



Transitioning your rescued and adopted Pointer

An informative piece by Matt Jefford, a Pointers In Need Volunteer

I am very pleased to have been asked to write an article for Pointers in Need (PIN). I have had the pleasure of knowing Claire for a number of years now and quite simply am in awe of what you do as a charity and I commend everyone for your hard work and open hearts for taking on these dogs that are so much in need of love, kindness and the protection of a loving family.

Here are some of my thoughts on transitioning a Working Gundog into a pet.

It's a hard fact that through selective breeding Gundogs are born with an instinct to hunt. There is a fine line in a working dog between hunting for themselves and hunting for you. The handlers want their dog to find and flush game birds but not to kill them. At times this basic instinct will take over in the field and the handlers work hard to make sure this does not happen. I think this is very evident in rescue dogs that have been abandoned. In survival mode, the dog simply employs the skills it has been taught to find and kill birds to survive. We will never stop that, but we can harness it to make them easier to live with, take out for a walk, or simply lie on the rug by the fire. It is my understanding that most of the dogs rescued by PIN have been bred to work in the field hunting mainly game birds such as Pheasant, Partridge, Quail, Grouse and Ptarmigan.

In Europe, Pointers are worked to put food on the table, not for sport. In a lot of the poorer European countries, it is the most efficient way of hunting for food. This should be a big consideration when thinking of taking on one of these amazing animals, and how to embark on desensitising them as they join your family.

I know I have painted a tough picture; however, Pointers are loving, loyal, kind and capable of fitting in. In my view a dog, or working dog is simply a product of their environment. I have seen first-hand how effortlessly working dogs transition into being a family pet with the right structure and boundaries put in place.

The younger dogs that PIN rescues have for one reason or another have not made the grade, they are discarded on the street or hills having to learn to scavenge and fend for themselves, then there are the older dogs, successful workers having been worked for a number of years, but something has happened, which has led them to be discarded. Lastly and tragically the old dogs, they have worked faithfully for their handler for a number of years, but are now at the age where their heart is strong but their limbs are not. Tragically, their owners decide they do not want to offer a home and discard them or surrender them to shelters as they are now an overhead cost.

As an adopter it is critical to understand that each type of dog will have a set of requirements linked to their age and working experience.

The younger dogs that have not made the grade will benefit from going to obedience classes, channelling their prey drive with seeking games and "working" with you to form that bond and give

them the mental stimulation they require. I would absolutely recommend seeking professional guidance from a specialised Pointer and Setter trainer. When adopting an older dog, they will have a different set of requirements, being so keen to please their owners by finding game birds. As well as teaching obedience, setting boundaries and helping the dog transition. A big consideration should be the dog's mental stimulation. This can easily be engaged by playing "find it games" and the dog is happy that it has a purpose. Lastly, we come to the oldies, I have personally rescued Pointers from PIN. In my mind this is one of the easiest and best jobs to have as an adopter. These older dogs are simply brilliant around the house with dogs and people and keen to find a place to relax and be spoilt.

Rescuing a working gundog is a hugely rewarding experience, these dogs are keen to learn and please whilst they continue to perform a "job" for you. This takes so many different forms, I have seen Pointers perform at a high level in Cannicross and agility, become experts in being part of a dog sled team or simply use their acute sense of smell to find the treats you have hidden from them in your garden or outside space. My point is that once you understand your dog's needs, install the correct boundaries and get in sync with each other you will never look back. You also have the advantage (I am biased) of living with one of the oldest, most stylish working gun dog breeds on the planet. That's not a bad thing.

Another aspect which will help with bringing them in closer to you is the retrieve. You can use things like dummies covered with Pheasant skin, or rabbit covered dummies which mimic the prey they would hunt for, which will help stimulate their mind, you can do things like hiding in different parts of your house or garden and getting them to search for them and bring back to you. Balls, basically any toy they are interested in, but make them work for it. You can set up 2/3/4 items out in your garden and teach them to hunt for each one individually and bring back to you. There are many ways to stimulate their brains to help keep them happy and relaxed in family life. Rather than allow them to run-around all over your house when invariably they end up getting over excited rather than stimulated and this then can encourage them to be destructive with your belongings rather than a calm relaxed dog.

I am assuming many of you are still exercising your dogs on a lead maybe long line, but ultimate aim is to get your dogs to the point where you can take them for a walk and they can have a free running without disappearing off over the horizon. Above all we need to bear in mind these dogs are Working Dogs, but you Do Not have to work them, but you DO need to do training to ensure they have a happy and fulfilled life.

MJ