

NEW OWNERS

The new lurcher owner can be overwhelmed by advice, lots of it conflicting, much of it more a matter of self-interest than truth (my mate's got a litter of...just right for you). Someone who has owned other dogs for many years might be unprepared for the differences between training whatever they are experienced with, and a lurcher. One size most definitely does not fit all, and nor does one training method. If ever a type of dog is designed to keep trainers on their toes, it is the lurcher. And just when you think years of lurcher ownership have shown you what goes on, along comes a dog that bowls you a googly, and you are right back to thinking on your feet again. It's fun.

Myths and legends abound. Should you start it while it is still in nappies, or keep it away from quarry for a year? Can a dog really catch these or those numbers in that timescale? Should your dog be catching by this age or that? What if it doesn't: is it useless? What if it does something you have never even read about? Is it – and are you – a failure if it yips once or does not chase something you think it should, or kills the rabbits it catches or refuses to retrieve? Has it been ruined for ever by something you did wrong once, or is the fault redeemable?

Everyone tells you that you must buy from working stock, but then half of those tell you that a first cross is a must: well, it is one or the other because the components of a first cross are rarely worked in the field if one is a greyhound off the track and the other is a collie off a chain. Two sighthounds bred together will produce a dog that will certainly chase, but can you train it? Some people do work purebred sighthounds, and work them well, too, but more do not, and they can be evasive if you ask how biddable their dogs are. Certain first crosses are a delight to train, and are definitely

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more biddable than the purebred components, but others need more experience than a tyro lurcher owner may have. Plenty of non-sighthounds might well be worked, after a fashion, in the field, but are they honestly capable of doing a true lurcher's job, and should you expect them to? Is that not why we crossbreed in the first place?

Then there are the people who would like you to take on a rescued lurcher. I know quantities of these that have been taken on with success, some by beginners and some by experienced owners, and you can get some awesome lurchers out of the rescue, which puts a question mark over the guaranteed working stock and the first-cross brigade. Most lurchers are bred as workers from workers, and it is arguable that you are taking on an unknown quantity in any case unless you have seen the parents work yourself, or the breeder has filmed them working. I would be particularly uneasy of anyone prepared to take a suckling bitch 'working'. If that is how they treat their bitch, maybe their priorities aren't mine. Many lurchers that end up in Rescue are from good stock, as are a fair few that end up in pet homes and go from thence to the showground. I've homed my working-bred pups to pet homes before now, because to my mind a good pet home is better than a bad working one. Rescued dogs are probably more difficult to train than ones you have had from new, but a few months down the line and you will have ironed out the differences. In most cases you can tell if they have been worked or not and therefore take an educated guess about whether they have sustained permanent damage or developed any unfortunate ideas. Similarly with the second-hand lurcher bought in for various reasons from another working home. Some good dogs and some ruined ones change hands this way; can the novice owner tell which is which?

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Breeding my own, I know not only that they work, I know how they work, and can tell new owners at what stage the wheels are likely to come off and how to avoid it. I vet new owners so thoroughly it borders on cruel, but my lurchers suit a particular type of person and it is no good homing them to someone who won't get on with them. But in truth, most lurchers can make decent rabbit dogs if they are only brought on properly and trained with care. A sound dog of the right shape will give years of service, and I am bound to admit so will many less beautiful specimens. I do come across extraordinary statements such as lurchers 'not making the grade'. For goodness' sake, what kind of a grade is that? Owning a lurcher is not a competition but a partnership: the dog works how it works, the owner gives the dog opportunities to work, and the more experience a dog has, the more it will catch. The perfect dog has yet to be born, and the same applies to the perfect owner. The advice I would give a first-time lurcher owner is to keep their money in their wallet for one season of watching as many lurchers work as possible, then get the type of dog that they like the best bred by somebody who has reared the pups well. Train the dog they have in front of them not the dog everyone else thinks they should have, and forget about standards and grades. There are knowledgeable people who can give very good advice, and there is usually more than one method of solving any problem, so if any advice does not sit well with them, try another way. And don't forget, it is supposed to be fun!