

## Training Tips—A Baker's Dozen

The best tip I can pass on to facilitate the training process is to do things right in the first place. Many of the problems I see in our training schools are a result of good intentions but poor applications. This column is dedicated to serving up a menu of training tips that will make training go easier and save time and money. "Fixing" is the hard part. Doing things right from the start is the desired recipe.

**• Tip No. 1:** Start teaching a pup to learn early. Opening a dog's mind to learning should begin when a pup is six weeks old and certainly no later than when it is 12 weeks. Teaching a young dog to "Kennel" is a great way to instill accountability. Make the early training fun. I use treats, such as small pieces of hot dogs or cheese, to reward the dog's success. I am a big proponent of clicker training in the foundational stages of obedience training. All of our early puppy development program incorporates clicker training. After the pup responds to commands with reasonable compliance in yard training, we make the transition to the electronic collar.

If a dog is not exposed to new learning situations, places and accountability during the imprinting stage (see "The First 20 Weeks," March/April '06), it never will respond as well to new learning. Training will be more difficult and will take longer, and the dog will never reach its full potential.

**• Tip No. 2:** Properly expose the dog to live birds when it is between 10 and 16 weeks of age. In my experience, dogs that are not introduced to bird scent and the flush during the imprinting stage often demonstrate apprehension when later exposed to birds. If a dog exhibits apprehension and has negative associations with



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scent or the flush, this can mean big trouble. At best training will require more birds—meaning more time and more money.

Introduce a dog to birds with a locked-wing pigeon. A locked-wing cannot flap or flush and imprint a negative association.

**Tip No. 3:** There is no more effective training program than one that includes a proper electronic-collar curriculum. Correctly incorporating an electronic collar will help teach the dog avoidance concepts, result in less pressure being put on the dog, and ultimately develop an enthusiastic companion that responds with excellence and style.

I strongly advise teaching the basic yard commands of "Kennel," "Sit" or "Whoa" (depending on the breed) before employing the electronic collar. A dog should know what a command means and make an effort to comply in the yard before an electronic collar is placed on it.

Remote training collars that offer a wide range of intensity levels, particularly at low stimulation, are better choices for training. The minimum requirement for a true training collar (versus a straight punishment collar) is that it has a number of low-level stimulation settings.

**• Tip No. 4:** When traveling with your dog, hydrate it with bottled water. Chang-

ing from hard water to soft water can precipitate a bad case of Montezuma's Revenge. If your dog is afflicted with diarrhea, it will become dehydrated. And a dehydrated bird dog will lack stamina and could face more serious health issues.

**• Tip No. 5:** A dog does not benefit from a "he man" breakfast on the morning of a hunt. Dogs receive the nutritional benefits of a balanced meal eight to 16 hours after ingestion.

Feeding the morning of a hunt will dehydrate the dog, raise its body temperature and possibly lead to bloat. Bloat itself is not life threatening, but it may develop into GVD, which is life threatening. A sound rule is to not feed within two hours before exercise or one hour after. Glycogen supplements can be very effective in helping a dog recover more quickly after a strenuous workout. Glycogen replenishment should be administered within 15 minutes to maximize the benefit; there is no benefit pre-exercise.

**• Tip No. 6:** Carry a couple of heavy-duty rubber bands while hunting. If your dog were to run into a barbed-wire fence and cut the artery in its tongue, for example, it could bleed to death. With this particular injury, it would be extremely difficult to tie a tourniquet between the cut and the heart. Slipping a heavy-duty rubber band over the dog's tongue would staunch the blood flow until you could seek professional help. And don't count on last year's rubber bands. Rubber bands dry out and become brittle. Make sure the bands you carry will do the job.

**• Tip No. 7:** Bark collars are a good investment. A dog howling away in your vehicle is burning glycogen as rapidly as when hunting. The glycogen tank is a

small fuel tank that is a dog's major energy source. When a dog has depleted its glycogen, it will handle less reliably, find fewer birds and in general put in a poor performance. A bark collar is an inexpensive but valuable addition to anyone's training bag.

