

90 Days until Hunting Season

It is now July 1st. People are enjoying the warm weather, swimming, fishing, hiking, cook outs and going on vacation. The thing that seems light years away is getting Fido ready for the opening of bird season. Unfortunately, your dog needs more time to prepare for hunting season than two to four weeks, but every year we get the phone calls right before the opening of bird and duck hunting season.

Some of these conversations are comical and others are frustrating. My question to you is, "How do you expect to do anything well if you don't practice?" We tend to think that dogs think like humans do. However, they think like dogs think. Dogs that are well bred, smart, and with no baggage are usually quick studies. The problem is that just because a Brittany has pointed a wing on a string in your living room or back yard a half dozen times doesn't mean that he is capable as a trained dog to hunt, find, point a grouse, and hold until you get there. It takes practice, practice, and practice.

The same is true for your Labrador pup. You have played fetch in your yard or in a familiar piece of water and he does pretty well. What about that wing shot Mallard that lands in a three acre piece of chest high grass? Your pup needs practice. These are just two examples of why people don't have proficient dogs to hunt. We are all eternal optimists, we love our dogs, and because we love them and they are ours, of course they are the best.

I always say that dogs don't lie but dog owners do. When someone is bringing their dog for training I always ask what they have done or not done for training so I know where to start. Then I take the dog out and physically see what the dog is doing. Usually, from what the owner said and what the dog is doing to what I see happening, there are big differences. There are two real reasons for this. First, when the dog is in a strange environment it will act differently; but secondly and more importantly for this article, you may have worked with your dog, but **NOT ENOUGH**.

How much is enough? A dog can learn to *come*, *sit* or other simple commands in a few short training sessions. However, it will take possibly 100-200 repetitions for the dog to be trained or 500 sessions to be bomb proof. There is also the age variables and consistency in the reinforcement of the training. If commands are given without the reinforcement of making the dog follow through, you are actually undoing the training you have already spent time doing. Getting a dog to point a grouse is a much more complicated task, and I believe that it takes 500 encounters on grouse for a dog to become a proficient grouse dog.

So, if you go hunting 5 times a year and find ten grouse per outing, it will take ten years for the pointing dog to get the hang of it. You can do the math to come up with 500 based upon the numbers of outings and numbers of bird encounters. This is why I suggest to people that a pointing dog for grouse is not a great choice if you can't train it, have it trained, or most importantly if you hunt only 20-30 times a year.

Be honest about how much you will hunt. When I ask people this time of year how much they will hunt this fall, they say, "all the time, every chance I get," or they give me a number of days. When I talk with them after hunting season I usually get an entirely different answer. Why? The answer is simply because these people had hoped to get out more. But between family, jobs, bad weather, and dog injuries, the average person never gets in enough good hunting. Without practice before the season begins and without enough experience during the season, a pointing dog seldom gets enough bird encounters to make it a proficient bird dog at a young age.

As far as your retriever goes, the same basic rules apply. Don't expect your retriever to handle complex blind retrieves if all you did were simple, visible marks. Without instruction and practice your retriever can not understand what you expect of it. Remember, it is not because it is deaf that your dog is not doing what you're screaming at it to do. **Have you taught and practiced what you are asking the dog to do?**

So what can you do with 90 days until hunting season? You need to do the 3 most important things: basics, basics, and more basics. When people come to watch me train they can't believe how much time we spend on the foundation. Just like a house that is built on rotten cedar posts, a dog without the basics won't function on the same level as a house built on an eight inch concrete cellar wall. If you can spend an hour a week for the next 15 weeks you will not believe how much your dog will progress. That is 15 minutes, three nights a week and 15 minutes on the weekend. You say you are serious about having a good bird dog or retriever then put the time in or it will never happen.

One motivating option is to find someone or a group to train with. You will have more fun doing what you love when you can share the work with someone who has the same interest. Also, get some guidance from your breeder or hire a professional. At the very least read a good book or watch some training videos. It doesn't matter if you get a pup from the best hunting or field trial stock in the country if you don't teach and practice training techniques. None of this breeding will count in hunting if you don't train before the season.

Some recommended books for the **pointing dogs** are:

The Best Way to Train your Gun Dog: The Delmar Smith Method by Bill Tarrant,
Wing & Shot by Robert Wehle.

For **retrievers**:

Tritronics Retriever Training by Phyllis and Jim Dobbs,
The 10 Minute Retriever by John and Amy Dahl.

Most people who come to me have read or ask about Richard Wolters and his training book. Remember that Wolters didn't train 12 dogs in his entire life. His experience was very limited and when reading about his techniques and recommendations you should remember this. On the other hand the six people who wrote the four books I have listed have trained around 10,000 dogs. They have had plenty of practice and experience.

One last recommendation is to train in different locations. After your upland dog will handle, come when called, and go right and left on command take him into the woods that you will hunt this fall. This way you can get your dog actual woods experience and look for new covers. With your retriever, go to beaver ponds and rivers to do your drill. Or go to an open large lake to simulate diver duck hunting. Remember that this is a long term commitment. It takes me as a professional trainer 3 to 4 years to develop a pup into a functional, bomb proof retriever or grouse dog. You can't do it in one season.

This is not rocket science, it can be done by anyone who will take the time and apply himself. You should try to enjoy the journey of dog training and not worry about the finished product or the number of dead birds. If you can focus on what you have with your companion each time you're training, you will have successes the first year of the dog's life and enjoy continuing the progress of both your dog and yourself as each day passes.

Good luck and great hunting,

John

at Kirby Mountain Kennels