

A gundog masterclass at Glanusk

PHOTOGRAPHY: ED SHEPHERD

During the drives, Ben's dogs sat patiently, marking fallen birds



Clockwise from top: The stunning Glanusk scenery; shoot manager Mark Coleman; sporting agent Simon Thompson (left) & Andy Katsantonis



Following on from his gundog training series, Ben Randall joins Marcus Janssen for a day's driven shooting in Wales.

Competitive field trialling is more popular than ever in the UK and, as a result, standards are impressively high. Dogs and handlers are expected to put in faultless performances and, at the pinnacle of the field trialling calendar – the various breed championships – this means performing under immense pressure. One mistake and you're out; it's as simple as that. Very few have what it takes to keep their nerve and deliver perfect performances until all rivals have either been eliminated or outclassed. Fewer still

have managed it more than once.

But in 2012, Ben Randall and his cocker bitch, FTCh Heolybwloch Fatty, did something that hadn't been done for over 35 years – they won the Cocker Championship for a second year on the trot. So when Ben offered his services as my own personal picker-up for a day last season, suffice to say I didn't turn him down. Besides, I had always wanted to see how the skills that are required to compete at the top of the field trialling world would transfer to everyday shooting scenarios.

GLANUSK ESTATE

Ben had arranged with Mark Coleman for us to join a team of Guns from London for a driven day at Glanusk in the Brecon Beacons. Having spoken to a friend who had shot Glanusk before, I arrived at the 5,000-acre estate with two preconceptions: the scenery would be pretty; and the pheasants challenging. But as I turned off the A40 near Crickhowell and drove through the stone gates that lead onto the estate, I realised that my friend's description of Glanusk had been doused in classic British

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understatement – if this was his idea of pretty scenery, I dreaded to think what challenging pheasants would look like. Awash with autumn's most glorious palette of golds, russets, crimsons and browns, the surrounding countryside wasn't pretty, it was spectacular. Stopping on an old stone bridge which crosses the River Usk, I took a moment to appreciate the view before continuing up the drive.

Shoot manager Mark Coleman, Ben and I met at the shoot room to talk through the plans for the day. It was decided that Ben would accompany me on my peg and then work his dog/s at the end of each drive, thus giving me an opportunity to see all the theory put into practice. "So, who have you brought with you?" I asked. "A bit of a mix," said Ben. "Mainly youngsters that need some practice – I've got a couple of springers, one or two cockers and a couple of labs with me." Ben obviously saw the disappointment on my face. "Oh, and I've got Fatty with me, too." Having heard so much

about her, I couldn't wait to see the two-time Cocker Championship-winner in action.

The Guns, a group of friends from London, soon started to arrive at the Glanusk Rod Room, a beautifully refurbished shoot lodge with oak flooring, a large inglenook fireplace surrounded by enormous sofas, and a dining table big enough to seat a team of Guns and their partners for a typically lavish Glanusk shoot lunch. I was soon to discover that most of the Guns were of Greek descent. "Have you ever shot with the Greeks before?" I wasn't sure if this was a warning or just an unusual introduction. "Hi, I am Savvakis Savva, let me introduce you to Andy Katsantonis, Peter Economides and Kyri Joannides." Mark couldn't have chosen a nicer group for us to join for the day as Ben and I were treated like a part of their team from the off. Indeed, before the first drive had even begun, it was clear that they too were looking forward to Ben's gundog masterclass.

DRIVE 1: THE LARCHES

Disembarking from the Gunbus, we had a short walk into an open field backed by a steep bank of mature beech, oak and conifer. The action was soon underway with a mix of birds curling out across the breadth of the line – a perfect opening drive as most were sporting without being intimidating. But, despite it being mid-November, there were one or two birds that

clearly thought it was January as they rocketed up into the heavens. Most sailed past unabated, but one, possibly the best bird of the day, suddenly folded above Andy Katsantonis. His broad smile was visible from three pegs away.

But as the horn sounded to mark the end of a successful drive, all eyes shifted to Ben and the pair of dogs – a springer and a black lab – that had sat patiently at his heel throughout the action. "Through the various stages of training, from patience training (restraint during feed times) and controlled game training (walking dogs at heel through a game pen and using multiple dummies), they have learned that during a drive, their job is to sit and watch quietly," said Ben. Using hand signals and pips on the whistle to guide them to within a few feet of their targets, he sent them out, one at a time, for marked retrieves.

What I found particularly impressive was the conviction with which the dogs responded to Ben's signals and instruction, never once deviating from the line that he set for them. "I always use retrieving lanes to start off with," said Ben. "This teaches them to cast out in a straight line." It was true teamwork, the dogs trusting implicitly that Ben would put them into the right area. "That trust is established through their foundation food training," commented Ben. "It has become ingrained in them that, not only are they working for me, but if they

do what they're told, they'll get something they really want." (Either food or a retrieve.)

The other thing that struck me was the accuracy of Ben's marking. This is a lot more challenging than it sounds, particularly on a drive like The Larches where the Guns had been double banked and a lot of birds had fallen within a relatively small area. But time and time again, Ben put his dogs right onto the mark and they came back with the retrieve. "With experience, the dogs also learn to mark multiple birds themselves," added Ben. "By using several dummies during their early training, you teach them to pay attention throughout the drive. And as I have established by training them alongside other dogs, they never know which bird you're going to send them for."

Once all of the birds had been picked, Ben opened the tailgate of his pick-up and, without having to be prompted, the two dogs joined the others in their boxes, ready to move on to the next drive.