• **Tip No. 8:** With a pointing breed, the time to take the dog off of birds and start yard training is when the pup begins pointing game. Continuing to allow a young dog to root out birds, creep and chase will only make things more difficult when trying to train the dog to hold point honestly and be steady to wing and shot. The more repetitions the dog has of rooting and chasing, the more pressure will be required down the road. No dog responds well to more pressure, especially around birds. Once the dog has been properly exposed to birds and the gun and demonstrates genetic talent, it's time to complete the yardwork and move to training manners around game.

• **Tip No. 9:** With a pointing breed, the more a dog retrieves before being taught to remain steady to wing and shot, the more difficult it will be to teach the dog to be steady to wing and shot. If a dog doesn't come to expect/anticipate a retrieve, it will remain staunch more reliably. I recommend training the conditioned retrieve after the dog holds point and is steady to wing and shot.

• **Tip No. 10:** Remote bird launchers are great tools for training both pointing and flushing breeds, as a lot of work can be accomplished without requiring additional help.

One thing I never do is place a scent bird in a launcher when teaching a dog to hold point. The scent bird is the bird the dog smells. If the scent bird is in the launcher, the dog will have to be closer to the bird in order to smell it. The closer the dog is to the bird in early training, the more likely it will be to jump in on the bird and require correction. And the closer the dog is to the bird when corrected, the more likely it is to lose style. The end result can be blinking.

Instead of placing the scent bird in the launcher, I sweep a locked-wing pigeon or harnessed quail over the spot where I will plant the disabled bird. I want to help the dog smell the bird farther away. Once the dog has established point on the scent bird, I launch a bird from the remote launcher, which is five to 10 yards farther out.

Launchers are a great aid in teaching flushing breeds to sit on volunteer birds and for marking drills. I also use them to teach tracking crippled birds. Wrap a piece

of Velcro around the flight feathers of a pheasant, preventing the bird from flying. Place the bird in a launcher. With the retriever line-steady by your side, launch the bird and fire the gun. The pheasant will come down and hit the ground running. Send the dog for the retrieve. With enough practice, your dog will become a pro at tracking running birds.

• **Tip No 11:** When teaching a pointing dog to back and honor the point of its brace mate, start with a dog silhouette. Place the silhouette on the backside of a bush, brush pile or hedgerow. Bring in the dog on a check cord. As soon as the dog sees the silhouette, command, "Whoa." (It is mandatory that the yard training on "Whoa" has been completed.) As soon as the dog is staunch, launch a fly-away bird from a remote launcher. The bird should come up in front of the silhouette. By launching a bird, you are ensuring that the dog gets excited and will want to play again. Far too many dogs blink backs altogether or look less than stylish and intense when backing, because the trainer neglected to incorporate live birds into the drills.

• **Tip No. 12:** A lot of money can be saved on bird costs by using a 10-foot piece of one-inch PVC pipe. Drive a four-foot stake into the ground. Attach a swivel to a PVC end cap and cement it to one end of the length of PVC. Tie about 30 feet of kite string to the swivel, and slide the PVC pipe over the stake. Tie a strong-flying pigeon to the string. The bird can fly around but won't be able to escape.

The pigeon pole is a great tool for teaching line steadiness to a duck dog or a retriever used in the dove fields. The pigeon can be used in launchers when teaching steadiness to wing and shot to any breed. With a couple of pigeon poles, one or two pigeons can be used to train a lot of dogs.

• **Tip No. 13:** Before embarking on building a house, a contractor has a set of blueprints; the same should be true in dog training. Before taking a dog out of the kennel, we have a game plan. We review what we are trying to accomplish, how we are going to set up the drills, which way the wind is blowing, and so on. Before heading out to train, review your game plan. If you're prepared, the training will go better for both you and your dog.



*George Hickox's DVD "Training Pointing Dogs" covers developing a gundog from puppy to polished performer. It can be ordered by visiting [www.georgehickox.com](http://www.georgehickox.com).*