

The Woes of Old Wives' Tales

The world of dog training is fraught with an abundance of myths and misconceptions. Owners guided by erroneous canine-behavior principles will inevitably hamper the advancement and success of their four-legged pupils. If a training regime is based upon incorrect assumptions, then it is inevitable that the dog will not be able to maximize its learning abilities and will not reach its full potential. You must stick with the proven principles of how dogs learn if you want to develop a hunting dog to a high standard. In this article I will address some of the more common old wives' tales that new trainers sometimes fall victim to—beliefs that are no less false for being widely held.

• **Let the dog be a puppy, and don't start training until the dog is one year old.**

Learning to learn should begin early in a dog's life. A dog that has not learned to offer up new behaviors in attempts to solve problems will struggle with learning new commands. Our role as a trainer is to help the dog, not shackle its learning of desired behaviors.

A pup is trying to figure out the world and discover what works for it. If a dog learns that it has no accountability and does not have to make an effort to be rewarded, it will be more difficult following a year of no structure to teach the dog that it has to respond to a command the first time. For example, if for a year a dog has heard "Come here" over and over and received no meaningful consequences for non-compliance, then trying to teach the dog that it must start obeying immediately will be a lot more difficult. Teaching foundational commands and desired behaviors early in a pup's life is the right prescription. A good trainer makes learning fun for the pup and develops a student that looks forward to learning and going to school. It is difficult to teach new behaviors if the dog has shut down to learn-



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Contrary to what some people say, once a dog has been introduced to guns and birds and has shown the ability to point, it no longer should be allowed to chase birds.

ing and lacks an open mind.

Our young-dog program is based on reward training. We teach the dog the fundamental principle that there is no free lunch. When the dog gives us something, we give it something. If the dog does not give us the desired behavior, we do not reward it. For example, at feeding time our pointers have to stand before we put their food bowls down; our Labs have to sit before they receive their meals. We first get the sought-after behavior before we couple it with a command. The way we do this initially is to wait. At first the dog may jump up excitedly in anticipation of dinner, as it has not yet learned what behavior will work. Eventually the dog will stand still for a brief moment—and in the case of a pointer puppy, this is the moment when we need to let the dog know that the behavior (standing) will result in something good. For flushing/retriever breeds we wait until the dog eventually sits. We use the clicker to mark the desired behavior for the dog

and then reinforce it with food (see "Clicker Talk," March/April '08). In a very short time the dog will offer the desired behavior to get the reward. At that moment I take the snapshot (the click) and give the dog food. Once the dog is reliably offering the behavior, I introduce the command to stand or sit, depending upon the breed. As the dog begins to offer the behavior, I say the command; and when the dog responds, I click and treat.

In yard training I teach dogs the command "Place," which they respond to by running to a raised platform, jumping onto it and either standing or sitting, depending on the breed. We start this type of training when a dog is six weeks old, and we will teach the kennel and recall commands using the same method.

A dog that has learned to offer desired behaviors to get rewards and understands that there is accountability for its actions will be a much better student. A dog that has begun its journey of learning will respond to more advanced training with enthusiasm. When it's the right time to incorporate avoidance training—in which a dog learns that by responding to a command the first time it will avoid a negative consequence—the well-prepared dog will step up readily. This will make the e-collar introduction easy and quick.

• **Let the dog chase birds for the first year.**

We don't allow a pup to continue chasing birds once it has been properly introduced to birds and guns. We eventually are going to train our dogs to be steady to wing & shot. A finished pointing dog will hold point and remain steady when the bird flushes and the shot is fired. Our Labs will sit at the flush and remain sitting until released. A dog that is steady to wing & shot is much less likely to be accidentally shot during a hunt and will not put up other birds while chasing a fly-away.

A multitude of problems develop when a pointing breed is allowed to creep, rout out birds and chase. Chasing is a big-time jackpot for the dog. If the behavior of flushing birds is reinforced, training the dog to remain staunch on point will be much more difficult. The more reinforcement the dog receives that flushing and chasing birds is OK, the more pressure will be required to extinguish the behavior. In my opinion, any program that necessitates more pressure than less is not sound. Similarly, with flushing/retrieving breeds, reinforced chasing will make it more difficult to train general obedience and control in the field.

Once a pointing dog has demonstrated the ability to point and has been introduced to guns and birds, we concentrate on yard training and the teaching of the "Whoa" command. For a flusher/retriever that has been introduced to the flush, is chasing birds, and has been introduced to the gun, we work on obedience and compliance to the command "Sit." At this point we no longer allow the dog to run free in the bird fields; we run it in bird-free areas to safely teach handling while preventing reinforcement of poor bird manners.

• **The dog's diet should be changed to a lower-protein food during the off-season.**

Although it may seem like a dog's diet has nothing to do with training, I feel that proper nutrition is critical to getting a dog to learn—and perform—to its potential. Protein rebuilds muscle, and very little protein is used by a dog as an energy source; therefore a dog's energy output has little to do with protein needs. The correct dietary prescription is to feed a top-tier food 12 months of the year. A dog that is fed a lower-quality food during the off-season will take longer to respond to pre-hunt conditioning than a dog that remains on a high-protein balanced diet. A dog should be fed the same diet year-round. The *quantity* of food—not the quality—should be decreased as the dog's caloric needs are lessened. A dog that is fed a superior food throughout the year will be healthier and live longer.

• **A dog wants to please its owner.**

A dog wants to please itself. It is concerned with what works for it and what doesn't. When eating a piece of steak, a dog does not think, *Hey, this is pretty good. Would you like a bite?* When one of my dogs responds to the recall command, it is not because it is trying to please me but

because it has been trained with avoidance training and has learned that by coming when called it avoids a negative consequence. A good trainer implements a program based on the dog's perception of what works for the dog. When a dog offers a desired behavior and the behavior is reinforced by a positive, the dog is more likely to repeat the behavior because the result is of benefit to the dog. If an undesired behavior is followed by a negative, the behavior is less likely to be repeated. It's all about how the dog perceives cause and effect.

• **Let an older dog teach a younger dog.**

An older Lab is not going to teach a younger one how to do blind retrieves, sit at the whistle or be steady to wing & shot. An older pointer is not going to teach a younger pointer how to handle, be steady to wing & shot, and hold point until the cows come home. That's just not the way training works. The trainer—not another dog—teaches a young dog to respond with excellence and style.



George Hickox and click-and-treat innovator Gary Wilkes will conduct a five-day dog training school in Seattle from August 19 to 23. For more information, visit www.georgehickox.com.