

STEADY TO FLUSH

NEW PERFORMANCE STANDARDS FOR SENIOR HUNTERS

By Ken Marden

HOW CAN I TRAIN MY DOG to remain steady to flush? How do I get my dog to stop to flush or honor on command?

DUE TO RECENT CHANGES in the Hunting Test Rules upgrading the required performance of Senior hunting dogs, these questions are frequently heard.

Admittedly, training for such a performance is more involved than was previously required of Senior dogs. But the changes provide a distinct improvement in safety because we will no longer have dogs breaking after a low-flying bird, directly in the gunner's line of fire. In addition, these new rules make the Senior Hunter a dog one can hunt over with the assurance of getting a clear shot at any game found.

In actual hunting situations, a dog that chases a wild flushing bird out of the country precludes your ability to mark the bird down, and to getting a second opportunity to put that bird in your game pouch. You will also spend more time hunting your dog than hunting birds. Dogs that chase after birds present safety problems as well. Hunting companions may occasionally get so excited about the prospect of bagging a fat cock pheasant that they concentrate on their shooting - to the exclusion of worrying about the young dog leaping at the bird as it takes flight.

When hunting two dogs together, it's imperative that they honor each other's points. A dog that steals its brace mate's point encourages the pointing dog to jump in and flush the bird, often before the hunters can get within gun range. If your dog continually fails to honor, he'll be back in the truck for the day.. .at the request of your hunting buddy. An uncontrolled dog can ruin any hunter's day.

The dog with a Senior Hunter title is the ideal hunting companion for the average hunter. Many hunters prefer a dog that breaks at shot. Danger to the dog at that stage is minimized and the dog has a head start on retrieving a bird that may be only wounded and has gone down a considerable distance away.

Basic Yard Training

To train a dog to be steady to flush, you must go back to basics - the "Woup" command, until the dog fully understands that "Woup" means stop whatever you're doing and remain in place until released, you'll have little success in stopping him on a wild flush or being steady to the flush of a pointed bird.

Many people have tried to accomplish this with the use of an electronic collar before the dog has fully absorbed what "Woup" really means. The electronic collar is not a teaching device: it's a means of correction for the dog that already knows what "Woup" or "Stay!" means. Non-judicious correction only serves to confuse the dog that doesn't understand what he is supposed to do. Regardless of your dog's age, you should put him on a check cord and a choke or force collar to teach him the "Woup" command. Extensive, repetitive and often boring yard work must take place before working your dog on birds.

Assuming your dog knows how to heel, begin with heeling your dog on a loose lead as you walk around the yard. As you walk, give the "Woup!" command and stop him with the check cord. If he moves, set him up in

the Woup position and praise him when he stays. Continue heeling the dog, stopping him every 30 feet with "Woup". If he moves, you should correct him with a sharp tug on the check cord, and set him up again. Be sure to praise each time the dog does the exercise correctly! Continue this process for at least 50 times per session until the dog no longer moves from the Woup position.

Adding Distance

The next phase involves giving the "Stay" command after the "Woup" command, taking a few steps away and returning to heel position. If the dog moves, correct him, set him up, then praise him if he stays. If, after days of such training the dog stays, start moving farther away from your dog in various directions, before returning to him. Eventually your dog will stay in position no matter how far away you move.

Now the lessons become more difficult. Move about 30 feet away, still holding the check cord. Command the dog to "Come." He may hesitate because you originally gave him the "Woup" command and told him to stay. Encourage him with a tug on the cord and praise him lavishly when he does come. When he is consistently remaining in place until you command him to come, you are ready for the next step.

Stand and leave your dog at a distance of 15-20 feet. Call him and stop him halfway with a firm "Woup", then call him to you, praising him if he stopped and didn't move after the "Woup" command. Vary the distances until you can move as much as 50 feet away, and start and stop him with the "Woup" command several times as he comes to you.

USING DISTRACTIONS

The last phase of yard training involves giving your dog the "Woup", walking in front of him and reaching for an object on the ground. This distraction may cause the dog to move forward when you reach for the object; if so, correct him and set him back in the original Woup position. Continue doing this exercise until the dog stays, no matter what gyrations you go through.

This yard training, however tedious, will have brought your dog under control. He will have learned the essential "Woup", "Stay" and "Come" commands, and knows that failure to obey will result in unpleasant corrections.

