

I've taken part in both 'obedience' and 'agility' competitions for about 20 years with my Alsatis but a few years ago I joined an 'Agility' club and two of the members had vizslas which I fell in love with. They were lovely looking dogs with loads of character and were obviously enjoying themselves. I had a chat with the owners to find out more about the breed and eventually I got a puppy from Sue Millson to train up for 'Agility' to take over from Oscar my Alsatian when he retired. This first 'ginger nut' (as they are affectionately called) was named Teal (my husband Tom is into shooting so he picked the name), and he was a great little puppy. Full of mischief, he got up to and into everything! Teal took to 'showing' and once he was old enough to 'agility' as if he'd been born to it. He loved all the jumping in the agility ring and at a show would drag me towards the arenas, absolutely beside himself with excitement. He had a ball!!

About 5 years ago I decided it was about time for another Vizsla, again to take over when Teal got too old for jumping, and in 2005 a little bitch puppy (again from Sue) joined our family. Tara became her name and she was even more full of devilment than Teal. Like him, she took to 'agility' like a duck to water. She was twice as fast as Teal and could even hold her own against the super fast Border Collies.

The only problem with her initially was that in 'agility' you have to go over the jumps etc in a set order (as in Show Jumping) and complete the course in the fastest time. Tara couldn't quite see the sense in this. To her it was more fun to race round the ring jumping everything in any order (some of them twice) and stay out as long as she could enjoying herself. The spectators loved her! She always got a huge round of applause, which of course encouraged her even more. Even the judge used to roar with laughter. She did settle down however, as her training progressed, and she started getting fairly high places in 'agility' competitions.

Looking back I suppose that because she was doing so well in 'agility' and didn't need a lot of training to keep her at her level that when the opportunity to try something different came

along I decided to give it a go. It came about when Tom and I were out walking the dogs. He'd said that she had to be trained to the whistle, to stop her for safety reasons. I'd been trying this for some time with limited success, but one day as she was heading off to do her own thing I gave a blast and she sat down! Couldn't believe it! I tried it again a little while later, and she sat down again. We were delighted, and Tom remarked that if she was responsive to the whistle, there was no reason why I shouldn't start training her for gundog work. I thought 'why not?', it would be something different and it's what gundogs are born to do. I knew I would have to join a specialist club since the training that Tara would get being an HPR dog (Hunt,Point,Retrieve) was somewhat different to a Spaniel for example. Spaniels, Labradors etc are used to push birds forward and flush them towards the guns (and retrieve them) whereas the HPR breeds (Vizslas, Pointers etc) range in front of walking guns, go to 'point' when they scent a bird, then flush the bird on command from their handler, and finally retrieve the shot bird.



The nearest HPR club I could find was the German Shorthaired Pointer Club in Surrey, and I started my training early in 2009. Tara was awful!! She had the attention span of a goldfish and it would have been easier to train frog spawn! I wondered what I had let myself in for! John, one of the Instructors however was full of confidence. “They’re always like this to begin with” he said, “she’s an intelligent little bitch and will respond to training”. He was right, I needn’t have worried, as the weeks went by Tara slowly did improve.

Every day after Tom and I had walked the dogs we would take Tara off on her own and carry out the training exercises I had been given. She loved the dummy and would race out



to fetch it only to do huge circles with it and refuse to hand it over. We solved that by working her on a path with a fence on one side and a river on the other so she was channelled back, and using titbits to encourage her to return, making her sit and hold the dummy before she got her treat. I also started going for private lessons with Jennifer Hurley and between her and the GSP club Tara’s education came on in leaps and bounds. In fact so much so, that one week John, my GSP Instructor, told me it was time to go out into the real world and start entering Working Gundog Tests. He told me that Tara was up to novice standard and that the best way to gain experience was to enter these competitions. I wasn’t too sure, because

Tara wasn’t perfect by any means, but decided to give it a go (It couldn’t be any more traumatic than when I first started doing Agility competitions, and I very quickly got into the routine with them and enjoyed testing against other dogs.)

