

## **STARTING PUPS**

I hear from quite a few people who are anxious because their lurcher either has not shown much sign of wanting to hunt, or more usually, has tried to catch but failed.

Some of these dogs are far too young to work; others are of the age when most would have started but they are lagging behind for some reason. The advice is always not to worry: the pup will come into its job in its own time, and while damage, both mental and physical, can be done by rushing a young dog, I have yet to see one ruined by starting late. A year after the first catch, you could not tell the one that started at six months from the one that didn't connect with a rabbit until it was two. And if you argue that the early starter has caught eighteen months' worth of rabbits that the late one has not, think to the other end of the dogs' lives, where the one might well do better for longer because it was stronger when it began to work.

A dog will start when it is ready, not when the owner thinks it should. There is good reason for this, for the precocious wild pup puts itself at far more risk than the late developer, should it tackle quarry that can best it. Our dogs are still only a spit away from the wild, and their hunting instinct will only cut in when they are ready to handle the result. Meanwhile, they have to develop. The five-month-old pup I was asked about recently because it was jacking on rabbits, was far too young for the 'few runs' on the lamp that its owner was giving it. Not only that, it was still teething, so of course it hurt its mouth when it tried to pick up. Between six and nine months there is a surge in hormone production and sexual development, and most pups will stop growing in body size at this time in order for the body to concentrate its resources into internal matters. This is why, after the first season, most bitches seem to have grown

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up so much in attitude. Males take longer, as males of most species do, because by the time they are mentally ready to fight for territory and the right to mate a bitch, they

had better have the physique that can handle it. Thus a dog of either sex may look fully grown at a year old, but between its first and second birthday will change just as much as between zero and one, albeit more subtly. The frame will fill out, the mind will be more astute, and the general attitude becomes a lot more professional.

Averages mean nothing with your own dog. Some parts of the country are a lot easier for starting a dog than others, and some people get a lot more opportunity to hunt. A dog that enjoys a couple of hours a day in wild, rabbit-rich areas is always going to be more experienced than the one that gets daily exercise but can only be taken where game lies when the owner is not involved with work and family matters. Mature rabbits are not easy game, or there would not be any left, for everything that eats meat eats rabbits. Sooner or later, though, even the slowest starter will come upon a rabbit that is not a fast, sleek decathlete, and then all that practice will pay off.

Usually mine will catch a baby rabbit, an injured one, or a myxomatosed one for their first, and indeed all of them have caught other creatures before they have connected with a rabbit. While most picked up their first rabbit between six and eight months, one of the best all-round lurchers I had did not succeed on rabbits until she was thirteen months or so. I know people who, impatient with their dogs or persuaded by 'friends' that their pup is useless, have parted with the animal, which has then gone on to catch well in the hands of a more experienced dog handler. Experience is not just a matter of years in the game, for many people have years of making the same mistakes: experience is learning from your own mistakes and those of others. Experience is not giving the dog too much to do. Experience is arranging confidence-building outings

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for your dog, and sacrificing short-term numbers of catches for long-term success, because knowing when to stop is as important as knowing how to start. Most

irritatingly for those in a hurry, a slow pup will come on far better for someone who puts no pressure on it, but instead bonds with it and enjoys taking it out for the pleasure of watching it learn. A pup has to go through many phases before it is a grown dog, and it has to make a lot of errors before its judgement is sound. Where some appear to be 'naturals' and can do it all from the beginning, others need a bit more space and time to develop. Take it from me, they will all do the job given time, opportunity and above all, patience. They will not work like other dogs, they each work like themselves, but as the result is still rabbits in the bag, that is all that should matter.