

SPINONE IN HUNTING AND HUNTING TRIALS

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The address of Dott. Luca Massimino at the seminar organised in the World Dog Show in Milan on 10 June 2015.

It is September. The burning hot summer gives way to autumn. Farmers are ploughing their fields and wine cellars have the distinctive scent of must. People picking mushrooms and chestnuts are a clear indication of the beginning of a new hunting season. The rhythm of autumn's rituals is as punctual as ever but the approaching season creates a crescendo of emotions in the heart of a hunter. An Italian author Mario Rigoni Stern was correct in writing: 'Hunting stands for liberty, sun, space, storms.' It is still dark. A car pulls up at the roadside. The silence is interrupted by occasional sounds of awakening nature. One more minute and off they go. The boot of the car opens and an enthusiastic white-and-orange Spinone jumps out. Two shadows walk in silence side by side in the dim moonlight, their steps rustling quietly in the undergrowth.

The hunter stops. His Spinone sits down and glances at his human friend with his big, expressive eyes, his large nose ready to detect even the faintest scents of game. The first rays of sunshine illuminate the horizon and darkness gives way to morning. The beating of mallards' wings cutting the air distracts the dog and his hunter. At last! The hunter unleashes his Spinone and readies his shotgun. The dog immediately starts to hunt with passion that reflects many long months of waiting. The dog and the hunter together embark on a new voyage of discovery which, according to Marcel Proust, does not consist of seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes. And, as always, when remembering those precious moments, those eyes capture more than any camera and tell more than a thousand stories.

I wanted to begin my address with this introduction so that every one of you can remember that moment you have lived in your minds a thousand times, when you relive the unique experiences you have encountered over and over again with your Spinone. This is a gift our dogs give us again and again. It's not necessary for me to repeat the history of the breed to you, dear breeders, judges and Spinone enthusiasts. You can all read *Lo Spinone italiano e le razze affini* (1951) by Adriano Ceresoli, considered the bible of our breed and now available to all thanks to the reprint by Club Italiano Spinoni with the support of the Italian Kennel Club.

Instead of history, I'm going to focus on the medium to long-term future of our breed. I would like to start by citing the renowned hunting trial judge and cynologist Giulio Colombo, who said: 'A trial dog is no more and no less an excellent hunting dog.' These few words crystallise the symbiosis between hunting and more competitive trialling. These are not just empty words. These words should always inspire breeding, selection, hunting training, and hunting with a Spinone.

One of the burning questions of our breed today is the need to modernise the historical concept of the dog of 'forests and wetlands', which has characterised the Spinone as a

hunting dog for decades. This does not mean turning our backs on the origins of the breed but acknowledging its historical starting point, as well as its justified and concrete evolution. This means the ability to understand that the starting point (forests and wetlands) is not a factor limiting the use of the Spinone but rather a sign of the great versatility of the breed to hunt in all kinds of terrains.

Now that we are talking about this question, there are some issues I would like to emphasise. The first one close to my heart is precocity. In order to be considered a valid pointing dog, the Spinone cannot afford to not be precocious.

I've bred spinoni since 1978. My background is in setters, and I could not hide my puzzlement when people told me that the Spinone is not precocious and that I needed to wait for two years before I could assess its hunting abilities. Still today, I ask myself (and you) whether a hunter can afford to wait two years before he finds out whether his Spinone will have what it takes to become the kind of hunting dog he desires or, indeed, if he has a rough diamond in his hands? In similar conditions, the owners of a setter or Brittany will get their answer in six or seven months. Just think about it: waiting for 24 long months to find out whether your Spinone – to which the entire family is by then very attached – is, in fact, a proper hunting dog. What if it isn't? Do you buy another one and wait for another two years? Can we really wait that long or should the starting point be different?

I think it should. We should get rid of the common idea that Spinone (or Bracco Italiano, for that matter) as a hunting dog is a slow maturing breed. In my opinion, the heart of the matter is the starting point of the dog: in order to start seeing the hunting abilities of a dog at a young age, you have to start from a verified, strong hunting dog pedigree.

Precocity is closely linked to the dog's passion for hunting, temperament, its actions in the terrain, and the quartering method. But do take care not to confuse certain fundamental concepts. It all starts from the moment the hunter unleashes his Spinone. I'm sure you all remember the film *Gladiator* and the famous line uttered by General Maximus. The general turned to look at his soldiers and said: 'At my signal, unleash hell.' This also applies to the Spinone: the dog must not hesitate, it must be immediately ready for action, and move energetically and continuously which, in the right context, translates into hunt that covers the entire terrain to be hunted. The differences compared to other breeds are pace and, obviously, style. However, there is no difference in the distance of hunt, the terrain covered or any other numerically measured factor. Anyone hunting with the Spinone must have equal opportunities to find game as someone hunting with a pointer. Although the pace and hence the speed of the dog are different, the Spinone must have an equal opportunity to find game both in open stubble fields and dense bushes or forests. In more difficult conditions, the Spinone has its additional advantages.