My first WGD test was with the Hampshire Gundog Club and to my surprise Tara came about 17th out of 30, which I didn’t think was too bad for a first time. I really enjoyed the day, it had taken me out of the comfort zone I had been in with Agility, and the new challenge gave me a renewed interest. One thing I hadn’t realised about WG tests was that an awful lot of walking was involved – MILES!!! Each test had to take place away from the others to stop dogs becoming distracted, and since there were four different tests and three different ‘groups’ (puppy, novice and advanced) you had to walk for about 15 – 20 minutes to get from say the ‘water test’ to the ‘hunting’ area. By the end of the day I was shattered. Tom, my husband, had spent the day sleeping or reading in his 4x4 (he was banned from watching in case he distracted Tara), so couldn’t understand what all the fuss was about-MEN!!!! The other thing I hadn’t realised was that these tests usually take place on private estates and you spend the day in absolutely lovely surroundings, out in the peace and quiet of the countryside, (apart from the snores from Tom).

Having been encouraged by our day out we stepped up Tara's training, doing 'split' retrieves, 'hidden' retrieves and 'water retrieves' (retrieving a dummy from water or across a stream). This paid off because I started getting 2nd, 3rd and 4th places at the various venues, and Tara was working her socks off. Eventually John said that he felt I should sit the Kennel Club Working Gundog Test (Part 1) which I did, and passed! (Part 1 is for the various tests using dummies.)



A couple of months later, after a training day with the GSP club I was told that I was being put down for Part 2 of the Kennel Club Test, which was as part of a shoot over live game. Tara had been introduced to feathers by putting pheasant wings on a dummy, but had never done any hunting or retrieving on live birds, so I was a bit worried. She had been introduced to the noise of a starting pistol during her training, but had never heard a shotgun (much louder), so Tom came up with a plan. He and a friend went shooting wood pigeons regularly, so it was arranged that he and I would meet his friend, and he would fire his shotgun about 200 yards away to see what reaction we got from Tara. At the same time, I would throw a dummy and get her to retrieve it. I needn't have worried. Tara paid no attention to the gun, apart from a curious glance, and we gradually moved nearer and nearer shooting and throwing the dummy, until I stood about 15 yards from the gun and Tom stood next to him. By now Tara was in her element, she was loving it. We had a final throw with Tom throwing the dummy and his friend Paul shooting in the general direction of it. It was a perfect retrieve! Tara was ready for the next stage. We moved into a field where the lads had built a hide and a couple of wood pigeon were shot. Tara was really excited at seeing this, so I put a dead pigeon inside an old nylon stocking with its head and tail sticking out, threw it out and sent her on a retrieve. With a bit of verbal encouragement she brought it back, and after showing it proudly to all of us eventually brought it to hand. Great. Another break through. I left it at that since I didn't want to push her too far on her first warm retrieve, and came home. The boys stayed out shooting the pigeons to keep the farmer happy. Next week we went out again but this time it was for real. Tom and Paul shot the wood pigeons and Paul sent his Spaniel out for the first couple to let Tara see what was required and then it was her turn. During the shooting I had had a job holding her she was so keen, so when I eventually sent her out she went off like a rocket. A little bit of encouragement and back she came with her first natural retrieve- marvellous! A few more pigeons later and she had got the hang of it. I now felt a bit more confident about the KC test.

