

JOHN R FALK

## What Level's Best?

Like so many things, field-dog performance is a relative matter. What is more than adequate for one hunter may be barely enough for another. Often the difference depends on how frequently the hunter gets afield and how much time that individual is able to allot to dog training to achieve a given level of performance. Besides

time, the availability of proper facilities weighs heavily on any training regimen, as does the type and quality of hunting opportunities.

In an effort to find common ground on which to assess how much performance is adequate, I developed the following categories of hunter types and field-dog ability:

**Hunter Type No. 1**—the occasional or casual hunter who gets afield only three or four times per season.

*Type No. 1 Dog Performance* elementary school.

•**Hunter Type No. 2**—the intermediate hunter who would like to get afield more often but who manages six to eight outings per season.

*Type No. 2 Dog Performance*—high school.

•**Hunter Type No. 3**—the avid, serious hunter who goes out every chance he gets, and makes the time.

*Type No. 3 Dog Performance*—college.

With these definitions, I called on Steve Del Rossi, of Salem, New Jersey, for his expert opinion. Del Rossi is a breeder and trainer of hunting Brittanys and the owner of Quail Hollow Kennels (104 Quinton-Marlboro Rd., Salem, NJ 08079). Coincidentally, Del Rossi uses similar classifications when he gives dog training seminars around the Northeast. So, feeling at home, he dove right in:

"The average bird hunter [Type No. 1] kills about 25 birds over his dog per year," Del Rossi says, "and that counts training birds, too! Not really enough to keep his dog sharp. But that's the average bird dog today, one that's brought to these shooting clubs and hunting preserves. And of course the owners are

training, find pointing dead to be a suitable substitute for retrieving?" "Oh, sure," Del Rossi says. "The casual hunter probably hunts more on preserves than for wild birds, and he can find most of the birds he shoots because they won't be in real thick stuff."

How much, then, does it take to satisfy the casual hunter? Del Rossi believes that the average hunter would be satisfied with the elementary school dog that will hunt, point most of its birds and point dead if it won't retrieve. Asked if he had any tips for the casual hunter wanting to train to that degree, Del Rossi says the main thing boils down to building a bond with the dog. "If people never really build that bond with the dog, they're going to be chasing him all day Saturday. Hunting's supposed to be a pleasure, but I see some people chasing their dogs through the woods, getting aggravated and having their blood pressure build up. And it's *their* fault; they never built a bond with their dog or spent enough time with him."

Drawing a comparison between dogs and children, Del Rossi cites a widely accepted philosophy that, as far as personality goes, children's are determined by the time they're three years old. And he thinks dog

owners make or break their pup's personality in the first six months of its life. "You know with some dogs you just 'hup' them and they turn naturally. That's because you've built that bond, that love, where the dog wants to please you. Once you have to muscle a dog you'll always have to muscle him . . . and that's not a good thing to do."

Is there a certain type of dog the average hunter should look for? "Certainly not a field-trial type," Del Rossi says. "What he should look for is a classic gundog—a close-working, level-headed



*Different types of hunters demand different levels of performance from their dogs.*

happy if the dog points, retrieves and comes when called. Backing doesn't matter to these hunters because they usually only own one dog at a time. And even not retrieving right to hand doesn't bother them. If they can get their dog to return to within six or seven feet they're tickled pink. So to satisfy this average guy, I'd say pointing is the first priority, listening—by that I mean hunting close—is the second and retrieving is third."

Would this average hunter, who probably doesn't want to spend much time

dog that hunts east and west, not north and south like the field-trial dogs do all the time."

Getting breed-specific, if a bit biased, he says the Brittany would do handily. "They come around a lot easier than, say, a powerful setter or pointer." Among the Continentals, Del Rossi cites the German wirehaired pointer and the wirehaired pointing griffon as very good candidates.

Progressing to the Type No. 2 hunter (and high-school level dog), Del Rossi believes this gunner requires a dog that is an eager hunter as well as a solid pointer, retriever and backer. "This type of guy is usually fairly serious about his hunting, even if he can't get out as often as he'd like. Chances are most of his buddies have dogs too. Naturally, those dogs have to honor one another on game."



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Yard training becomes more important to this intermediate hunter. "The high-school level dog must come every time he's called; and, because backing, or honoring, is really 'whoaing,' he has to know 'whoa' stone-cold to be able to hunt effectively with other dogs. This means lots of solid yard-training work."

As for which breeds would best satisfy this type of hunter, Del Rossi believes the Continentals or a Brittany would stack up fine, followed by a setter of the closer-working variety.

Graduating to the Type No. 3 hunter, Del Rossi feels that only a dog close to perfection will satisfy him. "Of course, that means a college-level gundog, one that's an enthusiastic hunter under good control, rock-staunch on point, steady to wing and shot, and always a willing, reliable retriever," Del Rossi says. "This is a guy who's about as serious as you can get about his gunning; he probably only hunts wild birds and needs a setter or pointer or a big-going Brittany—a dog with a lot more range to cover the ground effectively.

"Then too, as serious as he is, he's probably a lot deeper into training, so he can get his dog to the performance level he wants ... and keep him there."

How forgiving should this type of hunter be? What should he forgive and not forgive? "If he's smart, he shouldn't forgive anything," Del Rossi says. "Once you get your dog to the college level, as soon as he makes a mistake in the field, right now you've got to correct him! Otherwise you can slowly but surely begin to lose him."

Asked if he had any training advice for all three types of hunters, Del Rossi says he tells everyone to spend 10 minutes training per day for best results. "Just 10 minutes each day is better than just all day Saturday."

One of the most important but basic things a bird dog must know is the "whoa" command. "And one of the best ways to teach that is on a picnic table in your backyard during the summer," Del Rossi says. "Most people don't have a 'train-ing table,' per se, so I tell them just to put the dog up on their picnic table instead. He's insecure just from being off the ground up there, and he probably won't try to jump off the first few times. When you get him to 'whoa' on the table, especially while the kids are running around the yard, you've got him. He'll 'whoa' under any circumstances."

Teaching a dog to be steady to wing and shot, Del Rossi says, "is another extension of the picnic table, something you can easily do in the summertime. Make the dog 'whoa' on the table, and toss frisbees in front of him if you don't have birds—anything to distract him and make him jerk, but he still has to hold. Of course, each time you're shooting a blank gun. And if you don't have a blank gun, a cap gun is good enough for the backyard."

How much to satisfy? In the final analysis, it still boils down to you and your dog. It's whatever makes the two of you enjoy each day of hunting together in the field . . . and look forward eagerly to the next one.