

Look after that gundog

by Barry Oliver

This German wirehaired pointer might only be doing a training retrieve, but a long, cold day in the swamp requires lots of pre-season work of this kind in order to get your dog into his best shape.

To say that gundogs are an essential part of the field hunter's kit is an understatement. Most hunters rely almost entirely on their gundog to locate, flush and retrieve fallen game, but the relationship goes further than this. For many of us, the hunting experience is enriched enormously by the participation of our dogs. There is undoubtedly an elemental link between the hunter and their dog, something that lifts our enjoyment of the outdoors and the wild harvest that it offers.

Literature, art and our own shared anecdotal experiences collectively bear testament to the link between the hunter and their dog. We have seen paintings of

hunting scenes involving gundogs (which, incidentally, bear a remarkable physical resemblance to today's gundog breeds) and we have read or heard old stories of heroic gundogs and their remarkable feats in the field. And who among us has not regaled their companions with tales about their favourite dog's uncanny abilities, or has had to endure a mate telling a story, perhaps for the umpteenth time, about such and such a dog and its legendary exploits?

While we enjoy the shared role we play with our gundogs, there is still a lot we can learn about the way in which we look after them both during and after a trip to the field. The gundog will perform best if

properly cared for all year, not just when the season rolls around. Food, exercise, kennelling arrangements, vet care and care when actually in the field are all areas that the hunter should be skilled in. While good gundogs have an indomitable drive to push themselves and to keep going, the human part of the team must know how best to maintain this canine powerhouse in order to both keep them going and to prevent them from breaking down.

It goes without saying that the gundog should be given all of the mandated veterinary check-ups, injections and tablets necessary to avoid various canine illnesses. Distemper, heartworm, hepatitis, fleas,

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round hook and whipworm - the list of serious but avoidable parasites and illnesses is quite an extensive one and it pays to be aware of what needs to be done to protect your gundog's health. Running a sick or injured dog is bad news and the trick is to avoid this often-expensive option by looking after your gundog from the minute he comes into your care as a pup.

Injuries sustained in the field are another matter. These can be unavoidable and the list is equally extensive and just as expensive. Grass seed problems (sometimes these can be fatal), muscular and tendon strains and broken bones - expect them all at some time or another. Some dogs seem to be lucky and go through their field careers unscathed, while others seem to get everything. Some field injuries can be career ending so it pays to do the right thing wherever possible. Simple things like avoiding really rough ground, not overworking a dog and staying away from snakey-looking areas can help, but field injuries are often a bit of a lottery and a dog can hurt itself just jumping out of a car.

One bit of advice is to try to find the whereabouts of a good vet, one who is used to working dog injuries. If you're lucky enough to know of the whereabouts of a good greyhound vet it's worth bypassing the local one who only sees pet dogs and cats. These people are more used to seeing the tears and strains put on the muscular-skeletal system and can often come up with the right result. A greyhound 'muscleman' can also work wonders with an injured dog.

The field is an area where the hunter can play a major role in looking after the dog's well-being. A good dog has an indomitable urge to work, despite injury and conditions. Even if freezing or warm or if a pad or two is missing due to rough ground, a gundog simply wants to keep going. This desire needs to be controlled by a little bit of human commonsense. Carrying drinking water for the dog, giving him a spell every now and then, resting if it gets too hot and not overworking a dog are some of the things we can do to make things better for our gundogs. It may even prolong their careers.

Heatstroke is a life-threatening situation that gundog owners need to be very aware of. A sometimes strange malady, it can strike dogs on days that normally would not be regarded as too hot. I suspect it has more to do with dehydration. Whatever the reason, dogs should always have access to water before, during and after working and if a dog starts to show signs of heatstroke - shaking, falling over or glazed eyes - cool them down immediately with lots of shade and water. Fatalities through heatstroke are not uncommon.



This keen L'Epagneul Breton (Brittany) is approaching its 11th year, but its years of being well cared for can be seen in the youthful vitality with which it enters the water.



Mush! All gundogs require plenty of exercise. Running next to a bike is a great way to cover a lot of ground quickly.

Thoughtful handlers carry water sprays of the gardening variety on warm days and give their dogs a frequent damping down.

We are what we eat is a maxim that can be applied to our gundogs as much as it can be applied to ourselves. Good quality dog foods are readily available in Australia and the dedicated hunter will go the extra mile and pay top dollar for the premium performance brands. Top performance animals everywhere are fed top tucker and gundogs are no different. A hard working gundog might put in hours of work in a day, swimming or running in freezing conditions and good quality food is needed to ensure your dog is eating correctly.

Research is constantly carried out by top livestock food companies in order to calculate the effect of various ingredients and ratios on a dog's performance. Some studies are carried out on hardworking dogs, such as those that compete in the Iditarod sled dog race, and the results are reflected in the top brands that are available. Your dog may not be competing in an event run over thousands of kilometres in freezing conditions, but if you expect them to do their best, then feed them well.

