

# GUNDOGS

## *Pups Bred for Hunters, Not Trials*

**A**ll over the United States new opportunities exist for dog trainers to make a successful living by breeding and training good gundogs rather than trying to produce field-trial winners. The hunting public seems to be realizing that there is a distinct difference between the kind of dogs that win major championship field trials and the kind they want as companionable gundogs.

This awareness is creating a broad new market for dogs that handle easily and are comfortable to have around - dogs that exhibit determination and style without being speed freaks. A new wave of gundog breeders and trainers is emerging to supply this market and many of them are finding financial success in a field that has long been dominated by a few winners at the expense of those who lost.

Steve Del Rossi is typical of the new gundog trainer. Del Rossi, who operates Quail Hollow Kennels at RD 2, Salem, New Jersey, calls himself "a trainer of personal shooting dogs." At 28 years old, he's proved that a dog trainer won't starve if he stays home and breeds the kind of dogs hunters want instead of pounding the road trying to win championships with dogs that are often too specialized to make comfortable gundogs.

"People want dogs that hunt with them. They want dogs that hunt at a naturally comfortable pace and when they blow a whistle, they want the dog to come in to them," Del Rossi said. "Most of them want a dog to hold his point in a stylish manner until they walk in and flush the bird or give a command

that releases the dog to do the flushing. They will not tolerate dogs that bump birds, but neither do they insist on having their dogs steady to wing and shot. Most hunters can't keep pointing dogs steady when the birds start coming down anyway, and they want their dogs to retrieve. As long as the dog handles easily, holds his point until the bird is flushed, and then makes a nice retrieve, most hunters are happy. They'd prefer a dog like that to one that ranges wide and fast in his search for birds and has been trained to be steady to shot. There are more people looking for good gundogs than there are people who want dogs that win field trials."

Good gundogs are worth good money and today's prices are high enough to leave a spread for respectable profit. A smart gundog trainer breeds the kind of dogs that he likes to train and sells them with the expectation that they will come back to him for several months of training. He'll also select a few pups each year to raise himself and train to sell as finished gundogs at a year and a half to two years old. The dog will



then obey *come*, *sit*, *no* and *heel* commands without hesitation, hunt at a naturally comfortable pace without needing to be hacked at with the whistle, hold his point until his handler flushes the birds, and retrieve with a soft mouth. He will probably not be steady to wing and shot, may drop the bird at your feet rather than delivering to hand, but he'll be easy to handle, stylish on point, and he won't run away. A gundog like this is worth a minimum of \$1500, seven-week-old pups with his kind of potential are worth a minimum of \$200 and his sire will produce stud fees of at least \$200.

Del Rossi's Quail Hollow Kennel is typical of the kind of establishments the new wave of gundog trainers operate. The kennel is immaculately clean, regularly inspected by state authorities and follows a planned nutritional program - the sort of place you'd feel good about leaving your dog in for training or breeding or from which to buy your pup. Quail Hollow is situated in a fertile agricultural area surrounded by fields with quail, pheasants, grouse and woodcock. Steve has plenty of land for gundog training and the climate permits training the year around. Also, he's close



*Most gunners want dogs that handle easily, and hunt comfortably.*

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## Pups Bred for Hunters *continued*

to major metropolitan areas with a number of affluent sportsmen.

Del Rossi graduated from college with a degree in wildlife management, but decided he'd rather work for himself than be employed by a state agency. His grandfather had always trained bird dogs and as a boy, Steve had helped him. Later he trained his own dogs. Those dogs went home to satisfied owners and others, liking what they saw, began sending him dogs to train. Del Rossi's reputation began to grow.

After several years of training Brittanies for Helantha Lee of Rochester, New York, Del Rossi arranged to buy her dual bred Hunterlane line of Brittanies as the foundation stock for his own Quail Hollow line. "It's much easier to train good dogs than wild ones," he said. "When you have your own line, you know what you're breeding and when the pups you sell come back to you for training, you know how to expect them to behave. A lot of good trainers go broke trying to train dogs that are basically untrainable. The trainer can't produce, he gets a reputation for being unable to produce and he goes out of business. If he'd had better dogs to train, he might have done well. Trying to train crumbly dogs can bust you out of this business."