For this reason, I think the most important thing in a hunting dog is the 'soul and engine'. A car must have an engine and tyres, and only then all the rest. Using this comparison, the style is the body of a car: practical, yes, but less important than the dog's passion for

hunting. What would it be like to have a Spinone with a perfect hunting style but who would only hunt at a maximum of 30-40 metres from its owner, taking into account that as the day gets longer the quartering distance usually gets shorter? We also have to consider the density of game. When game is few and far between, a good hunting dog always starts to hunt further away, not vice versa. It is easy for any dog to show continuous, eager hunt in a hunting reserve where finding game is predictable and frequent, like holes on a golf course.

Another important issue is collaboration, which the dog should ideally do spontaneously. Practice and experience fine-tune it. It is wonderful to see how a Spinone goes and checks just the corner of the field to which you had thought of commanding it, or to see the dog returning to a gorge where you hope it will find game after a long day's hunt. Be it a hunting dog or a trialling dog, it is perfectly acceptable for the dog to hunt far away from the handler. We want to have a dog with a generous search ability but that is always under control. It is recommended to use a whistle as little as possible, both when hunting and in trials, in particular when faced with wild game.

Just imagine that you have a dog who has an excellent, continuous and energetic hunt. The dog hunts in front of you at a distance in hills. It suddenly perceives a scent. This is where the differences between the Spinone (and Bracco Italiano) and other pointing dogs start to emerge. The dog indicates the presence of game in good time, after which it approaches the game and points. This is where the fun begins. The point is solid, and the dog's tail is immobile.

The dog waits for the hunter to come and down the game. It must wait until the hunter is next to the dog or, in case of heavy vegetation, in the best possible shooting line, before it is allowed to flush out the game. This is probably the greatest difference between hunting and trials. We all agree that – both in hunting and in trials – it is of paramount importance to have a hunt as generous as possible with as good a quartering method as possible in order to reach the point in which the dog even has the possibility to flush. There is no time to lose in trials: a run only lasts 10 to 15 minutes, maybe a couple of minutes more. There are a couple of minutes more to use in hunting, but that's all. The hunter must shoot but it's not always possible to go next to the dog. In the case of thick vegetation, the hunter must choose the best possible shooting line, which is not always by the dog's side. In trials, the handler approaches the dog, and the assessment of the dog's actions depend on the judge. The dog sometimes has to flush the bird out even if the handler is further away, because it is not possible to get close. In such cases, judges may penalise the handler for not being close to the dog, but this behaviour is out of necessity and should be praised rather than treated negatively. In some countries, such as France, the dog flushes out the bird on command with the permission of the judge.

Let's go back to our imaginary hunter hunting with his Spinone.

A pheasant is downed, after which another very important stage commences: the retrieval and, in some cases, the tracking of wounded game. This is not a minor issue, but an essential part of hunting after a gunshot. A dog must retrieve game fast, eagerly and

happily. Those who have seen this know what I'm talking about: the eyes of a Spinone returning with downed game in his mouth are shining with admiration. The tracking of wounded game is even more important: on the hunter's command, the dog must not hunt for new game before it has found the downed one. Too often have I seen dogs that start to look frenetically for downed game, but if they don't find it immediately, they return to hunt without retrieving it. Another important element is the dog's ability to mark the trajectory of downed game, which the dog does not see falling. Excellent hunting dogs mark the trajectory immediately and do not return to quartering until they have found the downed animal. Club Italiano Spinone has always emphasised the importance of trials, in which game is downed, just to verify these fundamental hunting abilities.

Throughout history, the greatest pride of the Spinone has been retrieval from water. This is where the old saying of the dog of forests and wetlands resurfaces...and this is not just a pun. A coarse coat and thick skin help the Spinone to work in water. Many say that there are very few marshes and wetlands in Italy nowadays. I argue that you can lose downed game (a great shame for a hunter!) even in a tiny pond, a stream or a river. I had the opportunity to observe a hunting trial in the United States several years ago. It was difficult for me to understand how dogs worked in water for as long as an hour while the handler was commanding them from a boat or the bank. It is not too difficult to retrieve a dead animal floating a couple of metres from the bank. It's another thing to independently retrieve a wounded bird from far away in rough sea. While hunting in the wetlands of Orbetello, I've noted that there are differences between spinoni.

Since we are talking about hunting, honouring another dog's point deserves a chapter of its own. I used to accompany my father on hunting trials for continental pointing dogs some 50 years ago. The dogs hunted in pairs, and honouring the brace mate's point could often be observed (although rules allow a dog to honour on command). Now that dogs have hunted their runs alone for years, all kinds of allowances have been made to be able to verify the dog's ability to honour another dog's point, and to receive the title of hunting champion. The problem for hunting is that a hunter absolutely needs a dog that honours the point of another dog. It is outrageous to see hunters who make a scene in the middle of a hunt to try and stop their dog that is not willing to honour the point of another. This leads us back to another fundamental element: the solidity of the point. We cannot expect a dog to honour a point if the other dog is moving his tail while pointing.

