different strains of English Setters, one for the shows and one for shooting and field trials. Some representatives of the working strain, Dom's favourite side of the breed, were with us and we left all together to Cumbria, near Scotland.

When we reached our training grounds the temperature was as low as 8°C and it was windy, rainy and misty: yes, all these three things together! The moor we went to was called Yad Moss and it was full of sheep, cracked ground and quicksand decorated with sheep bones. Scary?

No, magical! We ran the dogs one by one. The first was FT Ch. Gibeltarik Troy at Upperwood (imported from Gibraltar). Troy is a stylish setter but he quickly made clear that he possesses much more than style. He is intelligent, practical and hard working; he would do everything to please his handler.

His son Upperwood Forest came next: he is less elegant than his father but, nevertheless, he moves and points nicely, I would define him a “bold youngster”.

Third dog to be seen was indeed

Glynlark Aramis the Champion Stake 2015 winner, perfectly owner-handled by David O'Neill



a bitch, FT Ch Upperwood No Fly Zone whose ancestors are strictly British. She proved us that she can find a grouse when it would seem impossible, she is determined, practical and has much bird sense.

With Upperwood Clover and FT Ch. Upperwood Hera we got great action and great style. The last dog running for us was FT Ch Upperwood Va Va Voom (Clio), in great shape despite the recent litter.

Space is running out, I hence close my story with a special thanks to Dom Goutorbe and Fiona Kirk who gave me this wonderful opportunity.