

## WHY THE GUN-SHY DOG?

BY BILL TARRANT

How does it go? It's been so long...

*Little Miss Muffet sat on her tuffet eating her curds and whey. When along came a spider and sat down beside her and frightened Miss Muffet away.*

It's something like that. And something like that is how we make gun-shy dogs. Here, I'll show you: Little Miss Cricket pointed a thicket, prompting the birds to stay. When along came a blither who fired right beside her and frightened Miss Cricket away.

Yes, that'll do nicely. And as for a blither, Webster tells us that's an idiot. And it's idiots who make gun-shy dogs. Let's take it in sequence. Miss Cricket's on point. The hunter approaches. But what path does he walk? Does he walk a great circle about the dog, all the time reading the dog, determining from the dog's gaze where the birds are probably hunkered? Does he end up far to front, standing at an angle to the pointing dog, kicking the birds out, firing, all at a distance from the dog, in plain sight of the dog, away from ears' harm?

This way there are no surprises for Miss Cricket, plus no bell-ringing explosion in her ears. If the hunter does all these things, Miss Cricket will probably stand to point, stand to wing and shot, and do it over and over again.

But what if the hunter walks straight toward the pointing dog? Consider yourself. When anyone walks straight toward you-and they're carrying a gun - do you not think twice? Do you not divert your attention from what you're doing? Do you not think of moving away? Moving back?

Or what if the hunter walks up to and passes Miss Cricket? What happens when someone approaches you from the rear, brushes close, goes on by? Does it not encourage you to: 1) Look back; 2) look to side; and 3) possibly move forward with the impetus provided by the passer-by?

Either way, the hunter who walks toward his dog, or close to his dog, breaks that dog's concentration on point. The dog loses intensity. The dog gets loose. Now a loose dog is one that will likely catwalk on birds, will likely break, will likely start knocking birds to sky. For a dog on point cannot move a foot - not a foot. For having moved one foot, she may move the other, and having moved the other, she may move the other two, and when she's got all four moving, she's into birds.

Sensing the dog is going to break, some hunters yell at the dog, or worse yet, run forward and strike at the dog. Thus the dog is intimidated. And all in the presence of gun and bird and man. The result can be a gun-shy, bird-shy, and man-shy dog. We have in the English language the phrase, "He's at the breaking point." This means the man is close to crumbling. What of poor Miss Cricket? For her to break point is to crumble. How does my buddy Delmar Smith, the Oklahoma bird dog trainer, say it? "When they ram that nose in there and go to smoking a pipe, when the base of that ear rolls forward, when that tail turns to steel, they've really got those birds zeroed in."

Yet, your near presence can break this stance, and once the stance is broken, there goes the certainty. And when the certainty is gone, the dog crumbles. Once crumbled, the dog panics. And in panic the dog either

leaps to the birds, or bolts. Either way the dog is apt to get scolded, And out of all this the dog will likely say, "I don't want to do this anymore".

So, never never never walk toward or close-by your dog on point. Always circle far to front, acknowledging the pointing dog by voice, saying. "Yes Cricket . . . I see 'em." Or saying. "Birds," Or "Whoop," or whatever words bond this dog and you together. Acknowledging the dog's point accomplishes many things. Most important, it is a reward. Plus, it says to the dog, "Thanks for finding and holding these birds. . . now we'll do what's left to be done, together." Thus the dog continues to pin the birds, but also assumes the responsibility of going broad-vision so she can watch the deadfall and the covey relocation.

Acknowledgment also raises the odds for successive covey finds. You're telling the dog, "I 'know there are birds here because you do not lie to me." You're telling the dog you know this isn't a false point, you know this isn't unproductive, for you know this dog doesn't let you down. You're telling the dog you have faith in her. For don't kid yourself, no dog's going to produce-repeatedly produce - if you doubt her worth, and she knows you doubt it.

Many dogs get into situations where they're not certain of their find. Your endorsement clinches their hunch. Yet, if you don't believe in the dog, why should the dog believe in herself? In everything you've done together you've been the pack leader, you've been the instructor and the enforcer, you've been the taker and the giver. . . you've been the dog's life.