The new wave of gundog trainers realizes that owners, as well as dogs, need training. "We encourage owners of dogs that are here for training to come down and train with us and to hunt with us in the fall." Del Rossi said. "If you can see what a guy is doing wrong and can correct him, he'll get much better performance from his dog. He'll be a more satisfied customer and when he goes home he'll be happy with his dog and he'll talk about it. It's by word of mouth that this business is built."

Until recently gundog trainers didn't get much glory. It was the trainers of hot field-trial contenders that got the attention. Advertising promoted the belief that the best hunting dogs were field-trial champions and that the progeny of such champions made

the best gundogs. But the dog-buying public found the facts to be different. Field-trial dogs have an inherited tendency to run wider and faster than suits a hunter on foot, and the offspring of these dogs are most often more dog than the foot hunter can handle. A savvy hunter looks for a good solid gundog background in the ancestry of the pup he buys. Such buyers have turned from field-trial champions to closer-working gundogs; they have also begun to seek out a different type of trainer. Within the last few years gundog trainers who have never even tried to win field trials, but have just plugged away at the job they know how to do — breeding and training bird dogs that handle comfortably — have found themselves to be in great demand. Consequently, training rates and gundog prices have been rising to the extent that today a good gundog trainer often earns more than some of the best field-trial handlers, and a lot better than the many field-trial handlers who are too often outside the winners' circle.

"Look at it from the hunter's standpoint," Del Rossi said. "The guy has permission to hunt on this farm, but not the one across the fence line. He must have a dog that hunts where his owner wants him to be, not one that is so obsessed with finding birds that nothing else matters. You've got to have a controllable dog. Also, most people like to see their dogs working close; they like to see him hit a point, not just find him standing on point after a long search in the direction where the dog was last seen. Most people haven't room to run a big-going dog. They want to choose how they will hunt a piece of cover and have a dog that will hunt accordingly."

Is it easier to produce good gundogs than it is to develop notable field-trial contenders? The answer is a resounding *yes*. Good gundogs are produced from well-rounded representatives of their respective breeds — dogs that are even-tempered, friendly and affectionate, good looking and intelligent enough to take basic training easily. They must have an inherent

desire to hunt and a good nose. All of these attributes are inherited qualities, thus an intelligent breeding program using proven foundation stock can produce a very high percentage of pups that have the potential to make excellent, companionable gundogs if given proper training. Field-trial champions, on the other hand, are one in thousands. The odds of producing dogs that will win major field-trial championships are pitiful. For every one that makes the grade, hundreds are produced that fall by the wayside. From the breeders' standpoint, producing good gundogs is a lark once you have good foundation stock. And, as for training, gundog trainers ask only logical obedience from their charges. The dog learns behavior that makes him socially acceptable and is taught to hunt within a pattern that suits his naturally closer-working tendency. He is encouraged to hold his points until the logical moment when the bird takes wing and then is free to run out and retrieve it if it falls. Nothing very tough about that. The training is pleasant and devoid of mind-bending pressures. The result is a happy dog, eager to do his master's bidding. Training a major field-trial winner, however, requires pushing a dog to and perhaps beyond his limits. It requires an extraordinary dog, an extraordinary trainer and a very specialized training. A challenge, to be sure, but not a game in which there is room for the average man or dog.

"When you have a pup that is bred to be a gundog, training is easy," says Rossi. "It's simply a matter of showing the dog how you want him to use his abilities. His confidence builds as he discovers that what you require of him meshes with what his genes demand. The result is a proud companion who loves to hunt the way you want him to." What could be a more pleasant objective for a trainer to achieve?

— *Sports Afield* April 1982



## Teaching Your Dog to Back

**H**unting with a bird dog that does not stop and honor another dog's points is like driving with someone who ignores stop signs and red lights. It's hard on your nerves and causes accidents.