There is only one chapter missing from our imaginary journey to hunt – or to participate in trials – with the Spinone. The curse and blessing of what is allegedly the greatest difference between hunting and trials: steadiness at flush and gun. Why a curse and a blessing? Curse, because if a dog chases game in a trial, it will be eliminated. As simple as that. However, it is a blessing for an ordinary hunter if his dog is steady at flush and gun. Would you, dear fellow hunters, care to count how many times you have not been able to shoot a hare or a bird, just because a dog chasing that particular animal has been in the line of fire! Or how many times the dog is so winded from chasing game that he'll have to call it a day. The question is even more topical now that the number of boar and deer has grown exponentially in Italy, which means that steadiness and control of the dog at flush is increasingly important. Do think about that! Club Italiano Spinoni organises

the St Hubert trial to verify the hunting abilities of dogs that are not steady at flush or gun. Nevertheless, I have to emphasise how important it is for the dog to be trainable.

I have deliberately left the description of an ideal Spinone, that is, the style, to the end, as the icing on the cake.

We have already established the importance of passion for hunting, persistence, temperament, quartering, retrieval and tracking of wounded game, and possibly honouring another dog's point and steadiness at flush.

I'm sure somebody will say that style should be at the top of the list. Think again. A hunter wants to have a dog with the aforementioned qualities at as high a level as possible. Style will come – and it must come – after. The typical pace of the Spinone is the trot. An energetic, efficient trot is the best possible prelude for the expressive approach to the quarry of the Spinone. The trot is facilitated by the structure of the dog. Power comes from the ideal inclination of the croup and optimum rear angulation. The dog approaches game with his head high, as if there was an invisible rubber band between the game and his nose. The ideal pace for hunting is an easy, efficient and dynamic movement in which gallop is interrupted with trot in such a way that the proportion of trot increases along with the hours of the hunting day. The pace is both in the soul and the morphology of the dog.

A judge of the Italian Kennel Club awards the dog a prize on the basis of his style. The same prize that a hunter, in his mind, gives to the dog when he sees it working successfully in the Lucanian forests or in the burning heat of Maremma. Both hunting and trials must appreciate and acknowledge the quality of the dog's work, not the number of animals downed.

Now that I've talked about the Spinone in hunting and trials, I must also say something about the person, the Spinone enthusiast.

Too often we have had seminars and given speeches about the Spinone's trot, point and whatnot, but we have never given one thought to the person, the ideal Spinone enthusiast. He chooses a puppy, raises it, introduces it to hunting, trains and exercises his dog and, in return, he gets satisfaction or irritation. The dog cannot survive without his master, just like a hunter cannot manage without his dog. This partnership must have one thing in common: passion. Both the dog and the hunter must have great passion and willingness to make sacrifices: one must continuously train a young dog to allow its inborn abilities to flourish, and the dog must be helped to show his hunting abilities early on. One must be understanding but not indulgent. One must always ask for more from the dog and be in contact with other enthusiasts to continuously verify the quality of one's own dog. As Giulio Colombo said: 'A trial dog is no more and no less than an excellent hunting dog.' This is the way it should always be, especially for the Spinone, which should be better suited for both hunting and trials than other breeds, but which needs a person to take it forward. You often hear people say that if a dog does not fare well in trials, it is given to a hunter to be just a hunting dog. Maybe this should be the other way round: one can

cover a dog's shortcomings during a run of 10 to 15 minutes in a trial...but 4 to 5 hours of hunting in forests or wetlands and the truth always comes out.

One of the great merits of Club Italiano Spinone is that the club has always promoted high-quality trials with wild game that really separate the sheep from the goats. The trials help to identify the best individuals for breeding. If used wisely, they will produce even better hunting dogs for hunters. Unfortunately, dogs awarded in hunting trials only produce between 15 and 20 per cent of all puppies, which is still too few. The number of puppies born annually has stabilised at around 500 dogs over the last ten years. This could be higher. Therefore, we have to do better, because it is our responsibility as Spinone and Bracco Italiano enthusiasts to cherish our national breeds, which are an integral part of the history of our beautiful country. The same history as our territory, beautiful landscapes, culture, arts, innovation and passion. The Italian hunting breeds are an integral part of the world-renowned Italian quality. We can proudly support this in our own breeding by not compromising on quality in favour of quantity. Watching the Spinone hunt gives you so much more than mere hunting or personal satisfaction. For this reason, I fully agree with Rigoni Stern who, as he sat on a rock contemplating new hunting adventures in Asigiano with his loyal Spinone Cimbri by his side, said: 'Hunting stands for liberty, sun, space, storms.'

As Ernest Hemingway said: 'No-one is as happy as hunters with the always new, fresh unknowing day ahead.'

We are even happier, because we have the Spinone by our side.
Long live the Spinone!

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