DRIVE 2: FEDW WOOD

As we marched our way up an ominously steep hill, a glorious panorama of the valley opening up behind us, I spotted headkeeper Mark Rigby, who I had met briefly earlier that morning. "This is a new drive," he said as we approached a stone wall behind which the Guns were being positioned by Mark Coleman. "We've only done it a few times so far, so we are still working on the finer details. But with a bit of luck, you should see some

decent birds." Turns out that Mark is another king of understatement. Pegged at no. 8, I was on the far left of the line and, although the majority of the birds – pushed from turnips beyond the brow of the hill – headed over the middle-pegged Guns, those that did come my way boasted the full armoury of height, speed and adverse curl in the crosswind, making it very difficult to read their line.

At the end of the drive, Mark realised that I was purposefully avoiding making eye contact with him. "So, Marcus, how did you get on?" he asked with a chuckle. I could only hang my head in shame. I was relieved to discover that I wasn't the only one though: "I didn't know where to begin," said one Gun. "Who knew pheasants could fly that fast!"

With such a strong tail-wind and steep drop behind us, a lot of the birds had fallen beyond the brow of the hill, making it a real challenge for the picking-up team. This was a perfect opportunity for some blind retrieves. This time, working a liver cocker and another springer, Ben signalled for them to keep pushing back until they disappeared over the brow. "If they go wrong, they must be recalled and started again," he said. "But once I've got them as close as I can, I allow them to use their noses to do the rest. Their sense of smell is 100,000 times more sensitive than ours, so it would be silly not to make use of that." It was great to watch as time and again they would return looking as pleased as punch with another pheasant for the game cart.

As we made the long walk back to the Gunbus, I noticed how both dogs were tucked in tightly behind Ben's heels. "They know the rules," he said. "Right from the very start of their training, I have established myself as pack leader and, unless I ask them to do otherwise, they stay behind me at all times. They know that if they break the rules, Dad won't be happy and they'll not get any more retrieves today." ➔



From left: Ben Randall, Mark Coleman, Tom Cox, Costas Avraam, Alex Avraam, Andy Katsantonis, Savvakis Savva, Damien Hancox, Gregory Palos, Simon Thompson, Peter Economides, Kyri Joannides & Marcus Janssen



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DRIVE 3: COCNHAINES

After a short stop for an impressive spread of elevenses, we all piled back into the Gunbus and headed to Cocnhaines, the penultimate drive of the day. Just before we set off towards our pegs, we all gathered around the tailgate of Ben’s pick-up. “Watch this,” said 12-year-old Alex Avraam, “Ben’s going to do his party trick.” With faces peering out from the dog boxes, all desperately eager to be summoned, Ben called one name. “Fatty,” he said quietly. Only one little liver cocker wriggled through the mass of fur and wagging tails and took up its place at Ben’s heel, the rest staying put, no doubt willing to be called next time. “Because you use the dog’s name as the recall command, that unique sound means nothing to the rest of them,” explained Ben.

If the pheasants on the previous drive had exposed the weaknesses in my repertoire, then the birds at Cocnhaines well and truly humiliated me. Every time a bird curled out in my direction, Ben, who was stood a few feet behind me, would start to chuckle. “Good luck mate, you’ll need it!” he’d say, followed by more laughter. I have no doubt that any of the Guns in the *Fieldsports First XV* would have been in their element on this drive, but these were some of the highest pheasants I have ever seen, let alone attempted to bring down.

Luckily, some of the Guns in front had fared rather better, so there were enough retrievers for Ben and Fatty to put on a masterclass for all

to watch, despite this being her first outing in several months. One particular retrieve saw Ben send her around the side of a copse of trees some 150m away to look for a bird on the far side. With every pip of the whistle, she turned to face him as if to say: “Where to now, Dad?” “In order to build that trust, you must start them with short retrieves,” said Ben. “But once that trust has been established, it doesn’t really matter how far you need to send them.” Once Ben had got her as close as possible, he gave her the ‘hi-lost’ command to hunt and she soon picked up the scent of the bird and disappeared. Sure enough, when she re-emerged, she had it in her mouth.

“How long did it take to train her?” asked Alex Avraam. “I didn’t train her,” said Ben wryly, “she trained me.” Obviously a joke, Ben did later explain to me that he’s never known a dog require less training. “She’s just got it mate,” he said proudly.



“It was this high.” Ben after the final retrieve of the day

DRIVE 4: TAN Y LAN

There was plenty of shooting across the breadth of the line on this drive and, with a mix of birds of both extreme and moderate height, you could be selective. By anyone’s standards, they were all great birds but, after Cocnhaines, they felt tame by comparison. There was certainly plenty of picking-up for Ben and Fatty to get on with afterwards.

Both Ben and I had marked a runner that had slipped into a thick patch of bracken. As Ben allowed Fatty to get on with it, her nose glued to the ground, the cock bird ran out of the far side and into the wood beyond. Unfortunately, the little dog – with its head down, deep in the bracken – didn’t see the bird emerge. Straight away, Ben pipped his whistle and Fatty’s head popped up. Using a hand signal,

Ben immediately sent her into the wood. Like a bullet, the little cocker darted off in hot pursuit and soon disappeared into the thick undergrowth. Another great example of teamwork.

By the time we had all congregated around the Gunbus to toast a great day’s sport, there was still no sign of Ben or Fatty. “It must be that unruly, badly-behaved mongrel of his,” said Mark jokingly. “It’s probably headed home to Herefordshire or set off after a fox.” As if on cue, Ben appeared from around a bend in the track ahead. With a triumphant look on his face and a dog at his heel, we needed no explanation. “I knew she’d get it,” said one of the Guns. “I didn’t doubt it for a second,” agreed Mark. It turns out the wily old pheasant had taken shelter

in a fallen tree, more than 6ft off the ground. “She still managed to get it,” said Ben with unadulterated pride. We’d all just been treated to a gundog masterclass.

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