Gundogs that don't back detract from the pleasures of a day afield. I once witnessed a very bloody dogfight in which one of the dogs was seriously injured when he crept past to steal the first dog's point. Less spectacular but more common are dogs that break point and flush their birds when they feel threatened by the approach of another dog. Neither of these events add to the feeling of camaraderie between the owners of the two dogs.

The remedy, however, is simple: teach the dogs to back. If you harbor any hopes of running your dog successfully with another, both should be taught to stop automatically and stand still when they see another dog on point. Teaching a dog to back another's point is not difficult and does not even require a second dog until the final phases of training. What is required *is* a simple, consistent approach.

"It's called the Plywood Pup method," says Steve Del Rossi of Quail Hollow Kennels, RD 2, Salem, New Jersey. Steve is the breeder of one of the nation's top lines of gundog Brittanies and has a solid record in training gundogs of all breeds. He is not the originator of the Plywood Pup method for teaching dogs to back, but he has refined the method to a point that anyone can copy.

The Plywood Pups are actually plywood silhouettes of gundogs (Brittanies in Steve's case). Sawed out of half-inch exterior grade plywood and painted to look like bird dogs on point, each silhouette is equipped with steel rods that extend six inches from the feet so that they can be planted anywhere. Start out with three such silhouettes, an equal number of bird release traps, a few homing pigeons and a checkcord.

"I use three silhouettes at a time so that I can show the dog three identical situations in each lesson," Steve

says. "They learn faster this way than if I used just one silhouette." Steve can make consistent backers out of most dogs by giving them one three-bird lesson a day for two weeks. So can you.

Steve erects the three silhouettes about 100 yards apart in a training field. He places them in spots that are over a rise of ground and out of sight until an approaching dog tops the rise and suddenly sees the silhouette ahead. Beside each silhouette he places a bird release trap with a pigeon in it.



*Using a Plywood Pup, a dog is taught to honor another's point.*

"The first two or maybe three times the dog encounters the silhouette he's not going to know what it is. If he has no natural tendency to stop and stare at it, take him up to it from the downwind side until he gets the scent of the bird in the trap. Then, holding the dog back with the checkcord, trigger the trap and let him watch the bird fly off," Steve explains. "That's just to let him know that when he sees the silhouette, there's a bird involved. Only let him get a whiff of the bird the first two or three times, and then never let him get scent of the bird again. From now on you stop him as soon as he comes into a position where he sees the silhouette. He's to back on sight, not try to scent the bird himself."

Steve takes the dog around the course on a checkcord in all succeed-

ing lessons. As soon as the dog tops the rise and comes into view of the silhouette, Steve stops the dog and restrains him while an assistant walks up to the silhouette and releases the bird. As it flies off, Steve shoots a blank pistol. He does not say *whoa*. "The dog must learn to stop when it sees the silhouette, not when it hears a command," he explains.

"It's very important to knock the silhouette over as soon as the bird is released," Steve insists. "The dog must learn that the sight of a pointing dog silhouette is the signal to stop. It should no longer be visible when he is allowed to move on."

Steve then takes the dog over the next rise and stops it once more the instant the dog comes in sight of the next silhouette. Each day the dog is given the same lesson using three silhouettes and three birds, but the silhouettes are placed in different spots each time so that the dog must start looking for them. "You'd be surprised how soon the dog begins looking for these silhouettes," Steve says. "If you are consistent, very quickly thereafter he will begin stopping on his own as soon as he sees one."

Shortly after the dog stops on his own, Steve abandons use of an assistant and walks in himself to do the flushing, leaving the dog backing. If the dog moves he uses the *whoa* command to anchor him in place.

Before a dog can be taught to back using this method, it should have a strongly developed pointing instinct and should be fully yard-trained to come and stop on command. Most dogs are at least a year old when Steve teaches them to back the Plywood Pups.

"That is not to say that they can't be taught to back earlier," he comments. "Many pups from well-bred litters back automatically. They're a cinch to work with and can be given the Plywood Pup routine at an earlier age. But you want to make sure you let the pointing instinct emerge fully before teaching a dog to back. Otherwise you may get a dog that

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## Teaching Your Dog to Back *continued*

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spends its time looking for something to back rather than finding birds of its own to point."

