

CONFIDENCE

Some dogs are born confident in their work, which is entirely different from confidence in themselves. Bold dogs can still lack working confidence, and a lurcher cross which includes one of the more in-your-face breeds does not guarantee a confident worker. Equally, some of the neeshest, shyest dogs I have known have transformed into tigers in the field, but returned to their normal apologetic selves as soon as their job was done.

If the confidence is not inborn – and it mostly isn't – it is up to the owner to instil working confidence in the dog. You cannot ensure early success in the taking of quarry because the quarry is dedicated to not being caught, but you can certainly load the dice in the dog's favour. This does not mean resorting to dubious practices, but it does mean taking every advantage put before you. Juvenile rabbits, myxomatosed rabbits, those with nowhere to go because they have been flooded out of their buries, or those whose escape routes mean negotiating obstacles such as rabbit fencing will all give the inexperienced dog enough work to do that it learns its job, while increasing its chances of a catch. Experienced dogs can all too easily lose their confidence from being worked too hard, while unfit, being constantly sent on impossible tasks, or run while in pain. These are the surest ways of creating a quitter that I know, and yet the lurching world seems full of people who want the moon for sixpence and want it by yesterday. Waiting until a dog is physically and mentally ready for each job is one of those common-sense things that isn't so common, and I still hear of dogs that have quit at an age where mine have yet to start. Yes, the dog might pull on the lead and seem all eagerness when it sees quarry run, but wanting to

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chase is in its blood: being able to catch is a matter of maturity. A daytime rabbit that knows where it is going is more than a match for a sapling lurcher, and a succession

of those missed will render the youngster dejected and uncertain, for sighthounds and their derivatives are sensitive beasts. How much better to start the young dog on less able rabbits! And if a lurcher of any age needs its confidence rebuilding, net a small rabbit bury, one in the open if you can, and let the dog pin some rabbits in the nets.

You can see that dog becoming keener with each 'catch', but this is not the time to let it chase a bolter. That should be saved for the next trip, because animals take time to assimilate a lesson. The dog should go home with plenty of success to think about.

Then you can take it out again, let it hold more netted rabbits, and when its confidence is really high, leave some holes open so that the dog can run after a few rabbits. It may catch or it may miss, but the important thing is that if it fails it can still taste success with rabbits in nets. A very cowed dog can take a season of ferreting to build its confidence up again, especially if it had a previous owner who made a misery out of every lost rabbit. If a dog is shouted at or otherwise punished for missing, pretty soon it will no longer try, and that can take a lot of getting back.

When it was legal to catch foxes – and let us hope that this important job will soon return to its rightful status – it was particularly important to start the dog well. This meant holding the dog back until it was physically and mentally able to do the job. One is no use without the other. Anyone who has seen foxes taken by a dog that is top of the game, one that despatches with speed and neatness and rarely puts itself in a position of getting bitten, will never mistake the work of a lesser dog of being anything other than inferior. Confidence is vital for tackling such quarry, but so is ability, and they increase together.

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If you are starting a lurcher from a pup, and you concentrate on building its working confidence by taking it out and about, letting it follow scent, waiting when it is puzzling something out, being patient while it investigates buries and so on, you will be laying good sound foundations. When you start to show the dog its job, do everything in your power to give it success, and be free with your praise when the dog catches. End each session early so that the dog does not become tired, lose concentration and then start to miss. The dog that is sure it “can do” is the dog that will try, and when most tries result in a catch, the dog will try harder. The dog that has seen early success is better able to ride out the failures that will surely come, and still be confident and eager in its work every time you go out together. The dog that has had its confidence shattered by human ignorance may never reach its full potential, no matter how much work is done subsequently, but a wise owner can still make a useful hunting partner of it.