The importance of exercise for the gundog cannot be emphasised enough, but it doesn't happen by itself. Like all animals, gundogs require a fitness regimen in order to reach and maintain peak fitness. While the importance of this is evident, this is probably the one area where gundog owners let their dogs down. Wild dogs keep fit by hunting to eat and if they aren't fit, they die. The modern dog does not exist under the same imperative and relies on his handler for regular exercise. There is no excuse for not exercising a gundog.

Exercise for a gundog should be given every day, unless the dog is ill or recovering from a particularly hard hunting trip. The best form of exercise for dogs is free running. On-lead walking and walking machines are okay every now and then, but a gundog needs to run and run often. If your gundog lives in an urban environment, it can be difficult to give him the exercise he needs, but this is no excuse and the committed owner will always find a way.

One of the best ways to achieve and maintain a dog's fitness is running next to a bike while on a lead. A good quality harness is all that it needs to give the dog a few kilometres in very short time. Dogs trained in a harness from pups learn to adapt quickly to it and can be trained to pull, trot or gallop on command. Hard pulling in a harness, especially if there is a good hill nearby, makes a great workout for a gundog. If you are fortunate enough to have lots of open space nearby then there should be no problem in giving your dog the required amount of running. Lots of running

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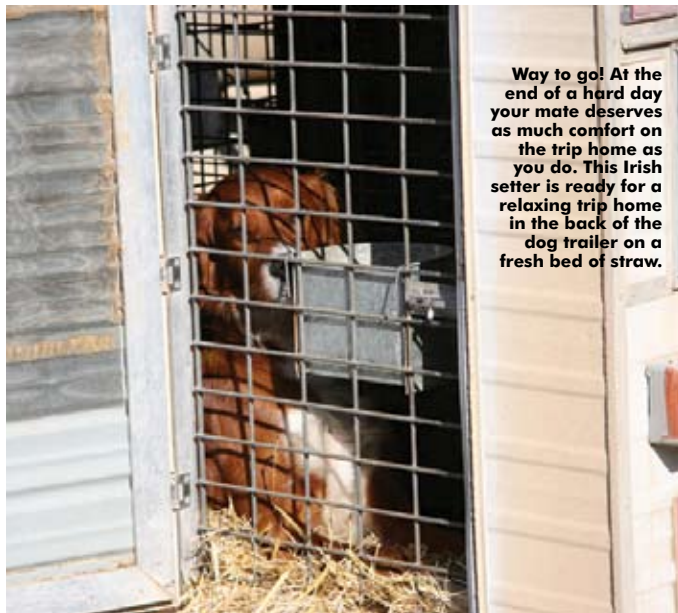
will keep your gundog in good physical condition. Keep their pads nice and hard and make them a better adjusted companion to have around; being confined day in and out with no exercise is psychological torture for any dog, especially a gundog.

Despite the advantages of fitness for gundogs, it is surprising just how many otherwise well looked after dogs do not get the required amount of exercise. Many hunters seem to expect their dog to sit around all off-season and simply come out fighting fit on day one. It doesn't happen. While a young gundog has a reserve of natural energy that will see it through such an approach, all dogs need exercise. The older the dog gets the more important it is that it is regularly and conscientiously exercised. An overweight, unfit dog simply will not last in the field, especially on a warm day.

Care for a hard-going gundog at the end of the day is another area that can be neglected by owners. A dog that has been working needs rest to recover properly and this means a comfortable, warm bed. If these basics aren't available, then tired, unrecovered and stressed muscles, ligaments and tendons will not recuperate and develop correctly. A dog repeatedly worked without proper rest and recovery cannot do its best and runs the risk of becoming ill or injured. The older the dog, the greater is the risk of this happening.

Travelling home from a hard day in the field is one area where the thoughtful owner should take extra care. Make certain that the dog is thoroughly dry, rug them if necessary and provide them with good bedding to lie on. It is common for racehorses to be walked in order to cool down after a race, just as athletes undergo a cooling down period following a training session or competition. Many gundog owners now leash their dogs and walk them for a few minutes before putting them in the car or dog trailer after a hard session. This has the result of allowing the dog to cool down correctly, just as an Olympic swimmer swims several laps of the warm-down pool after a race to rid the muscles of lactic acid.

Apart from the joy we receive from the companionship shared and those memorable and irreplaceable times in the field, our gundogs are an expensive investment. It is estimated that a fully trained gundog has cost their owner at least \$10,000 in training, veterinary fees, initial purchase price and food expenses by the time it has reached three years of age. For all of these reasons, it makes good sense to look after that gundog. ●



Way to go! At the end of a hard day your mate deserves as much comfort on the trip home as you do. This Irish setter is ready for a relaxing trip home in the back of the dog trailer on a fresh bed of straw.