

# VERSATILE HUNTING DOG

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***A HUNT THAT WARMS THE HEART***



# A Hunt That Warms The Heart

I have always felt that hunting creates special bonds. The bond that develops between a dog and hunter as a team in the field cannot be explained. The bond that develops between a father and son, mother and son, or father and daughter, whatever the combination may be, just seems special to me. I've heard it said, when you spend time afield with someone, you can really tell what that person's true personality is. I wholeheartedly agree.

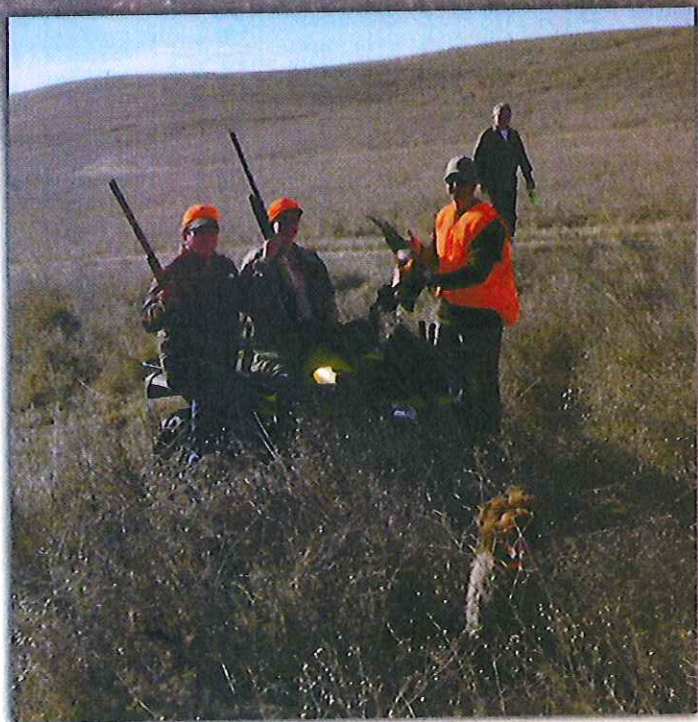
But, if I may, I'd like to take a moment to tell you about an extraordinary hunt with some very special folks, a hunt that warms my heart.

It was early September in 2013. My friend, Bruce Collett, and I were in Idaho at the Treasure Valley NAVHDA Chapter training and testing dogs when I received an email from Russ Cleland of the Great Central Valley NAVHDA Chapter in California. The National Wild Turkey Federation had contacted Russ regarding an upland hunt they wanted to provide for the Wounded Warriors and other handicapped hunters. Russ was asking for a volunteer, so I jumped at the chance.

Shortly thereafter I was put in touch with Patrick Morse from the NWTF. To say that Patrick was energetic and excited about conducting this hunt would be an understatement. Simply put, Patrick was fired-up about being able to help these folks.

Patrick asked me if I could provide a hunt with dogs for three Wounded Warriors, all Marines from Camp Pendleton, as well as three wheelchair-bound handicapped hunters, one of which was a seventeen-year-old girl who had recently broken her back in a tragic accident, leaving her paralyzed from the waist down. My answer, of course, was that we would make this hunt happen, whatever it took.

Fast forward to November of 2013, and our hunt was coming together. Quail Point Hunt Club in Zamora, California had offered to provide the field and birds. A local real estate company, Fohl and McClellan, had agreed to purchase fourteen American





flags to surround our field. A Marine from the local Honor Guard, Roy Fansler, had agreed to welcome the Wounded Warriors with flags flying when they arrived. Joe Pecs, President of the California State Chapter of the NWTF, would be barbecuing after the hunt to add to the fun and camaraderie. The date had been set for December 29, 2013.

It was finally hunt day. Bruce and I had arrived at Quail Point Hunt Club with our Wirehaired Pointing Griffons, Gus and Cota. Sitting in the parking lot next to his truck, with a quad in tow, was a gentleman in a wheelchair. The hunt was not for another three hours, but I figure this must have been one of our special hunters.