Many of the pups Steve breeds are natural backers. He has whole litters of Brittanies that will back each other pointing a wing on a string at seven and eight weeks of age. "I take them out in groups of three or four at a time and just let nature take its course. I simply tease them into pointing the wing on a string and let them all stand there soaking up that good feeling they get when they and the 'bird' hold still," he says.

Steve makes his silhouettes larger than life-size. "My Plywood Pups are about 24 inches high at the shoulder; a real Britt is only about 20," he says. "I want them to be visible."

Steve uses pigeons rather than quail in the lessons because pigeons are stronger fliers and will often circle the field before heading back to their left, giving the dog something

to watch as the Plywood Pup is knocked over. "Quail just aren't consistently good fliers when used in this sort of setup," Steve explains. "You've got to have birds that will get up and fly away. Nothing is worse than a quail that pops out of the trap and just flutters a few yards and then lands again. Use homing pigeons, they really fly."

If your training area does not have hilly terrain where the silhouettes can be hidden from view, use hedges or clumps of brush to hide the Plywood Pups. Remember not to let the dog smell the bird in the trap during these lessons. If necessary, work downwind so that no scent will be carried to him. He is being taught to stop when he sees a dog on point.

Once the dog becomes consistent at stopping and standing still for a minute or so when he spies a Plywood Pup, it's time to switch him over to the real thing. Have your

hunting buddy come over with his dog and get it established pointing a pigeon. Then bring your dog into sight of the pointing dog and watch him slam to a stop. Kick the birds out, shoot and carry on. You and your hunting companion will now have an easier time afield. If he too trains his dog to back, you'll be able to work your dogs as a brace and double your pleasure.

"Three silhouettes a day for two weeks is all most dogs need to become consistent," Steve says. "Call it a month if the dog is stubborn. Either way it's no big deal. I'd say each lesson takes maybe 20 minutes. In the end the investment of that little bit of time will pay off."

And, like everything else in training, the more you teach your dog, the better rapport you will have with him.

— Sports *Afield* May 1985

## Hunters Can Save the Woodcock

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To every woodcock hunter in the Atlantic Flyway, Cape May, New Jersey, is known as a major gathering place for the birds. Woodcock traveling down the coast are funneled into this famous peninsula and pile up at the tip to wait for a favorable wind before they make the long crossing over Delaware Bay. A similar buildup takes place in I Yarmouth County, Nova Scotia, where woodcock gather in late November. By the time these northern birds reach Cape May in December, they have been joined by populations flying out of New Brunswick, Quebec, Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts, Connecticut and New York.

People who live at Cape May see normally furtive woodcock feeding on lawns

like robins. Go into any patch of likely cover and woodcock flutter up. The ground becomes white with chalky splashes; a sign to every woodcock hunter that the birds are in.

When prevailing westerly winds hold birds back at Cape May, the

most concentrated gathering of woodcock takes place on a little 600-acre tract of publicly owned land known as Higbee Beach. The woodcock here are found right out on the sand dunes at the edge of the Bay and back in the swampy, vine-covered holly and beech forest. Even open fields hold woodcock in broad daylight.

Years ago when woodcock were not nearly so popular as a gamebird, the hunting pressure at Cape May was slight, even when the birds were there in exceptional numbers. But as the woodcock has caught the fancy of an increasing number of gundog men, hunting pressure at Cape May has intensified. The coverts at Higbee Beach, once thick and overgrown with protective briars and



*Atlantic Flyway birds could be in trouble unless sportsmen help.*

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## Hunters Can Save the Woodcock *continued*

tangling vines, have been trampled flat by hunters. There is no accurate measure of the number of woodcock killed at Higbee Beach, but it is significant in years when the great buildups occur.

Whether or not the number of birds killed at Higbee Beach is detrimental to the overall Atlantic Flyway population, the woodcock hunter's image is being severely damaged by the shooting that takes place there.

Professional gundog trainer Steve Del Rossi of Quail Hollow Kennels, RD 2, Salem, New Jersey, guides woodcock hunters in the fall and early winter. He takes his clients to Higbee Beach when the birds are in. "You can limit out in a matter of minutes," he says. "It's a slaughter."

