



Robin sends FTCh Brackenbird Minnow

Above right: FTCh Brackenbird Minnow clears Robin's training fence

Right: Young lab Tay neatly pops the fence after only her second water retrieve

Robin also trains but doesn't yet run spaniels in competition. Young Happy is enthusiastic in all she does!

Ebony Drummer bringing a water retrieve to hand

Robin in training mode

Future champion? Six-month-old Tay is just starting her training. This photo shows the first time she had picked this type of dummy

A totally adorable Modbury golden puppy

A Tibeapuppy playing

FLYING THE FLAG

SARAH WHITTINGTON MEETS ROBIN WATSON OF TIBEA GUNDOGS, A MAN WHO'S TAKING THE BRITISH TRAINING MESSAGE AROUND THE WORLD.

You could be forgiven for thinking you've got the wrong address in searching for Robin Watson's Tibeapuppy Kennels. Nestling in countryside carved up by a labyrinth of roads, his West Midlands' kennels are truly tucked away. He's naturally concerned about security but you won't hear a murmur from his dogs – not a yelp, squeak or errant bark – belying their location. "They are naturally quiet," the multi-field trial winner explains. "Not only would I get eliminated from competition but no-one wants a noisy dog in their home!" And most of the dogs Robin and his partner Rachael Corbett produce (99 per cent they suggest) go to working, family homes where they will be expected to live part or all their existence in the house.

Robin has made up two field trial champions, FTCh Whitmill Eclipse of Tibeapuppy and FTCh Brackenbird Minnow, and is an A-panel retriever judge. Rachael breeds her own Modbury working golden retrievers – there is much banter as to whether labs or goldies make better dogs, although their kennels do include cockers, springers, a Jack Russell and a Yorkshire terrier – "my daughters!" Rachael is keen to point out

of the latter two. "The dogs just board at the kennels during the day time!"

A believer in the importance of free exercise for the working dog, Robin's dogs are all given the opportunity to run around, cock a leg and yes, bark for 10-15 minutes twice a day. "They go out in groups of eight to ten before breakfast and then they're happy to settle down until I'm ready to train," he says, "With dogs going to live

in a home environment it's important that they learn how to interact with other dogs that they might meet running free on a walk.

"No-one wants a dirty dog in the house either. Free exercise keeps your kennels cleaner and teaches the dog to toilet when he's outside.

"You can also learn a lot from watching your dog interact," he adds. "Are they sniffing and searching scents out, are they bossy and rough with the others? And if the young dogs get carried away I can tell them off..." Promptly followed by deerhound, house dog Agy, who clearly thinks she's better than her neighbours.

Robin grew up with gundogs. His father, also named Robin, was a highly-respected trainer who first trained with Dick Mayle at Woburn Estate aged 17, making up two retrievers in his career and breeding the prolific working labrador sire FTCh Tibeapuppy Tosh, run by Ian Openshaw.

"I was probably around eight years old when I first started helping Mum and Dad," Robin says, "I was Dad's skivvy really, fetching and carrying and perhaps getting to throw the odd dummy,"

GUNDOGS HOME & ABROAD

but it was a sound grounding for Robin junior who got his first dog to train aged 12. "It was a golden retriever of all things!" he jokes. "And I think I only got her because she didn't like Dad but would retrieve for me."

"She was called Chesil, after the beach, and she was a good dog. I had to do a demonstration with her at school and I think it went okay, because they didn't tell me otherwise!"

Robin's love of fieldsports developed and he started shooting; an interest he hasn't lost and one of the reasons why he is passionate about developing inherently steady and obedient, natural retrievers. Back then though he would 'borrow' one of his father's dogs for local rough shooting forays with his mates. "It was always on the strictest understanding that we wouldn't let the trial dogs hunt the hedgerows. Of course as soon as we were out of sight off the dogs would go!"

Robin's father was never a full-time dog trainer (he was a meat inspector) and he was convinced his son should learn a trade. "And so, I trained as a blacksmith and that's what I did in the day, training dogs in the evenings."

Tragically, his father died aged just 44. "I was 21 and he left me his best dog, Tibe Sid," Robin says. "It's because of Dad I have labs in the main. I really wanted to do well with Sid and I'll admit I didn't do as well as I should have. Perhaps, I wasn't good enough to run a dog like that then." Robin continued to maintain the Tibe kennels with his mother, Marlene.