Let's look at all this another way. . . We speak of a gun-shy dog. Do you know such a dog is usually man-shy and bird-shy as well? It seems the three occur all at once, and altogether. A dog is taken to the field too soon (the dog's just not ready to work birds). A man approaches the dog's point without consideration, the man intimidates the dog, the man stands directly over the dog-and fires a gun. At that same time, the dog sees birds flare, and the dog senses all this happening at the same time and she associates it all as one thing, and says, "I want none of this," then tucks her tail and runs.

For as John Nash, fourth generation Irish setter breeder, told me that day on the moors or Ireland's Ballyfin when we were partridge hunting, "Did you ever notice, Bill, that there are no bad pups. . . just bad dogs?" And as Delmar observed one time when he and I were judging a field trial in Hawaii, "Every problem a dog's got is manmade. The dog wasn't born with it. So the best dog training a man can do is avoid problems. . . not get smart in fixin' 'em. For that's just writin' your message on a scribbled-up board."

And Joe Simpson, the first man to go behind enemy lines with an American- trained dog, observed one afternoon as we were sipping tea in the backyard of his Emmett, Idaho farm home, "When I went into the K-9 Corps, you'd hear a bird dog trainer say of another, 'He sure can train dogs. . . you ought to see him use a whip."

Let's take all three statements and ball 'em all together. They're saying: 1) dogs don't make dog problems, men make dog problems: 2) a well-trained dog is one that's been brought along problem-free, not problem-corrected; and 3) blithers who do make problems too often think the solution is the right-smart handling of a whip. And I add quickly, what's a whip? A menace? And what of a man's approach to a dog? His standing above a dog? Cannot the man's manner serve the same menacing purpose of a whip? But the man may not know this. The man doesn't know he is whipping his dog psychologically.

And that's how gun-shy dogs are often made. Part of the way. . . there are others. For example, let's suppose you can't shoot all that well. Up comes a cock pheasant, you go blouie, down he falls, but kicking, and you

cast Miss Cricket to fetch. She leaps to take the bird in her mouth, the pheasant flips over on his back and spurs her deep in the nose, and that could be all for Miss Cricket. She now says, "If you want the bird, fetch it yourself." Don't be surprised if she starts breaking point just as you appear, or just before you fire. She's birdy. So she'll take you to feather, but she wants nothing to do with wing and shot.

So another way to keep your dog from becoming gun-shy is to kill what you shoot. Don't drop cripples out there. Even a bobwhite! Let's say the bobwhite runs and Miss Cricket leaps in pursuit, only to get a twig in her eye. Miss Cricket may wonder, why did the bird do that? All she knows is she leaped toward the bird and her eye burned. Miss Cricket may no longer want anything to do with bobwhite.

So, understand the factors that cause a hit or a miss: range, gauge, choke, and shot. Read Bob Brister's shotgun columns to learn the details. But understand now, you must use enough gun. If it takes a 12 gauge for you, then use it. And use enough shell. Gun wizard Hal Jankofsky, Scottsdale, AZ, whose gun shop is a treasured classroom of mine, says, "The best shot size on quail, pheasant and dove is 7 1/2 to 8 over dogs. . . because this is a controlled shot."

He admits there will be those who attack this statement. But his observation supports the shooting experience of the National English Springer trials. Springer gunners let the pheasants have a long flight—so the dogs get a good look—then drop them dead at ranges of 40 to 60 yards. Shot size is 7 1/2's.

Also, Springer gunners are shooting low-brass shells. Jankofsky says, "A high velocity load is actually slower. For example, in a 12 gauge it is actually 15 feet per second slower." So you're going to get on your target faster with low-brass shells, and by shooting 7 1/2's you're going to be throwing more shot than if you were shooting 4's or 6's.

But like I say, read Brister. He's the in-house shotgun expert. Learn to use your gun to kill clean. That way all of Miss Cricket's birds will be immobile, and she'll not become gun-shy by a spurring pheasant, or because she stuck her eye with a thorn dashing in after a flopping quail.

