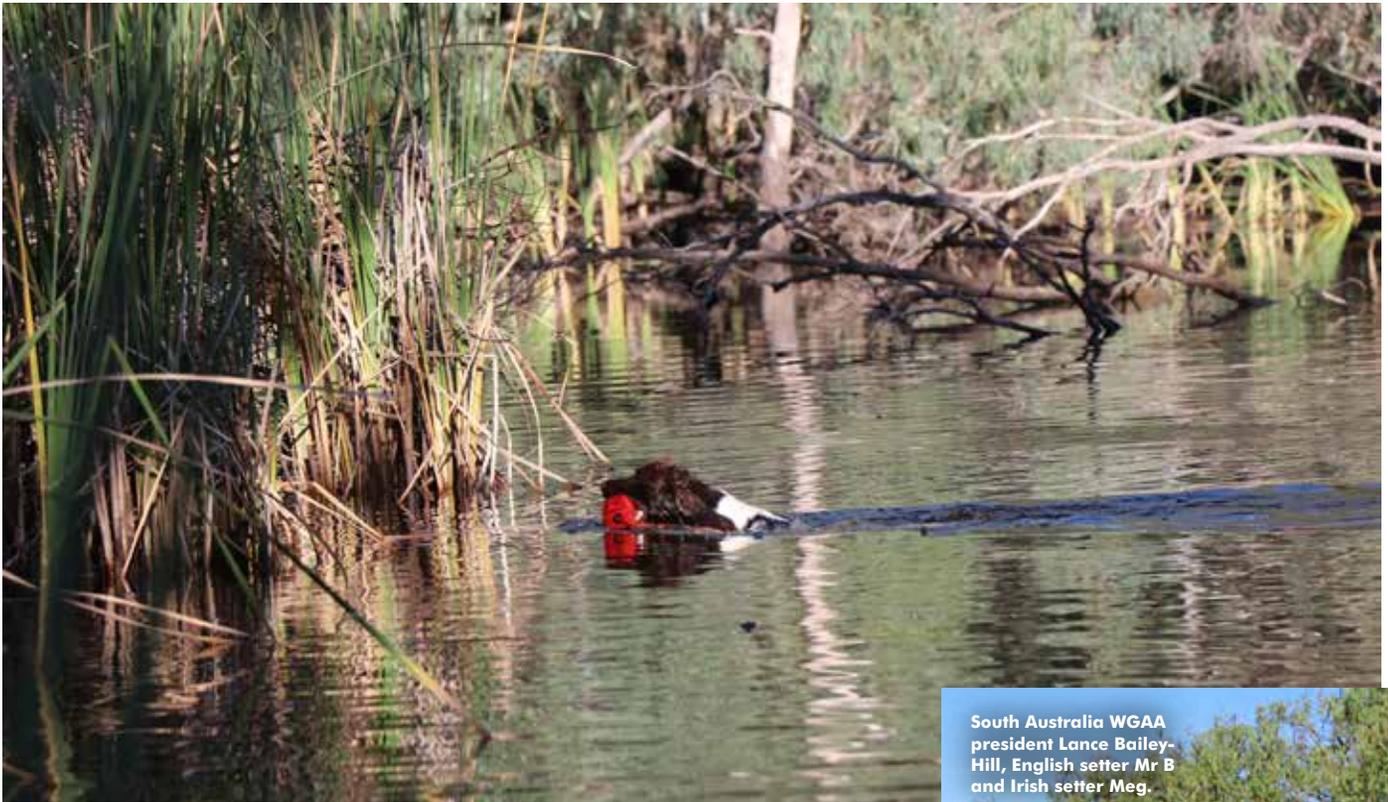




Talbot on target! Working Gundogs

Communications Officer Sam Talbot



South Australia WGAA president Lance Bailey-Hill, English setter Mr B and Irish setter Meg.



With duck seasons underway in the southern states, it seems fitting this month that we turn the spotlight on man's best friend. After all, dogs are an important part of hunting, having worked side-by-side with shooters for centuries. This great relationship has led to a highly refined ability to quickly retrieve over land or water and from this tradition comes the modern SSAA discipline of Working Gundogs.

Even those with little interest in other shooting sports are quick to appreciate the skills of the dogs, and if you've visited a SSAA SHOT Expo you'll know the Working Gundog demonstrations are one of the most popular attractions. But with the good comes the bad. The discipline requires arguably the most expensive, unique, frustrating and temperamental piece of equipment in all the shooting sports - a dog - but

ask anyone involved in the discipline and they'll tell you they wouldn't have it any other way.

Owning a well-trained gundog doesn't happen by chance, an intensive training program is normally undertaken from the puppy stage, often with the help of a club. While there's no hunting in the discipline itself, there are obvious crossover applications which can be applied to the field and many competitors do this. Clubs and competitions are structured to facilitate all levels of dogs from beginners to mature champions, and some of Australia's leading trainers and handlers are SSAA instructors.

One of those is national discipline chairman Jim Jeffrey who told me gundog work is probably the closest thing to an even partnership between an animal and a human. "For example with pointers and setters, the dog can't get the >

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game without the gunner and often the gunner can't get the game without the dog," he said.

Sub-disciplines

While all the dogs are winners in my eyes, this is a competition after all which takes place across four sub-disciplines - Retrieving; Hunt, Point and Retrieve; Spaniel; and Pointer and Setter - with various breeds of Labradors, Brittays, retrievers, pointers, setters, spaniels, Munsterlanders, Weimaraners and more all having their own skills and specialities while also falling into one of the sub-disciplines.

During competitions the dogs are assessed on a variety of skills and score points for factors like obedience, steadiness, ability to locate and quietness, while they can lose points for missing game, failing to obey commands, dropping game or blinking (deliberately leaving their pointing position).