As the day unfolded, I began to learn that these folks were in no way handicapped. While I discovered that they may approach a bird or dog from a different point of view, and that they may shoot from a different stance than you or me, they are just as capable of hunting upland game as anyone I have ever met, maybe even more so. I no longer considered them handicapped. But special? Oh yes, these folks were certainly special.

Back at the hunt, I introduced myself to Mr. Don Wixon. Don had let us know that he had come early to see the area and asked if he could be of any help. I let Don know that Bruce and I were here early to warm up the dogs and to install the flags

around the hills surrounding our field. Don jumped at the chance to come with us, and I grabbed a camera to take our first picture of the day.

Gus and Cota had never worked with quads around them while hunting upland game, so having Don there early worked out perfectly, because the dogs got used to having a quad approach them while on point. We learned that a person on a quad needs to swing his or her gun in a certain direction, and the dogs learned to retrieve a bird to hand, right up to the quad. After the warm-up hunt, it was time to install the flags.

Don had offered to help us by letting us load all the flags onto the back of his quad. Don rode with the flags while Bruce and I installed them on the hills surrounding the valley that we would be hunting. When we finished, I looked at those hills as a sight to behold.

Done with the field prep, we headed back to the clubhouse. When we arrived, we found our tough old Marine, Roy, had already installed both a large American and Marine flag at the entrance of the parking lot to the clubhouse. The event was coming together and looking great.

As I exited my vehicle, I was told that Patrick Morse and the Marines were pulling in. Once again, I grabbed my camera. Roy met the Marines at the entrance of the clubhouse as I took pictures. The young Marines

had shown that old bull the utmost respect. These guys were class — first class.

Patrick then informed me that the first two hunters would be ready to go in minutes, and that both hunters were paralyzed from the waist down. One of the hunters, Taylor, was a seventeen-year-old girl. This would be her first pheasant hunt and her first time shooting off of her quad out in a field. The other special hunter, Larry, had brought his son to hunt alongside of him. This would also be his son's first hunt.

Bruce and I walked towards the field with our dogs to wait for the arrival of the special hunters. I walked into the field with my camera, while Bruce waited to greet the hunters as they arrived. The sight of the hunters arriving on their quads with families in tow got my heart pounding and my nerves going. It was a hot, dry day, and I was praying the dogs would do well for these special folks. As they arrived, I took pictures while Patrick handled the hunters and went through a quick safety meeting. Then, it was time to go into the field.

Flags surrounding us and sun on our shoulders, we released the dogs and they began to quarter. The hunters had brought many family members to take pictures, backup shots, and to enjoy the dog work and the excitement of the hunt. As we headed out, Patrick whispered in my ear, "This is what it must be like to hunt with the President. Look at the entourage of people behind the hunters." I was suddenly really nervous. "Come on pups," I thought, "do your best, find those birds... please."

About fifteen minutes into the hunt, Gus started getting birdie and slammed into a stunning point. Cota saw Gus and honored his point beautifully. Patrick looked over at me, gave me the thumbs up, and said, "Wow, that's awesome." Patrick positioned the hunters and stepped in to flush the bird. An explosion of color erupted out of the ground with pounding wings and shots fired, but the bird continued to fly, unscathed, as the dogs stood, waiting to be released. No bird. I figured I was not the only one who was nervous. I looked at Taylor and saw the obvious disappointment and nervousness in her eyes. Her father worked quickly with her on her gun position as I looked over to say, "No problem, Taylor, we'll get more birds. Just hang in there." She smiled at me and my nerves vanished. I knew we were going to get these folks birds, no matter what.

