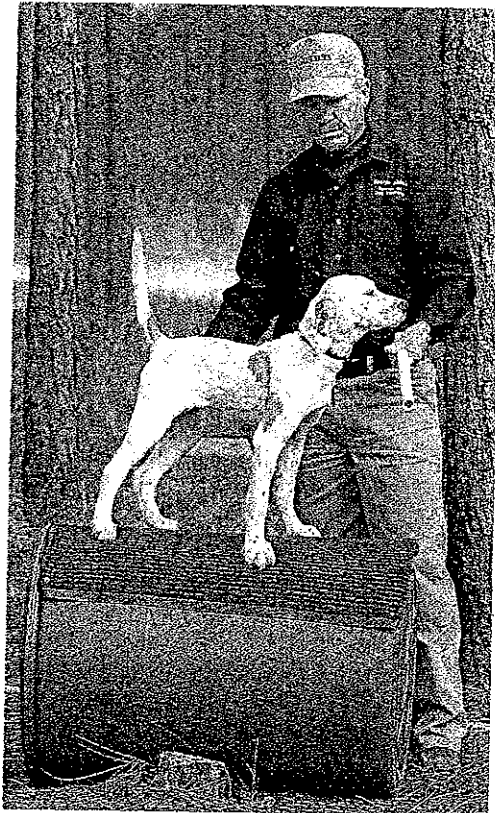


Beyond 20 Weeks

The imprinting stage in a dog's development occurs during the first 20 weeks of the dog's life. In March/April I discussed the psychological stages in which young dogs can develop positive behavioral traits. Conversely, if a pup misses certain windows of association, such as proper socialization with people and other dogs, it never will train as well as its genetics might allow. It never will be as good as it could have been if it had been properly introduced to stress, new places or negative associations during the "fear factor" stage.

I recently finished teaching a five-day school at our winter training and quail hunting grounds in Georgia. The students—both the two-legged and four-legged variety—had ability. This particular school was unique in that more than half of the human students guided and handled dogs on plantations catering to quail hunters. Another student owned 15,000 acres of prime quail habitat in Texas and was an avid bird hunter. One student came in with a 16-week-old shorthair—the owner's first bird dog.

With this group, the biggest challenge in graduating the dogs to more advanced skill levels was dealing with apprehensions. Not human apprehensions, but those of the dogs. Except for the young shorthair. With the number of birds the youngster was exposed to during the course, at the end of the five days the developing dog was enthusiastically questing and pointing and responding eagerly to yard training. New situations and new lessons were being approached with an open mind and an eagerness to participate. Many of the older dogs were not so confident; apprehension had become part of their personalities. Variable reinforcement, correcting at the wrong place or wrong time, improper introduction to electronic collars and being pushed too quickly in training had resulted in psy-



In barrel training, the dog is taught to stand still with its head and tail high.

chological baggage. It is more difficult to progress to advanced training if there isn't a solid foundation to build on.

Much of the work done with the dogs was rehabilitative. Behavioral traits, personality flaws and strong associations that were counterproductive had to be extinguished. The owners will have to continue taking this rehabilitative course to work past these issues—recognizing that extinguishing behavior is much more difficult than shaping it from the get-go.

If your dog is genetically talented and developed within the optimum stages as outlined in my column "The First 20 Weeks" (March/April) training should go smoothly and successfully for you both.

The rehabilitative work outlined for

many of the dogs at the Georgia school involved positive reinforcement, clicker training and establishing proper associations. The handlers learned how to ensure that their dogs formed the intended associations by not correcting at the wrong place or time. The owners/trainers understood the importance of place orientation and were able to open their dogs' minds to new situations and learning opportunities.

All of the handlers will be able to move their dogs forward to more advanced levels, but it will take longer and require more effort than it would take someone starting fresh with a young dog. They won't be able to make as many mistakes as someone starting from scratch. That's because windows of opportunity were missed during the first 20 weeks, and fundamental training rules were broken in their dogs' schooling after the 20-week period.

The training period immediately following 20 weeks takes the dog through yardwork. This is the training stage that comes after initial imprinting and takes the dog back to the field to finish formal "bird manners."

By the time it reaches 20 weeks old, a pup should be running confidently in the fields and woods, pointing but not necessarily holding, and chasing flying birds. It should have been properly introduced to the gun as well as to clicker/treat association by base loading. (Base loading is simply sitting down for 15 minutes, working a training clicker, and each time immediately offering a treat such as a piece of hotdog. Bil-Jac manufactures frozen treats that most dogs love, and you can buy them from many large pet outlets.)

During the imprinting stage, we clicked the puppy when we put it in a kennel or walked it on a Whoa board. The pup developed a positive association by receiving a treat when it stopped on

"Whoa" or kenneled. It had an open mind and was looking for ways to get the click/treat, not for ways to get out of obeying a command.

