

March 2018

Statement from the Chair on the future of the Gundog Club



The Gundog Trust

owns and manages the **Gundog Club**

"It is my firm belief that positive reinforcement dog training is the future. But more than that, I believe it is our responsibility as a charity representing the interests and welfare of gundog breeds to lead the way in this respect"

There has been a fundamental shift in dog handling techniques across the dog training world in the last ten years. A shift from teaching dogs using a mixture of both force and rewards, to teaching dogs without any force at all, using science based positive reinforcement techniques.

Ten years ago many people still questioned whether or not force-free dog training was even possible. Today there are force-free trained dogs competing at the highest level in most dog sports and disciplines.

Many important organisations such as the Animal Behaviour and Training Council have issued position statements recommending positive reinforcement training. Service dog training organisations, including the Guide Dogs For The Blind, have now switched to positive reinforcement training. And positive reinforcement training is now widely recommended by respected animal welfare organisations. It is my belief that it is time for The Gundog Club to follow suit.

Choosing our future path

The demand for force free gundog training continues to grow in the UK and elsewhere. Membership of my Positive Gundogs group on Facebook (a force free gundog training support group) is now accelerating.

Yet the Gundog Club is unable to offer sufficient force free trainers to meet the demands of our students and there is a reluctance for experienced force free trainers to join us due to our association with traditional trainers and traditional training methods. At the same time, many of our traditional instructors are reluctant to support our gradings or progress our students through the scheme, and reports of harsh handling continue to arrive in my inbox.

For some time now, it has seemed to me that we are effectively trying to straddle two worlds, and not really succeeding in being accepted in either. I think it is time to choose our path.

The Gundog Trust business planning committee led by Julie Clayton has worked very hard this year to put the Gundog Club's finances in good order. All our administration is now carried out by volunteers, and we have dispensed with the expense of bricks and mortar premises. We have raised funds and commissioned the construction of a new website that will enable us to carry out a range of functions from admin to test bookings, and the provision of educational materials online.

The group has also looked at length at the needs of our students, the impact of our training methods, and our responsibilities towards the welfare of gundogs whose owners become associated with, and influenced by, the Gundog Club. We have also reviewed the latest evidence on dog training techniques, their effectiveness, and their impact on dog welfare. As a result, it is the recommendation of the planning committee that the Gundog Club switch to force free training in September 2018. We recognise that this will have a major impact on our traditional instructors and on the future of the Club

Switching to force free - and the role of traditional instructors

In almost all disciplines force free dog trainers now lead the way and set the standard. However, it is easier for a force-free dog trainer from another discipline or sport, to learn to be a gundog trainer, than it is for a gundog trainer to learn to be a force-free instructor. Training without force involves a very different set of skills from those we have traditionally used in gundog training and old habits die hard. I personally have found these skills challenging to acquire and am still learning. But it can be done, and there are now many crossover trainers who have made this leap successfully. We will be very happy to support any of our traditional trainers who want to make the switch to force free training but accept that most will not wish to attempt this. It may be that there will be a role for our experienced gundog instructors in teaching experienced force-free instructors advanced gundog handling concepts, and we will be happy to discuss this with them going forwards

Making the change

I am aware that this news will not please everyone. And I very much regret the inevitable upset that this decision will cause to some of the traditional instructors that have supported us for many years. I am however confident that this is the right decision for the Gundog Club.

Pippa Mattinson
Chair of the Gundog Trust
Gundog Club Founder
8th March 2018