Taylor's extended family trailed behind us in the field, cameras in hand, as they





watched her struggle to connect on her first few shots. Then, it happened. Gus went on point in the valley, near Larry and his son. Patrick headed down to position the hunters and flush the bird. I then noticed that Cota was also on point on the side of the hill. Taylor was the only hunter near Cota, so she positioned her quad as her father moved in closer to help. Cota was holding steady as I looked over at Taylor and asked, "Are you ready?" She said, "Yes." I took one step towards the area where Cota was pointing. The bird flushed, rocketing fast over the hill. I heard a single shot and watched as the bird was hit and started landing somewhere over the hill. "Cota! Fetch, girl, fetch!" I yelled. Cota ran over the hill and out of sight. I turned to Taylor as she said, "I hit it, I hit it!" I looked up towards the hill and over the top came Cota with a beautiful rooster in her mouth with long tail feathers hanging down. I looked over at Taylor and saw a smile on her face, followed by tears of joy. Then, I heard cheering, clapping, hooting, and hollering coming from her mother, father, grandfather, uncle, and brothers. Cota delivered the bird to hand and I gave it to Taylor's father. The celebration continued as I turned my head to walk away so they wouldn't see the tears running down my cheeks.

I looked down the hill and saw everyone celebrating the retrieve of Gus' point. Patrick later told me that Larry's son had also got his first bird, and that Larry told him that nothing could have made him happier than to be beside his son, out hunting, and witness his son's first bird. The day had already been filled with touching moments.

Next were our Wounded Warriors, and it was an honor to walk in the field with these fine gentlemen. These folks had placed themselves in harm's way for our country's benefit, and I realized that we owe them so much.

Not knowing what their injuries were, we tried to position the Wounded Warriors on the paths in the field, as the dogs, Bruce, and I worked the cover. Time and time again, as the dogs went on point, I heard Patrick ask, "Do you think you can get out to the dog?" The answer every time, from each Marine, was, "Yes sir, I'll get there." And every time they got there, no matter what it took.

The day kept getting hotter, and the ground cover was getting dryer, but our



versatile hunting dogs never stopped. They continued to point bird after bird, delivering each bird to hand after the shot, and every time I handed a bird to one of the Wounded Warriors, I got a, "Thank you, sir, great dog." I thought to myself, no, thank you, sir, for what you've given for our great country.

On the last hunt of the day, Don came back out to hunt with some of our Wounded Warriors. The dogs were tired and hot, but they kept working hard and continued to find the birds. Everyone was truly impressed with the stamina and heart these dogs had, and I was as proud as ever.

When we finally wrapped up the hunt, I told everyone to head back to the clubhouse for the barbeque. I, however, would stay and pick up all the flags. Don offered to help again, and I happily accepted, as I was exhausted and drained. Don took his shotgun along because, earlier in the day, someone had seen a pheasant in the cove below the first hill. We hunted the cove, with no luck, and headed for the flags. Cota ran ahead of us and locked into a picturesque point, right in front of the first American flag. I grabbed the camera as Don got his gun ready, and I took a beautiful picture before moving in to flush the bird. Don made a clean shot and dropped a huge, gorgeous rooster. It was a perfect ending to a wonderful hunt.

When I arrived at the barbeque, I could smell the burgers on the grill and saw the

birds lined up on the ground. Folks were smiling while they each re-lived the shots of the day, and I watched as each hug and "thank you" was passed around with genuine, heartfelt sincerity. I knew, then, that we had provided more than a hunt here. We helped a young girl see that she could accomplish whatever she wanted in life, regardless of the situation. We helped a father spend a wonderful day in the field with his son, and we had let our Wounded Warriors, who had given so much for us, feel our gratitude and compassion.

Yes, it had been an extraordinary hunt, one that I will never forget, and one that truly warms the heart.

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*Author's Note: Your NAVHDA at work... After posting a picture of Cota's last point by the flag on my Facebook page, Don Wixon wrote this comment: "Yes this was a special moment and a great way to end the day. I want to give a big THANK YOU to you and Bruce and the entire group of helpers. You all worked your backsides off. And those dogs, no telling how many miles of field they worked. It was a great pleasure watching them work. I had more fun watching them than I had pulling the trigger."*

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