

Spinone

Orso ('Bear') del Ricciardo owned by Lino Albanesi.

Baffo ('Moustache') and Lino, his owner



THE Spinone has always been part of our hunting tradition. With 'our' I mean 'us', who live in the flat and watery areas of northern Italy. As years passed by, however, the breed's popularity faded; more and more Italians, attracted by foreign breeds, abandoned the moustached pointer.

His faults, past and present? He is 'big' and 'slow', they say, smelling bad and eating too much. In present-day Italy the Spinone is a dog for 'aficionados' – loyalists who appreciate his essence and respect his historical past.

Spinone means tradition

What do people like in the Spinone? Personality, first of all, him being hunter without any need to learn it. Get a Spinone and take him to the countryside — he will start working and the hunter spirit will come out naturally. The Spinone's inimitable glance reflects the goodness of his heart — he is as big and surly outside, as he is good and sensitive inside. The Spinone establishes a deep bond with his

owner and is delighted to work with him and for him. This certainly happens according to the Spinone's own characteristic style. Modern life scorns everything that is not frenetic, intense and nervous. None of these adjectives can be used to describe the Spinone.

So, are we talking about an obsolete dog? On the contrary, this ancient breed is part of the very fabric of our history, ready to maintain his staunch identity. The Spinone has his own flavour, he smells of wet roads, of fogs, of men wearing tabards and smoking pipes. His is the Smell of Tradition. A part of Italy enshrined in a hunting dog, the Spinone had been our hunting partner for centuries and he has the papers that say so.

Hunting with a Spinone

For those who love this breed, it's a scrupulously efficient hunting partner, an animal born to accompany a side-by-side shotgun! The Spinone knows well the tasks he is asked to accomplish: find the scent, point the prey and retrieve it, never mind the effort. His genetic background, holding the centuries of experience of his ancestors, gives him the courage, each

time, to enter the most bristling of bushes or the iciest of waters.

The Spinone executes his duties with an innately firm and ready demeanour. Spinone's owners have 'friends', not 'workers'; the hunter will teach the dog and the dog will teach the hunter in turn. The Spinone, at work, never forgets to refer to his handler, he knows that a good hunt can result only from a mutual collaboration. The Spinone ranges closer than the British pointing breeds but this is not detrimental to the quality of the hunt or to the outcome of the hunting day. One of the best ways to understand the soul of the Spinone, the spirit that drives his action, is to witness the Spinone at work with other breeds.

Spinone Tales

Aiace di Morghengo ('Ajax') was the Spinone I witnessed in the field. I often think his name suits him well; Aiace is still strong and vigorous in spite of his 12 years. Trotting like an authentic specimen of his breed, he never ceases to 'pip the others to the post'. With so much nonchalance, Aiace always arrives first when

the kind giant from northern Italy

it comes to pointing or retrieving. GSPs and Britannies happily gallop around him but Aiace, saving energies and led by mysterious shortcuts, is always the first to find the quarry. Aiace points, waits for the hunter and after the shot leaves together with the others, from the same place, to retrieve, but is invariably the one who comes back with a bird in the mouth.

Orso del Ricciardo and his 'son' Baffo, two Spinoni 'all moustache' as the standard asks for, placid and curious with a soothing glance, need a mention too. When I first met them, he was hunting with a vivacious English Setter and an austere German Wirehaired Pointer (or 'Drahthaar' in the registered pure version) – three breeds, three styles, playing together. The Setter was fast and long ranging with well set lacets. She opened wide, running incessantly, went after the scent as a good Setter should and held the point in perfect style. The two Spinoni replied in their own way, working together and remaining well focused on their handler. Their connection with the handler did not prevent them from opening, adding some gallop in between the trot, perceiving scents, pointing and performing wonderful retrieves. Sometimes one of these two came first, scenting something missed by the Setter in her run, some other times she came first and pointed patiently, waiting for her handler and the rest of the pack. When Baffo and Orso arrived, they were ready to honour and help in case of difficult retrieves. If a bird or a scent fell in the midst of intricate briars, they went ahead, needing no invitation, and opened the way.

With voice full of emotion, Orso and Baffo's owner told me: 'I got the hunting license only five years ago and I did my homework before choosing a dog. After reading and interviewing people and breeders, I came to the conclusion that the Spinone was my ideal dog. Orso taught me to hunt. I never had to teach him anything. My dogs are alert and never troublesome, you call them and they come back immediately. I use them in the plains, where there is plenty of water. They are great swimmers and can perform wonderful retrieves from water!'

Differences, at work, between the Spinoni and the Setter were striking, with the Drahthaar falling right in the middle. She galloped but her openings were not as wide as those of her fringed colleague, but she was superior in thick

bushes and retrieves. On the other hand, the Spinoni were better focused on their handler and, thanks to their heavier build, were stronger – a strength useful to face the briars.

Does the coat make the dog?

The only thing the Drahthaar and the Spinoni share is the longer hair whose texture is, nevertheless, not the same. People may think that rough-haired breeds are all the same. Someone, to understand a Spinone, asked whether it is similar to a Wire-haired Pointing Griffon ('Korthal'). The question, thus asked, sounds heretic to the breed fanciers; the Fox Terrier has a wire coat, so what? Is this enough to compare it to a Spinone?

The Korthal has nothing in common with the Spinone; not the coat, nor the size, not even the action. Korthals are smaller, lighter in bone, with bodies inscribable in a rectangle, not in a square. Grazing gallop is their gait, not the trot interrupted by gallop typical of the Spinone.

The Drahthaar? There is no connection between these two breeds, not even the coat – which is different, wirier in the Drahthaar, and dissimilar in texture. The Drahthaar, conformation aside, is a martial dog who has nothing in common with the kind giant from northern Italy.

The breed that gets closer to the Spinone is the Bracco Italiano.

They both fall in the same FCI class 'Italian Continental Pointing Dogs' and come from approximately the same geographic area but proudly remain two distinct breeds. The Spinone is neither a wire-haired Bracco, nor the peasants' Bracco as someone would label him. They do not share the same physical build, the same personality, the same movement, or even the same hunting style.

Recently, some Spinoni looking and acting like Bracchi have become trendy. Whereas it is true that the working standard describing the Spinone compares him to the Bracco this does not authorise hunters to consider these two breeds as a single one.

The angulations of the Spinone, for example, produce a unique movement that differs from the Bracco's one; the Spinone, moreover, tends to gallop more than the Bracco, and, again, his trot is more curled and the head is carried lower.

The Spinone on Point

The Spinone can be defined as a productive dog, lacking in style but very efficient when it comes to finding quarry. Discussing the pointing style of a breed, on the whole, is not easy – we risk to generalise: no dog and no point are like another. Quarry behaviour, too, varies according to species and within the same species. Also, we should never disregard the influence of the environment and the weather.

The Spinone is supposed to remain steady on point, nevertheless there are dogs who tend to get closer to the prey than others and conclude the action more rapidly. Quick conclusion, yet, does not mean bumping birds – the Spinone is a very practical dog and understands on his own when waiting would mean losing the bird. Head carriage varies according to the prey and the wind. A close approach to the game, in the Spinone, is not universal but an attitude influenced by the dog's experience and specialisation, if any. Those dogs used on snipes or grey partridges tend to point birds a long way off. On the contrary, a Spinone who has learnt his job on wild pheasants or on tight-sitting birds prefers to point these birds at a close distance.

— Rossella

