



VC Osage Bria Luchi MH
Spinone

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Braveheart

I wonder if many of you out there have a dog you might call "Braveheart". It is a nickname given to my Spinone, Luchi, by Suzi Moore, who also has a Braveheart: a GSP named Jilly. It refers to a dog – often one's First Hunting Dog – that must bear the brunt of our training errors and learning curves. Braveheart dogs need a lot of heart to overcome ambiguous corrections, intermittent training, and sometimes inappropriate force.

Happily for both Suzi and me, our dogs were able to move on and ultimately qualify as Versatile Champions. The training for a Braveheart dog is a forever altered path, both for the dog and the handler. An improved relationship has to be built, based on respect and consistency. The handler has to bring the dog back from training mistakes that may have caused the dog to shut down his or her natural desire, or perhaps to become defiant. The dog has to find the courage and joy that versatile hunting dogs need in order to perform both independently and obediently.

My story starts in 2003 with a Spinone pup full of *joie de vivre* and natural talent. I used to wonder why many other puppies seemed more obedient, but was heartened when

John Crozier encouraged me by saying, "You can't put desire like that in a dog. Don't worry, the obedience will come. You'll go to the Invitational with Luchi." Well, that all came to pass, but it was not a straight path.

Luchi always had a wonderful natural duck search, and was initially willing to go on a resend. However, I believe I pushed her too hard and made the duck search arduous rather than fun. Gradually she refused to go on the resend. Then, I made some inappropriate corrections with the e-collar in the field, causing confusion just three weeks before her Utility test. She shut down, meaning her desire was flattened and the parts of her work that called for independence, such as the duck search, suffered.

At this point my training partner, Karen Beyer, said, "We're not giving up on Luchi." I will always be grateful for her faith in the dog and confidence that we could find another way. With this determination, we were ready to put in the work to get Luchi back on track.

The path to a UT Prize I took another year. I happened to apprentice under Al Harmeyer, who said that you have more success when you can engage the dog's natural desire, and not to rely so much on obedience. That win-

ter, I let Luchi have her head in every way – I didn't correct her on small steadiness issues, knowing the obedience could easily be reinforced later. I took her hunting at every opportunity to rekindle her desire. For the UT duck search, Karen Beyer and I even placed pheasant launchers on the water so that we could release ducks remotely, all to create excitement and rebuild her confidence.

Rather than hammering Luchi on UT training that she didn't really need, I moved on and began to train her for the Invitational. Lena Amirian suggested this would demonstrate whether or not she had the stuff in her to take the pressure and perform at this highest level. It was a good test, and it gave me confidence to see what a fine dog she really is. Luchi easily achieved a Prize I, 201 points that fall, and we were on the way to the 2007 Invitational.

I have learned so much from my Braveheart dog: how to balance work with play, how to apply consistent pressure with daily obedience routines, and how to better read a dog. I now have more understanding of the "fluidity" of dogs, and how to adjust my training to each dog on a given day. But for me it all comes down to this: the fact that Luchi qualified as a NAVHDA VC this year is most of all a tribute to a special dog and the heart she never lost.