He was also diligently forging away as a blacksmith, welder and part-time trainer, when the 80s recession hit. "Welding work just dried up, but luckily I managed to get a job at Southern Electric." Three or four years went past when news loomed of possible redundancies. "I thought about it and decided now's my chance to work for myself, took the plunge and opted for voluntary redundancy." It was all for the best – he had his own forge,



Robin is patient yet enthusiastic with his young dogs. He is also able to source dogs for clients all over the world



Right: The latest batch of Tibe and Modbury pups



Youngster Ebony Drummer worked last season. Robin is hopeful of running him in competition later this year

something when the weather was rough and out training at other times.

Not long after he met Morty Turner-Cooke and his wife Pauline, who introduced him to the American gundog community. Word spread and Robin was approached by a wealthy American family offering him the prospect of becoming their trainer. They watched Robin train in the Cotswolds and he went to visit them before the contract was signed. He produced their gundogs for seven years. But America was not without its risks! "The boss in Georgia was watching his dogs work and I really wanted to impress him," Robin says, "so I sent the dogs into this lake... until the plantation manager pointed out these two bumps on the water's surface and said I might want to keep an eye out for them moving... because they were alligators! I got those dogs out quick!"

And when he first went out shooting in the States, Robin was handed a pair of cowboy gloves at the start of the day. He didn't ask and

just shoved them into his back pocket. On bending down to pick up a quail, he learnt what the gloves were for - his hands were shredded by the coarse grass.

Spending time in America, Robin built up contacts in the country and now conducts training sessions and seminars there. "I go over twice a year or so, for ten days to a fortnight, training and judging. There's such an interest in and resurgence for the British labrador. I also go to Europe three or four times a year." Destinations include France, Italy, Denmark, Germany and Sweden.

And why the interest in the British way from across the pond? "The American labrador has become too highly strung and difficult to handle for most people, due to the use of the shock collar, which I am against. If a dog is forced to retrieve it's going to stop picking-up," he says. "The British labrador is softer and easier to handle and train. Retrieving is a natural trait.

"I can remember sending a dog to South

Dakota and its new owner being amazed at the fact it would settle down next to the sofa at the end of a day's shooting. Most American gundogs have to be kennelled as they can't switch off."

With around 20 dogs in the kennels at home, supported by Proplan nutrition, foreign visits take time to plan. Robin still wants the opportunity to train his own dogs and has the ideal location with a variety of cover and terrain accessed straight from the kennel yard. There's old bomb craters providing challenging scenting, farmland and a pond, perfect for introductory water work. He can also head out to nearby woodland.

Rachael's mum and stepdad, Liz and Tony, step into the breach while the couple are overseas. Liz used to breed labradors and that's why Rachael is so keen on goldies. "I was never allowed one," she says, "so as soon as I left home that's what I got!"

So what makes the ideal gundog? Robin doesn't mind, big or small, dog or bitch. "You can't tell what size a puppy is going to be. It

doesn't follow that a small dog will come out of a small bitch. I look at temperament first, then that they've got a good waggly tail to show they've got plenty of drive, and style demonstrated by their natural ability to retrieve. I then wait until the pup's ready to start training." Another time when watching the dog at free exercise pays. "It's all about patience. I think some handlers expect training to be as easy as switching on a computer and the dog will just do it. They forget it's a learning process and it takes time."

Robin spends the UK season juggling picking-up commitments, judging and running dogs in trials. The couple both enjoy picking-up, which is all over the country but also at their local Packington Estate.

And future ambitions? "I take pride in producing and sourcing good, general, shooting dogs for people – a companion who will be a pleasure to be in the field with."

www.tibeagundogs.co.uk
www.modbury-retrievers.co.uk



June Atkinson with one of her Holway golden retrievers (photo taken 1997)

Obituary JUNE ATKINSON 1926-2011

June Atkinson, who has died aged 84, was an imposing presence in the gundog world. In her hands especially Holway golden retrievers were a match for the best and, of 29 Holway FTChs, she made up 14. Her FTCh Mazurka of Wynford won the Retriever Championship, which she qualified for 36 times and Judged nine times, in 1954 and was second the following year. Two Diplomas followed giving him four awards in four runs.

As a sire he is behind many of the subsequent Holway FTChs, notably FTCh Holway Gaiety who won eight Open Stakes and the Rank Routledge Trophy. That bitch line was one June bred to time and again, but her public profile in such events as the Game Fair International was mostly associated with charismatic dogs like FTChs Holway Chanter and Holway Corbiere, the 'Desert Orchid' of gundogs.

Fiercely competitive, June set high standards and was sharply critical when others fell short of them. Her commitment to her dogs, horses and the Dorset countryside around her home was total. She served for many years on Kennel Club, IGL and Southern and Western Committees and the Golden Retriever Club made her Vice President in 1996. Her death is a huge loss.

Graham Cox