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Author: Jackie Drakeford

There is hard mouth, and then there is hard mouth. There is brought to hand in a deceased mode but whole or with a couple of discreet punctures, crunched but never mind we don't eat the ribs anyway, or chinks when you take it, with bits hanging out and barely fit for ferret food. There is 'dead', 'let go bloody dead' and 'Ow that's my thumb you little bastard'. There is pressure on the lips, pinching of delicate parts, lifting the quarters off the ground or having the whole damned dog dangling under your arm while you try to persuade it to relinquish the corpse in its mouth. It does not follow that the mortal remains in the last example are necessarily in a worse state than those that are yielded readily, albeit in somewhat compressed condition. Some of 'em just like to make very sure that whatever is in their mouth is not going to be accidentally dropped and then run away. Considering the effort put into catching it in the first place, you may concede that the dog has a point.

It is a truism that you can turn a soft-mouthed dog hard, but not a hard-mouthed dog soft. I have heard people claim that they can, but when you press them for details (it would, after all, be a priceless skill) you discover that they have a theory in their mind and have never even worked with a lurcher, never mind a hard-mouthed one. A dog that puts its all into pelting full-tilt after something fast and agile, and has to strike and scoop it up in its mouth, then retrieve it, then do it all over again, cannot be re-trained in any manner that affects the strike and pickup. The dog may retrieve dummies softly until hell freezes over, but that bears little resemblance to its real job.

I had a dog so soft-mouthed that every year a few rabbits would kick themselves out of her mouth. She was a demon on foxes, spun roe over dead on impact, retrieved feather neatly folded and unmarked, killed squirrels, rats and mink, and the only two hares she ever caught, having only seen four in her life, she also killed. She never

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marked a rabbit. I have also had a dog out of whose mouth nothing ever came out alive. The rest were in between those two extremes, and considering all mine were good foxers (before the ban, obviously) I didn't mind the odd marked rabbit. If you seriously want a velvet-mouthed rabbit dog, don't work it on biting quarry. Some differentiate between the two, some don't, and you'll never know which yours is until it's too late. I attended a lurcher field trial some years ago where every one of sixty-something rabbits caught by the four finalists was skinned out, and not one had even a bruise on it. Three dogs were collie-bred and the fourth had some kelpie in as well. That's where you go for your soft-mouthed dog. I'm not saying every dog bred so will be soft any more than I am saying any dog bred differently will not be (my old girl was mostly deerhound and saluki, with not a sniff of collie) but that will certainly weight the dice.

Some dogs are soft-mouthed when ferreting and mark the catch lamping or bushing. I have one that mullers the first rabbit he has after he has dealt with a rat of some sort, but is otherwise content just to kill them neatly to make the carry-back easier. Never underestimate the difficulties of carrying a struggling rabbit, or something with the kicking power of a hare or a well-spurred cock pheasant. Is your dog similar? Don't worry about it. Enjoy the dog you have got, not the one somebody else thinks you should have.

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'No foot, no 'oss' say the horsey people, and you could as well say 'No foot, no dog'.

The coursing people are very careful to wash dogs' feet clean after work, checking every toe and every web, getting all the dirt out especially from the nail beds while

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giving each foot a thorough looking-over. Some use a mild disinfectant, but salt water is preferred by others, including me, as the dog is likely to lick its feet afterwards. If you catch a foot injury early, you can make all the difference to a dog's recovery time. Your sense of touch is as valuable as your eyes, for you will feel heat before a swelling starts, or a lump that might have a foreign body in it, and can find and remove the smallest specks of grit.