

Built for the shooting field

JOHN WALKER discovers how dogs like Clay, a labrador pup found at Battersea Dog & Cats Home, are now maturing as gundogs.

It was in the spring of 2007 that I first met and subsequently wrote about Clay, a bouncy 12-week-old black labrador. Clay had been re-homed by Battersea Dogs & Cats Home with Howard Kirby's Mullenscote Gundogs in Hampshire.

I wrote that big paws, bright intelligent eyes, a questing nose, mobile rudder, shiny black coat and a brisk gait summed him up best at first acquaintance. It was Howard's display team in action at Blenheim that had brought the trainer into contact with Battersea and thus brought Clay to Hampshire.

Originally homed by its breeder at eight weeks and rejected by his first owner because of a conflict with an existing dog, Clay caught the eye of a young couple from London. After three days of discovering the joys of toilet training and, in addition, allergic reactions, the prospect of rearing proved too much and the couple brought Clay to Battersea.

Battersea called Howard and he went to meet Clay. Howard described him as a typical strong little labrador. Clay did a brisk retrieve of a tennis ball, rolled over to have his tummy tickled and showed all the other signs of affection and character expected of him. Battersea's policy is to put every dog in their care through their veterinary centre, so Clay came to Howard micro-chipped, vaccinated, de-fleaed and wormed. His eyes and hips were checked visually but not scored.

I had watched him at work in the summer of 2007 as part of the Mullenscote display team. The Kirby magic touch was already evident, so after outings in the field at the beginning of the next season, young Clay passed into the experienced and tender care of Jane and Richard Loader that November. He found himself exercised by 20 days in his first season.

I caught up with Clay last season when he was working on Compton Chamberlayne estate in Wiltshire. Jane had paired him with her 11-year-old dog, Flint. She explained that the older dog looked after the longer retrieves and runners and Clay was reserved for the heavier sweeping up, working closer to his new boss. "I like my dogs to show initiative," said Jane, as Clay completed a long and complex retrieve. "He is very social and fits in well with other dogs and has been worked on everything from Wiltshire partridge

via grouse to ptarmigan on the high tops of Invercauld. Although he still shows a reluctance to work in water, he has all the contained bounciness and enthusiasm of a young lad still learning his trade."

Howard has taken further dogs from Battersea. To offset the ebullient bounce of the black labrador, his

next choice was an older golden retriever bitch called Maggie who came to Mullenscote in the summer of 2007 and was re-homed with Sue Harvey in July 2008. Sue's partner Tony coaches at Lains Shooting School, which Howard operates alongside the Mullenscote Kennels.

I recently watched Maggie work on pasture and in woodland in pursuit of pheasant. Wonderful awareness of her surroundings and quarry, together with a soft mouth, makes her very much fit for purpose. She demonstrated enormous natural energy and perseverance. "Maggie's a bit restless and excitable at times,"

said Sue, "but she runs that off quite quickly. She's very social and laid back and doesn't have a nasty bone in her body."

Neither Clay nor Maggie are yet considered steady enough by their owners to regularly sit off the lead while shooting is in progress. Like most younger retrievers they are still a work in progress, but both dogs behaved politely enough and completed their work in good order. It is something of a gamble to take on a dog of uncertain provenance and possible emotional damage. Howard is convinced however that there are no bad dogs, only bad owners, and that every dog can be trained or rehabilitated.

Howard, Annie Buckley and the team at Lains Shooting School and Mullenscote Gundogs clearly have a way with dogs and their owners which works minor miracles at many levels. On the evidence of Clay and Maggie, they know of what they speak. Their work recently won them the Best Traditional Business category in the 2008 Countryside Alliance Awards for the South of England. They also went on to become nation-wide runners-up in that category.○



Clay, retrieving to the hand of Jane Loader, is steadily growing in stature.

For more information about re-homing dogs from Battersea Dogs & Cats Home contact 0207 627 9210 or Howard Kirby on 01264 889467.

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