Not having my own dog makes it all but impossible to properly participate in the discipline but as Jim explained: "Some of our members don't have dogs, they just like to spectate and come camping with us."

Retrieving

I arranged to meet SSAA (SA) WGAA (Working Gundog Association Australia) secretary Patrick Torrens for a training



Dogs and trainers patiently wait their turn.

day at a dam in Mount Barker. The SA branch doesn't have the depth to stage fully-fledged competitions but are enjoying a resurgence at the moment and there's never been a better time to get involved.

Our training ground for the day not only served as the local swimming pool and a way to practise water retrieves, it was also useful for keeping dogs cool in 38C. One after another Patrick launched a red plastic dummy into the water for the dogs to dutifully return. Patrick was there with Logan, his English spring spaniel imported from the UK, who displayed textbook obedience

and eagerness both in and out of the water.

One thing that caught my eye were the different swimming styles, Labradors making the transition from land to water with complete ease, while others splashed and slapped the water the whole time. Patrick explained that swimming ability comes with age and experience. "Most younger dogs won't be comfortable in the water right away but you see older dogs, who are a lot calmer, let themselves sink a bit which allows them to cruise and use less energy," he said.

There were a few mishaps with some of

Huge crowds watch Working Gundogs at the Melbourne SSAA SHOT Expo.



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the younger dogs failing to complete the retrieves but the more experienced ones ensured no-one had to swim into the dam to retrieve the dummy. The dummy is made of high-density foam, ensuring it floats, and the colour makes it easy for dogs to see. The dummy itself isn't overly important and using a variety of them is a good way to keep dogs interested and stimulated.

Beyond the simple retrieves we did on the day the Retrieving sub-discipline features no less than 12 variations. These include single mark retrieve where a well-sighted dummy is cast for the dog to see; blind retrieve where the dog isn't allowed to see where the dummy is cast; double or triple mark retrieve where multiple dummies are cast; two-bird retrieve where while retrieving one dummy another is cast; as well as countless combinations and variations of these, sometimes using multiple dummies.

Pointer and Setter

With the water retrieves complete it was time for pointers and setters to shine. Patrick set up a bird-scented dummy for SSAA (SA) WGAA president Lance Bailey-Hill, English setter Mr B and Irish setter Meg to find. With the dummy at one end of a paddock and Lance and the dogs at the other, Meg sprang into action sweeping back and forth across the paddock. Lance encouraged her to continue the methodical approach which led to Meg eventually zeroing in on the dummy and snapping to attention.

With the dummy detected Meg stood frozen, pointing at the game, while Mr B showed his class and experience, backing away rather than disturbing the dog already pointing. Backing is an important and



Logan is ready to go.



All in a day's work.

recognised part of the sub-discipline and is used for scoring.

After some time with Meg motionless and maintaining her point, Lance gave the signal and she knocked over the piece of pipe concealing the dummy. On another day this would trigger a quail to take flight but this time it simply meant the end of training.

The key in this scenario was that unlike spaniels who work much closer to hunters and instantly flush game out, pointers and setters can work up to 100m away. Being so far away means their distinctive poses and pointing give the hunter time to catch up and have a decent shot, the premise the Pointer and Setter discipline is based on.

Puppy problems

As an experienced trainer Patrick explained some of the pitfalls he encounters when owners are trying to transition pups to fully grown working gundogs. "When training a puppy to go into water, the worst thing you can do is force it," he said. "Trainers need to introduce the dog to water and let it build



Meg doesn't bat an eyelid having zeroed in on the dummy.

confidence before attempting long retrieve.

"You also have to be careful about shooting over your dog too early and risk making them gun shy. And remember, pups' ears are still developing so firing a gun near them can cause damage and deafness later in life. There's no rush when training a pup - one extra year of training can buy you an extra 10 years of work down the track."

As for buying your future working



Mr B demonstrates 11 years of experience, backing off and not interrupting Meg's point.

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gundog, Patrick recommends visiting a working gundog kennel and not a show dog kennel as this will ensure the dog has the right instincts and a keenness to hunt. "You'd also want to see both parents and make sure they're in good health and are working dogs," said Patrick. "Any parents that are Field Champions or have Field Champions in any part of their lineage is beneficial too."

While no-one can be an expert in all breeds, heading to your local SSAA WGAA club will give you general knowledge and advice on training your dog regardless of its level. "Having lots of people with different breeds in a club is useful and makes everything a bit more interesting, so we're always welcoming new people to the club," said Patrick.

Conclusion

While not the easiest discipline to get started in, based on the reactions and enjoyment of its competitors, Working Gundogs might just be the most rewarding. Unlike a firearm which will gather dust in safe, a dog requires much more and is a big commitment whether you end up becoming involved in Working Gundogs or not. While some people use the Working Gundog discipline as a training ground for hunting,



Some of the dogs splashed and slapped the water the whole time.

Jim says there are plenty who only do the discipline. "In the same way many shotgunners only shoot clay targets, many of the retrievers are not interested in hunting," he said.

There's much more to the wide world of Working Gundogs than I've been able to go into and like most disciplines, the best place to start is at your local club. The discipline is certainly one I want to be involved in eventually and I look forward to the day I continue my family tradition and have my own chocolate curly-coated retriever. ●

Dog categories

Four sub-disciplines of Working Gundogs are made up of specific breeds, including but not limited to:

Retrieving: Labrador, golden retriever, flat coats and curly coats.

Spaniel: English springer spaniel and cocker spaniel.

Pointer and Setter: Pointer, Irish setter, English setter, Gordon setter and Irish red and white setter.

Hunt, Point, Retrieve: German shorthaired pointer, Brittany, Vizsla, Munsterlander, wirehaired pointer, Weimaraner.

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