By now the young dog is ready to progress to more advanced yardwork. Once the pup has demonstrated a propensity to point, is hunting, and has had birds killed over it, I take it off of birds. I no longer run the dog where I feel there is a high probability that it will find birds. This also means no exposure to poor-flying birds. I don't advise taking a pup, once it is pointing, to a local preserve. *I really do not want the young dog catching birds.* The next time I put the dog into birds, it is expected to hold point. But there are a bunch of structural building blocks and yard drills that must take place first.

When they are confused or trying to figure out a solution to avoid pressure, dogs will revert to the first thing they learned. In other words, a dog that is taught to sit first will tend to sit when put under stress or in a new training situation. When such a dog is given the command "Whoa," for example, it will try to sit, requiring the trainer to make it stand by picking it up. Similarly, if a dog is taught "Here" first, then teaching "Whoa" will be more challenging, as the dog will try to approach the handler when it becomes confused or panics. The owner will have to bring the dog back to the spot where it was when the "Whoa" command was given. Ideally, this would be done within 1.3 seconds to maximize the association of being corrected with the failure of not complying—hardly feasible in this training situation.

Because holding point, steadiness to wing, steadiness to shot, and backing are all based on "Whoa," that is the first command I teach. I teach "Whoa" before "Here," "Heel" or "Kennel." I do not teach my setters or pointers to sit. If I bred and developed versatile breeds for hunting upland birds and waterfowl, I would teach "Sit" after teaching "Whoa." By teaching "Whoa" first, I don't have to put more pressure on the dogs later on. Less pressure is always better, especially where "Whoa" is concerned. I am going to use the command "Whoa" around birds, and I want it to be positive. I do not want the dog to be at all apprehensive when it hears the command.

I am going to teach the pup "Whoa," "Kennel" and "Here" in yard training. I

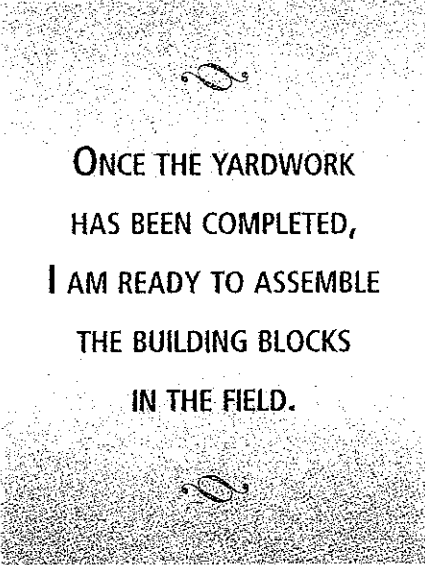
will not give any commands in the field until the yard training is complete—in other words, until the dog is complying with style to commands.

Before teaching avoidance training and introducing the dog to the e-collar, I teach commands in the yard by using a lot of click-and-treat reinforcement. However, once the dog understands what I want, I blend in a certain amount of pressure for non-compliance.

I use whatever it takes at the time to train the dog, whether it is barrel training, the Buddy Stick (see below), the Whoa board, a pinch collar, praise or treats. On the barrel, I teach the dog to stand still and hold its head and tail high. I introduce pressure here by popping the dog under the chin with a piece of PVC pipe if it moves. I will click for success. I will walk the dog onto the Whoa board and give it a treat when it stays on the board. I initially may use the Buddy Stick to ensure that the dog does not move forward on the board. The Buddy Stick is a six-foot piece of one-inch PVC pipe with a snap on the end. The snap is attached to the dog's collar. The stick gives me absolute control, and I can stop the dog or pull it to me. The dog can use

more escape hatches with a check cord, and one objective in yard training is to teach the dog that using escape hatches to avoid compliance does not work.

I also use prong collars. With these, I



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can lead the dog to a board and, with subtle jerks of the collar, teach the dog to stand on the board and ultimately "Whoa" on the ground. The dog is always rewarded for success. The objec-

tive is to teach the dog to respond with excellence and style the first time it receives the command or cue.

After working on "Whoa," I teach "Kennel" and then "Here." After the dog is complying consistently, I introduce the electronic collar. A proper e-collar program is necessary to avoid case-hardening, collar-wise or apprehension problems. Of course, proper introduction and the ability to train with low-level stimulation are paramount to success.

Once the yardwork has been completed—which takes months—I am ready to assemble the building blocks in the field. Remember that it is the quality of the sessions, not the quantity, that is important. By taking time, being patient, being consistent and letting the dog develop and mature, I end up with a dog that is ready for advanced fieldwork. And with a solid foundation that has been built in the yard, I will have to use a lot less pressure in the field around birds. ✈

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.