



George DeCosta and pup



# The First Year **5** GOLDEN Rules

by George DeCosta

The training of any puppy in the first year is extremely important in order to set the foundation for many years to come. However, training a hunting puppy correctly may be even more challenging than training your average pup for a couple of reasons. You have to walk a fine line in allowing the puppy to explore and build self confidence in the field out in front of you while establishing who's the quarterback of the hunting team and who's the boss at home. You also must keep the time afield fun and exciting so you don't take the natural hunting desire out of your puppy.

One of the most common reasons why folks bring their pup to me is because, "My pup just won't get out there and hunt. He/she stays really close and doesn't seem excited." Almost always this has come from too much pressure and too much obedience before the puppy was allowed to enjoy itself searching, finding birds, bumping birds, getting out too far and making mistakes. The pup has become what is known as handler dependent. It has been taught to sit, heel, lay down, shake, stay close, etc., but didn't have the chance

to just have fun out there exploring and just being a hunting puppy.

There are many methods and techniques for training hunting, and most of them work well. However, a technique that works for one pup may not work so well for another. I think it's important to read your puppy and use what works for you and the pup. Having said that, there are some fundamental rules that I adhere to when training a hunting puppy.

**Rule 1: Keep it fun and keep formal training sessions short and simple.** Fifteen to 20 minutes of formal training at one session is what I like. I may do two or three sessions in a day, but they'll be short. When I say formal sessions, I'm meaning that you are one on one with your puppy making it comply. (Teaching commands such as whoa, come, sit, down, etc.) I'll give the puppy loads of praise when it complies, good boy/girl and lots of love! You're not only teaching your puppy the command but you're also teaching your puppy to *continued on page 28*



**Rules** continued from page 26 “Learn to Learn.” Once the puppy learns to learn and enjoys it, you can teach a pup anything. Mix the commands up when teaching. A few whoas with lots of praise and love. Then a few comes, then maybe a sit or two. Then relieve the pressure with something fun, and back to the whoa and come and be done. End with something the pup really loves to do, maybe fetch, or a treat. Be sure to end on a good, fun note.

**Rule 2: Remember you are always training your puppy.** I see this rule broken all the time. Example: You don’t have the pup on a lead and you say “Come.” The puppy doesn’t come. “Come boy, come here, come, Fido come, come on boy/girl come here, come, come, COME.” And the pup is still not complying. You’ve just taught your pup it doesn’t have to come on the first command. If it doesn’t come with the first command, maybe a stronger “Come” on the second. If the pup doesn’t come, stop using that command. (Walk away saying something like, “Hey, let’s go this way,” or clap your hands and entice the pup with, “Over here, over here.”) Don’t continue to repeat a command that you’ve taught your pup that you cannot enforce; you’re teaching it not to obey.

**Rule 3: Repetition creates an automatic response.** Every time the pup is coming to you on its own use the command Come. Say you just got home and the puppy is running to you. Say, “Puppy’s name, Come” as it’s on its way. When the puppy gets to you, load on the love and praise. If you’ve taught your puppy whoa, have it whoa before it goes outside, before it goes to its food bowl, before it gets out of its crate, when you stop at a crosswalk. Use everyday activities to develop the repetition of the command being complied with. Soon the pup will automatically whoa because it has done it so many times it has become automatic. (Think of someone learning martial arts. They do the technique over and over until it becomes automatic.) This is not formal training sessions this is throughout the day training. Do not do too many repetitive commands during formal training session, you’ll burn your pup out and it will lose its interest in learning. Big difference.

**Rule 4: Let the puppy be a puppy.** Give the pup its head in the field. Let it explore and bump birds. Let it have fun. If it doesn’t comply, don’t get upset, it’s a puppy. Stop training if you find yourself getting frustrated. Come back and train when you’ve calmed down. When the pup complies, be sure to praise the heck out of it. Don’t expect the puppy to sit, or stay down for long periods, it’s a child. At the start, release it before it makes the mistake. As it matures and learns the command better, then stretch the time out a little more each session. Then you can correct as needed. Remember, if you put too much pressure on your puppy you may get it to comply, but you may have also taken the excitement out of your puppy and made it handler dependent. It becomes a robot. Hunting puppies are not robots. They must build self confidence and feel empowered to do things on their own.

**Rule 5: It’s easier to teach a puppy correctly then it is to fix a problem later on.** Try to circumvent problems by taking your time and working with the pup slowly towards items that could scare or shutdown the puppy. For instance: Don’t just take your puppy out and shoot over it, even if it’s with a bird. Yes, 90 percent of the puppies will do fine doing this, but I see the 10 percent that are gun sensitive or gun shy because they weren’t

introduced to loud sounds while eating and having fun. And they now have a negative associated with birds. Don’t keep pulling your puppy back when it wants to explore and it’s only 20 or 30 yards in front of you. It will learn to stay within 20 to 30 yards. Then later when you want it to search and point, it has almost no range. You can easily teach your pup to work closer later; it’s much harder to teach it to range out after being continually pulled back at a very young age. You can pull on a rope, but you can’t push it out.

Some tips on rules 2 and 3: I will use a lot of commands that are not yet in our formal sessions throughout the day. Examples: Every time my pup reaches the end of its long lead, I’ll give it a tug and say, “Easy.” When I whoa it before going outside or let it out of its crate, I’ll say, “Out.” When I take its lead off to have fun in the field, I’ll say, “Hunt ‘em up.” When in the field, I’ll take a canvas bumper with bird scent rubbed into it and every once in a while toss it for the pup to play with. Then I’ll toss it into long grass/cover area where the pup sees it go in but can’t see the bumper. The pup has already played with it so it knows the scent and will start to use its nose to find the bumper. This engages the use of the nose with playtime. I’ll give the command, “Find it” when we do this; again, this is all fun. If the pup doesn’t go in for it, I’ll just go get it. But if the pup finds it, load on the praise. After a couple of months of this play, you’ll be able to just toss the bumper into heavy cover without the puppy having seen the toss, say “Find it” and the pup will go into action. It’s just a fun game to the puppy, but later you can transfer that to bird finding and it all comes together. The puppy will learn these types of commands by association.

So now you have some insights to my five rules. Hopefully, you’ve found them informative. The first two commands I teach a puppy are whoa and come. If you have a pup that will whoa (stop) on command every time and come when called, you have a puppy under control and you can take it anywhere. Whoa could also stop your pup from going after a skunk, or porcupine or even save its life by stopping it from chasing something onto a busy street. Whoa will also come into play later when you start working your pup on steady to flush, wing, shot and fall. After whoa and come is in place, we’ll start working on sit and down.

By the way, you’ll notice that I don’t use the command stay. I like to keep things simple, and I think adding stay to a command can be confusing to the puppy. Whoa means whoa. (The pup stands in place until released.) Sit means sit. (The pup is to sit until released.) Down means down. (The puppy stays in the down position until released.) Why add stay? If the pup moves on whoa, stands on sit or rises on down, use the original command to correct: whoa, sit, down.

I also want the pup to learn to be out in front of me. When the pup goes to the side, I turn so the pup is in front. If it goes behind, I turn so the pup is again in front. I try to give the pup the feeling that its job is to be out front exploring and searching.

I hope you’ve enjoyed reading some of my hunting puppy training guidelines and I hope they made sense to you. In later articles, I’ll go over the specifics of how I train many of the above commands and how I introduce puppies to birds, gunfire and water work. Remember, you’ll be with your puppy for all of its life and a huge part of yours. Take it slow, have fun and enjoy the journey with your best friend and special family member. 🐾