

# One Great Dog in a Lifetime

by Billy Gianquinto

**M**ost dog owners agree that you own one great gun dog in your lifetime. You compare all your other dogs to that one. I am not a dog trainer in any sense of the word, but I do know how to relate to a dog by using a little common sense. Obviously each dog is unique. The more time you spend with your animal, actually working him, the more you will understand his behavior.

I have owned four dogs over 37 years. My best dog, named Sayko, was my first dog. He was a big, beautiful, black Labrador that had that "I'll retrieve anything you want" look on his face. Sayko is truly worth bragging about, so I'll brag a little. He was an incessant retriever, never giving up on any bird until he found it. He could sniff a bird a quarter of a mile away. To this day, I've never seen another animal spring so fearlessly and attack the water as he did. This animal would dive off the piers of San Francisco when I threw his bumper into the bay. He just loved to retrieve.

I acquired Sayko when he was 1-1/2 years old. He was untrained and from a friend who used the dog as a companion for his four-year-old daughter. The dog didn't know how to sit, stay, or lie down—nothing. But I could see the dog had the smarts and the retrieving ability, and I immediately tuned into him. He went everywhere with me. When he threw his collar and took off, he'd retrieve anything that he could get in his choppers. Two-by-fours were his favorite. One day he retrieved a small suitcase, another day a woman's red bra. Where he got that I'll never know.

The first day I owned him, Sayko learned to sit, stay, and lie down. But when it came time to retrieve at the report of a gun, disaster struck. Without even firing a shot over him I found out he was gun shy. Not just timid, but scared to death. At first sight of my .28 gauge, Sayko took off running. When I found him two hours later he was hiding underneath a dumpster quivering frantically with a death look on his face. Somebody must have beaten him

with a gun before I owned him.

"What am I going to do now?" I thought. I decided to get some advice from professional trainers. The first trainer I phoned said it would be a steep uphill battle to gun-break him, but it could be done. He suggested I mix his food with hamburger grease, and when he is right in the middle of chowing down shoot a cap pistol near him. Result? Sayko wouldn't eat for a week. I had to force-feed him until he smoothed out.

The next brilliant idea came from a top Minnesota dog trainer. He advised me to take Sayko out to the middle of San Francisco Bay and shoot the gun. He said the dog would jump out, swim around for a while, and come back to the boat when he got tired. Then duplicate the procedure until the dog figured out that the gun wouldn't hurt him. Like an idiot, I tried it. Result Number Two? Sayko swam all the way to Sausalito on the first shot. I phoned the Minnesota trainer and suggested that he find other gainful employment.

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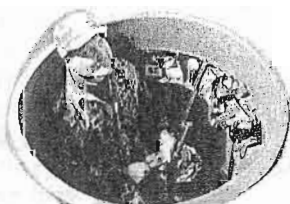
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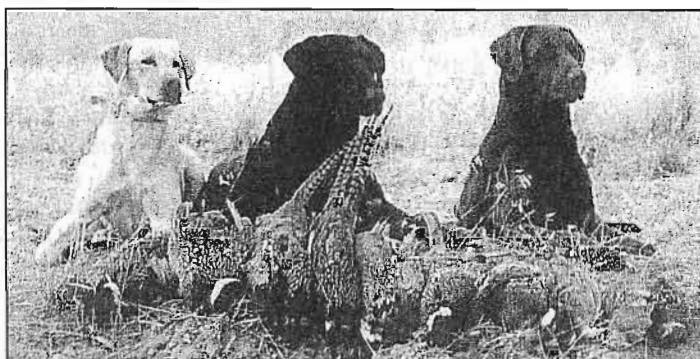
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*Stu Renna's yellow Labrador retriever likes to chomp on dog biscuits between retrieves. In the winter when Renna is not in a duck blind with his favorite hunting partner, he is busy helping plan the CWA Davis Dinner.*

Photo by Stu Renna

-I tried one more pro. He said to take Sayko to the trap and skeet range, and keep him in the car while all the shots were being fired. Result Number Three? Sayko had daily sessions with a canine shrink for two weeks.

I finally decided to try and gun-break him myself. I figured that since he loved to retrieve I would bring the gun along when I walked and worked him on a leash. The first few weeks he nearly pulled my arms out of their sockets trying to get away. After three months of daily walks, Sayko gradually got used to the sight of the gun and would retrieve the dummy. After five months, I tried it without the leash, and it seemed like the gun was his best buddy. Was he overcoming his gun shyness?

The time of reckoning came. I took him to a friend's pond outside of Petaluma one Saturday. It was now or never. Standing on the edge of the pond, I shot, threw the dummy, and to my surprise Sayko leaped into the murky pond and made a beeline for the bumper. "Wow! He's doing it," I yelled. He abruptly turned away from the dummy and headed for a stand of tules. Was he retrieving or running away? What happened next was absolutely amazing. He entered the tules and retrieved what looked like a bird. He got out of the water and literally ran around the pond, back to me, then heeled to my left. I couldn't believe my eyes. In his mouth was a green-winged teal. I grabbed the bird from his smiling jaws and began hugging and kissing him. I was ecstatic. All that work paid off. I fi-

nally had a gun dog, I said to myself, smiling all the way home.

I had Sayko for 11 years. Sadly, one Halloween night he threw his collar, climbed his seven-foot kennel fence, ran off, and was killed by a car later that night. It is impossible to count the number of hunts or the number of birds my pal Sayko retrieved. I know it's in the thousands. People ask me to tell stories about him, and I occasionally do. There are a million of them. I still haven't seen a retriever with Sayko's qualities, and my other dogs couldn't hold a candle to him. There was just something about that dog. The question is, will I ever in my life have another great dog? 🐾

*The author has been a professional caller for 28 years. He has authored a series of videos and cassettes on calling and waterfowling.*

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