Now pertinent to all this is something I've never heard a hunter, or dog man, mention. Yet to me it seems so self-evident. A dog on point, or a dog that's honoring a point, cannot move a foot until ordered to Hi-on to either relocate on a running covey, retrieve deadfall, or cast to hunt. And what is a dog on point? That's a dog that's got the birds scented and he's signaling their location with heart, body, and soul. If the dog moves toward the covey—and this is important and this is what I've never heard a man mention—the dog's still pointing. He's still telling you where the birds are, but he's not whoaed. Whoa means put all four feet down and don't move 'em. It has nothing to do with birds. I repeat, it has nothing to do with birds.

Whoa is taught in yard training without a bird (see Field & Stream, December 1974). Whoa is taught long before the dog is ever introduced to a bird in training. Whoa means turn to stone, stand dead, don't even think of moving—even if gnats swirl before your eyes and a flea stabs you under the tail. Whoa is man's way of controlling point. Point is what God gave a dog to help earn his keep: to keep vittles on the table. Point is natural. Whoa is manmade. A dog can point a bird, if he's scenting it, running 49 miles an hour. But he won't be whoaing at that speed. Understand?

Now, in the world of bird dogs we speak of a back, an honor. That's one dog sight-pointing another that's scent-pointing. It comes to pass when you're working a brace of dogs. One points birds, the other points the pointing dog—unless there's a divided find. But should either dog move, we say, "That dog broke point," or, "That dog broke honor." And what we're saying is wrong. That honoring dog could also be running 40 miles an

hour and still be pointing the pointing dog. Follow me? So what we should be saying is, "That dog broke whoa."

Long before dog met and teamed up with man, the dog hunted birds, scented them, pointed them, lunged for them, pawed them to the ground, or grabbed them in mouth, and ate them. Then man came along and said, "No, that's not the way you're going to do it from now on. From now on you're going to hunt them, that's for sure. And you're going to scent them. But you'll not lunge to get them yourself. You'll whoa to get them for me. That way I can net the birds or shoot them and they'll be mine."

Thus, it's the whoaing that man interjected. Man stuck it on, as it were. And the dog is always trying to shake it off. Trying to shake it off and get back to what's natural. For so many things man does with a dog are unnatural. So I repeat, no dog really breaks point, or breaks honor. He breaks whoa. Therefore, a dog in the presence of birds can never be permitted to move a foot; to do so means he'll revert to nature. Therefore, you as a hunter can never be so interested, so busily engaged, in the harvest of game that you can't lay down your gun and do some dog training.

The moment you let a pointing or honoring dog raise a foot you're encouraging him to break whoa. And whatever you let a dog get away with--that's what you teach him. So here comes a hunter, walks right into the dog, which encourages the dog to raise a foot; to move sideways. Or, the hunter stands above the dog and fires, which encourages the dog to jump away from the noise. And such a hunter is teaching the dog to break whoa on point.

So give a dog a break; don't make him break. Keep your approach to birds and your gunning a long ways from the dog on point. Remember, you can make a dog gun-shy with one approach, with one shot. But you can spend a lifetime coaxing him to boldness and never get him to really stand to the gun again. Avoiding gun-shyness is easy. Correcting it is nearly impossible.

So much in nature is that way. Cast too close to the bass and he'll spook. Stalk too near the sheep, he'll flee. Crowd the falcon and he'll not take your arm. High-pressure the rustic and you'll not see his still. Only when nature's left far behind can man ram and jam and blunder in and brush past and dart about. Like in a subway or a traffic jam or a line to enter a restaurant.

No wonder we shy from cities, no wonder we seek the distant field. Everything is done quickly in city. But in nature, all things take time. And all things take courting. And patience. In one word: all things take respect.

Without respect, some of us shy away--even our dogs.

From his Field & Stream contributions, Bill Tarrant has compiled two books for training gun dogs that should be part of every hunter's library. Autographed copies can be ordered from Bill Tarrant, P.O. Box 684, Scottsdale, AZ 85252. The bird dog training book is \$13, the retriever training book, \$27. Prices include postage.

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