The test took place on a grey, cold day at Little Buckham in Sussex, the venue of the Isfield Shoot. I was slightly apprehensive, but looking forward to it. It was a new adventure for Tara and myself and whatever the outcome, it would be a fun and interesting day. I thought Tara might do ok but didn't have high expectations. Once the guns arrived we were all briefed and off we went to the shooting area. We didn't all work at the same time since there were about 14 of us taking the test, but were split into four groups each with a couple of guns. Tara was called up to hunt and when a bird was shot it turned out to be a 'runner'- a wounded bird. My heart sank since all we had ever practised was on dead birds, but I needn't have worried. Tara went off after it and they both disappeared into shrubbery some distance away and didn't reappear for some time. I was just about to blow my whistle to

recall her when the 'gun' stopped me. "Leave her be, she knows what she's doing" and sure enough out she came with the bird to do a lovely recall. I was delighted! She then went on to do another retrieve and again it was a 'runner', and again she chased it down and brought it back. By this time I was over the moon, she was working like a little demon. At the end of the day the 'gun' I had been walking with told me that he had driven 150 miles to do the shoot and it had been worth it just to see Tara work. He reckoned she was a cracking little dog. I agreed!!! We all retired to the local pub for a meal whilst the judges conferred, and the end result was that half the dogs had passed the Kennel Club Certificate Part 2 and Tara was one of them. Great result, I couldn't stop grinning.

On the way home I was still bubbling with excitement and Tom said "I'm glad you had a good day 'cos you're going to have to do it all again next week. You're 'beating' and 'picking up' on my shoot in Dorset". He belongs to a shoot near Wareham and had spoken to the Shoot Captain about me and Tara and we had been invited to take part. Time for some revision on Tara's training, I didn't want to let Tom down in front of his pals. I wasn't sure what to expect on the shoot, but Tom had always said that there was a great atmosphere and they were a really friendly bunch, and so it proved to be. I kept Tara on her lead to begin with but on one drive Bill the Shoot Captain told me to 'push up' a strip of wood towards the guns. Tara loves hunting and off she went quartering left and right through this strip of trees and rhododendrons. At one point I lost her, but when I went round a rhododendron bush she was on a solid 'point' and then flushed the bird only to have it fly up into a tree and sit there looking smug. Tom reckoned it was a last seasons bird that had got crafty. He couldn't shoot it whilst it was up a tree and he didn't have a saw handy, so he said a very rude word in the bird's general direction and we moved off. It was an enjoyable day and Tara worked well though didn't get a retrieve in, and I was learning all about the 'beating'

business.



I felt a lot more confident about the next time on the shoot, it was a good atmosphere and the guys were really friendly with a lot of leg-pulling and mickey-taking throughout the day. A week later and we were out again and it proved to be a great day in as much that Tara retrieved two of Tom's birds. The first came out of a wood straight towards where we were standing and Tom dropped it about 50 yards to our left. As the bird had been approaching I had been winding Tara up telling her to watch it, and when it went down I slipped her lead and she brought it back to hand. It felt great, her first

bird to Tom's gun!

This was the start of an enjoyable season for all of us. There were a few more retrieves to come including a cracking one from water. Tom had been placed as a 'back gun' standing by the side of two small lakes when a bird came straight down the middle. Tom shot it and it fell in the centre of the second lake, which was surrounded by rhododendron bushes. I saw the splash so took Tara to the edge and put her in through a gap in the bushes. She hadn't marked the fall so I told her to 'get on' and she swam straight out into the lake. I then shouted 'right' (remembering the commands I taught her in Agility) and she turned right and spotted the bird which she brought out straight to hand. I reckon that was the highlight of the season, I was really chuffed with her.

All too soon, it seemed, the Game Season was over. Tara had come on in leaps and bounds and was having a ball on the shoot, I was sorry when it all ended. It won't be long however to the start of the wood pigeon shooting and I'm looking forward to that, and of course the start of the Working Gundog Tests, though I'm not sure how Tara will react to thrown dummies after the excitement of shot game. I'm also eagerly awaiting March when Crufts is on since I get presented with my Kennel Club Working Gundog certificates in the Special Events arena. Meanwhile it's back to the GSP club and training days again, next Sunday being the first. I'm looking forward to seeing our Instructor, John, again and telling him all about Tara's Game Season.