



Hunt Training

down to the Basics

by George DeCosta, Jr

I'm often asked about my steps in training a pup specifically for hunting. I think a hunting dog is trained a bit differently than a general non-hunting canine. Here's a basic outline of my training steps.

Stage 1 - Puppy. I don't like to over train a young puppy on obedience. I find this can take the natural drive and passion out of some puppies. I like to give a pup its head so it builds confidence and learns to explore. I want it to know its job is out in front, searching and finding birds. However, it is still very important to have control of your puppy, so right away I teach whoa and come. If you can stop and recall your pup, you can go almost anywhere and have a safe puppy. Also, whoa will come into play later in advanced training. I'll also add sit, but I won't use it often, or have the pup sit for a very long period. If possible, I like to see the puppy find and flush wild birds that it cannot catch, or I'll use a launcher to mimic a wild-bird flush. This will bring out a pup's natural instinct to point. If there's any chance of the pup catching a bird, I'll have the puppy on a lead. I want this stage to be all fun and positive for the puppy.



Stage II - Intermediate Pup. After a puppy has learned to love to hunt and has a fire in its belly to find birds, I'll add more obedience. I'll add heeling, and sit for longer periods. By now the pup should be pointing on its own, so after the point I'll add whoa for steadiness. I'll also add the retrieve for the reward. If the pup breaks point and flushes the bird on its own, no retrieve and no praise. If the pup holds point solidly, then I'll shoot or toss a bird for the retrieve. I don't enforce the retrieve; any retrieve at all after a point is highly praised. And if the pup wants to prance around a bit with the bird, I let it as long as it doesn't chomp on the bird. I don't want to immediately take away the prize; this can lead to the pup not bringing the bird back on future retrieves. Try to keep it fun and add the reward for the proper performance.

Stage III - Advanced Dog. I begin this stage after the pup has had a good hunting season under its belt. The dog is pointing, has a strong whoa compliance and



sits or stands in one place until released. The dog now knows the game, so I'll add the training that makes a more finished bird dog. I'll work on steady to fall and retrieve to hand as well as steadiness and quietness in the blind. I'll have the dog sit or stand in one spot while I toss bumpers. I'll make the dog stay until released by its name. I'll toss pigeons around the dog while it's on point to teach the dog to remain on point after the flush. If needed, I'll force fetch the dog to deliver to hand every time. By now I know that the added pressure of advanced training will not take the passion or desire out of the dog. We're in the game as a team, but the pup learns I'm the quarterback.

Is there more to it than the outline above? You bet. But this gives the basic outline I use in training a hunting dog. We can examine more specific training techniques in future issues. ☘