INTRODUCTION TO BIRDS

Finally, it's time to move on to training with birds. If your dog has been well trained in the yard, he will not associate corrections with birds, but rather with the fact that he failed to obey your commands.

Two people are necessary to make a dog staunch on point, and steady to flush: one person to flush the planted birds and one to control the dog with a check cord. I suggest pigeons or quail for this training. Pigeons are particularly good since they fly well and always fly away, eliminating the chance of your dog catching the bird.

Plant several birds at least 30 yards apart. Let your dog run free, trailing the check cord. When he establishes point, command "Woup", pick up the check cord, shortening it as you walk toward the dog. Stroke him gently on the back, under the belly and under the tail to give him confidence that he is doing the right thing.

As your helper walks to flush the bird, your dog may want to go with him. Repeat the "Woup" command. If the dog does not stop, give a sharp tug on the check cord and set him back in position. Once the dog is again pointing staunchly, have your helper flush the bird and fire the blank gun. If the dog attempts to chase, correct him. At this stage you must be careful to make your corrections and commands as gentle as possible to avoid having your dog lose style. Anger, frustration, and harsh handling on your part can ruin a dog despite his original potential.

After the bird is flushed and your dog has not attempted to chase, praise him and heel him away on the check cord. Repeat this procedure three or four times, then quit for the day. It is particularly important that you stop on a high note where you can praise your dog for his performance.

OBEDIENCE IS A MUST

Obedience to the "Woup!" command is essential to both the honoring situation and the stop to flush. Again, you should use a helper, preferably one who has a staunchly pointing dog. After the helper's dog is on point, let your dog run free, but still trailing the check cord. As soon as you're certain your dog has seen the other dog on point, give the "Woup" command. If your dog does not stop, grab the check cord and dump him. Then set him up and command him to "Stay" or "Woup" while the other handler flushes the pointed bird. Some trainers suggest putting the dog back in his crate after each honoring situation to make him realize this is a training session, not just running and hunting.

If a staunch pointing dog is not available, you can cut out and paint plywood pointing dog silhouette and use the above procedure. After your helper flushes the bird, he knocks the silhouette dog flat. Eventually your dog will stop upon seeing a real dog or cutout on point without the "Woup" command. You'll then be able to walk ahead of him, flush the bird and kick over the cutout dog.

To train your dog not to chase a wild flushing bird requires the use of many pigeons. Put a bunch of pigeons in your hunting coat pockets and let your dog, still trailing the check cord, run free. As the dog runs near you, release a pigeon. If he starts to chase, order "Woup" and dump him with the check cord if he doesn't stop. Repeat this procedure over and over until the dog tires of chasing and being dumped. He'll soon associate correction with birds in flight, and will stop without the "Woup" command. If you are fortunate enough to have access to an electronic collar, this device can be of great benefit in training your dog to stop to flush. With a dog that already understands the "Woup" command but chooses to ignore it, a light shock correction from the collar will get his attention faster than grabbing the check cord. But remember, the dog must understand what he's supposed to do before the collar can be used as a correction.

There are six simple steps to successfully training your pointing dog, both in the yard and the field:

1. Repetition
2. Repetition
3. Repetition
4. Patience
5. Patience

6. Patience

Good luck with your Senior Hunter.

Ken Marden has been breeding, training and competing German Shorthaired Pointers since 1961. An active competitor in Conformation Shows, Obedience Trials, Field Trials, and Hunting Tests over the past thirty years, Ken is an advocate of the dual-purpose dog, a sound specimen that conforms to the breed standard while retaining the ability to give an outstanding performance in the field. He has judged more than 90 Pointing Breed Field Trials, including Two German Shorthaired Pointer National Championships, three Vizsla National Championships, and the Weimaraner National Amateur Championship.

A supporter of the AKC's Hunting Test Program since its inception, Ken is presently campaigning three dogs; two young dogs which have qualified as Junior Hunters, and an older dog working on his Master Hunter title. He was a member of the Pointing Breed Hunting Test Advisory Committee that recommended modifications of the test requirements instituted on June 1, 1992.

Ken presently serves on the Board of Directors of the German Shorthaired Pointer Club of America and on the American Kennel Club's Board of Directors, where he chairs the Performance Events Committee.

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