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Meet new England gundog team captain David Latham

David Latham has big shoes to fill when he takes over the England gundog team captaincy from John Halstead in 2015.



David Latham with FTCh Delfleet Neon of Fendawood and FTW Beileys Aguzannis of Fendawood during a recent training day.

Credit: Martin Puddifer

As a professional handler, trainer, tutor, judge, selector and breeder, David Latham doesn't have time for those who say the gundog world is a closed shop. The three-time IGL Retriever Championship winner, who will take over the England gundog team captaincy from "hero" John Halstead next year, came up the hard way. The 49-year-old from Middlewich, Cheshire, is proud of his humble roots and not the least bit embarrassed when talking about night-time training routines in supermarket car parks.

"It's an unfair accusation," says David, sitting alongside Gary McCarthy, owner of Gundog Gear, his invaluable sponsor. "I lived in a terraced house with my parents when I started. I still run around in a van with 250,000 miles on the clock. I've dedicated my life to my dogs. If I can do it on a small budget and still compete with the best... [he tails off, gesturing as if to ask what more do naysayers want]... you've got to use your knock backs – whatever they are – to your advantage. Handling is such an objective thing. Your ambition will get you through."

That ambition has taken David far and wide. In 2010 he left his job as a coachbuilder for Bentley Motors to turn professional, later moving to Austria with his new wife Stefanie, a professional dog trainer, breeder and member of the Austrian gundog team. Their kennel of around 50 dogs now includes breeding bitches, stud dogs and trialling dogs.

Be someone

David got the taste for gundogs through his father, a rough-shooting and rabbiting enthusiast. While friends were delivering papers, David was going around his village selling rabbits netted the night before. The close bond with his first dog Gunstock Sally was forged via nights in front of the fire and a dummy made from a sock full of pebbles. David had never even used a whistle until a training day at North West Labrador Retriever Club in the 1980s.

Despite a lack of facilities, David was extremely serious about his hobby even during those early years. A growing interest in handling led him to the gallery at a Checkley Wood field trial in 1986 and it made such an impression that he telephoned Sandra Halstead that same night to reserve one Drakeshead Matt.

Their first success came in 1989 during their first novice trial. David has dealt with different kinds of pressure during his professional career – here after all is a handler who has now qualified for 15 IGL Retriever Championships at the time of writing – but the folly of youth certainly helped him to win those first few trials.

“When you’re young and naïve you don’t realise how tricky the retrieves are. The younger you start competing, the less pressure you feel, purely because of your age. You don’t think about it, you just do it. The real pressure comes after you’ve won a championship. After that people are expecting you to do well, and with that in your mind, your head can go after one mistake.”

That call to the Halsteads was the start of a friendship that has certainly helped to keep David’s mind focused and his feet on the ground. As his handling career was taking off he developed three main goals: to have a dog made up to field trial champion (five times and counting); to win an IGL Retriever Championship (there have been three since 2003); and to be selected for England duty under John’s leadership (first achieved at the Game Fair in 2006).

As with any championship handler, the road to realising these goals has been riddled with uncertainty and risk: how many handlers who want to move things forward would be willing to sacrifice a lucrative full-time career or shun lasting personal relationships until their late 40s in favour of their gundogs? Even when you are an established name things can go against you, as the instant disqualification of FTCh Fobbingacres Sunny for running in on the first day of the 2009 championship at Blankney proved.

“That disqualification was a real missed opportunity,” admits David. “Twelve months’ training was gone in a second. My shoulders dropped for a while after that.”

The way David talks about winning and losing it’s no wonder his aim of adding to his IGL Retriever Championship wins means so much; the victory at the Italian Retriever Championship with FTCh Lesser Burdock Abbotstone earlier this year – David was the first Englishman to ever take the title – is simply described as “sweet”.

“I want to win a retriever championship again,” he says stone faced, confidently naming 2012’s win at Cawdor with FTCh Delfleet Neon of Fendawood as his favourite. “It’s everyone’s dream to win that prize. In the week running up to the championship you know that all over the country every dog about to compete will be out training to win. Of course, there is an element of luck. The thing with field trials, perhaps more than working tests, is that whatever happens – the number you get, what type of bird you’re asked to retrieve 10 steps ahead, and how the guns shoot – good dogs will always come through.”

England expects

With the retirement of John Halstead after the recent Game Fair, David takes on a whole new responsibility, that of England captain. Applying for the post wasn’t even on David’s list of ambitions until he found out about the retirement, but he does have previous experience in the role, having been put in caretaker charge in 2011. David led the team to world cup and Game Fair success in John’s absence, but the role brought a “different pressure”, one he will doubtless feel again when he takes over the reigns.

“I am nervous? Yes. When you get in the England side it’s the talk of the country; people are asking who’s got in and why they’ve got in, or saying he’s only there because he knows so and so. When you’re the one picking that side you think everyone is on you. You’ve got to pick the right handler, the right dog. The pressure is massive. There are thousands of people in the stands at internationals and some of them, unfortunately, have come to see you fail. Standards are rising. The European teams are coming up so fast – a home nations win isn’t a cert anymore.”

David takes his time to describe what kind of England captain he wants to be. Words like “consistent”, “inspirational”, “fair” and “professional” are banded around. Given what he has gone through to get this far, and while much of his thinking will come from the teachings of his mentor, John Halstead, David knows he has got to follow his own thoughts. He wants to win every prize he can in the five years he’s England captain and second isn’t an option. It never has been.