Although he has a considerable commercial interest in the shooting of woodcock at Cape May, Del Rossi favors dosing Higbee Beach to hunting and is organizing a campaign to make this famous covert a refuge. "I'd like to see woodcock hunters get together and lead the effort to make Higbee Beach a woodcock refuge," he told me.

"It's unfair to hunt them here even if the number of birds killed is not detrimental to the overall well-being of the woodcock population," Del Rossi explained. "They are here because they are trapped, they can't move on. To hunt them under such conditions is not sporting, and it's giving hunters a bad image."

Higbee Beach is also a popular gathering place for Audubon Club members to observe migrating birds, such as hawks and falcons. "It's damned embarrassing when you see a group of bird watchers trying to observe the migrants, while the hunters tramp around killing woodcock right and left," cites Del Rossi. "You can imagine what those people think of hunters after witnessing what goes on here."

While Del Rossi favors a ban on hunting at the Beach, he wants to keep it open for bird dog training and wishes to establish the tract as the site for a late season woodcock field trial. "Where could you run a

better woodcock trial than here in December?" he asks. "Woodcock hunters from all over could bring their dogs here at the end of the season and have a wonderful competition to see who has the best woodcock dog."

Woodcock field trials, now run in Main and Canada, draw many New Englanders, but a good woodcock trial in New Jersey would be within reach of gundog men from the Middle Atlantic states.

If this plan succeeds, Cape May's Higbee Beach could become a unique dog-training area. Publicly owned, it would be open to everyone, and the birds would be wild, not pen-raised counterfeits. Dog training would be completely compatible with bird watching in this case too. In fact, most bird watchers would probably enjoy the chance to see woodcock that the dogs would find, especially during periods when only a few woodcock are at Cape May.

There is no question that woodcock in the Atlantic Flyway are declining in numbers due to increased hunting pressure and loss of vital habitat. The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is unable to make an accurate assessment of the situation, since Congress still has not passed legislation that would require woodcock hunters to buy a special stamp, similar to the duck stamp required of waterfowl hunters. Without this means of identifying how many woodcock hunters there are, Fish and Wildlife biologists can only guess at how many woodcock are killed each fall, and therefore they are unable to foresee increased hunting pressure in time to shorten seasons or decrease bag limits when woodcock populations are threatened.

For that reason, it is important that woodcock hunters accept responsibility for the bird and take steps to keep the woodcock hunting scene above criticism. In 1982 woodcock hunters from Maine, New Hampshire and Vermont — all good woodcock-producing states — spear-

headed efforts to eliminate early woodcock seasons in an effort to ease pressure on the species. They are also leading the drive to get Congress to institute a woodcock stamp.

Now would be the the time for woodcock hunters to band together once again and establish Higbee Beach at Cape May as a woodcock refuge. If hunters lead this effort, there is every reason to expect that gundog training activities will be retrained there, and there's the possibility that the tract could become one of the great woodcock field-trial venues.

Because woodcock migrate through many states, the creation of a woodcock refuge at Cape May should be of concern to all woodcock hunters, not only those from New Jersey. Those willing to join the campaign to save this bird should contact Steve Del Rossi, Quail Hollow Kennels, RD 2, Salem, NJ 08079.

— *Sports Afield May 1983*



**Note:** Gundog editor Jerome B. Robinson's classic book *Hunt Close!* teaches you how to train your own close-working bird dog. Autographed copies are available for \$12.95 from Jerome B. Robinson, RD 2, Canaan, NH 03741.

## The Forcing Stick

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The instinct to retrieve, once a general trait among all gundog breeds, is eroding. Today there is less than a 50-50 chance that a pup from any pointing breed will *want* to bring back game you shoot; even among the specialized retriever breeds the record is not much better.

It has become accepted that modern gundogs are "force-trained" to retrieve. Even those individuals that have retained retrieving instincts are often force-trained to assure that they will retrieve whenever they are told to, regardless of whether or not their instincts motivate them at the time.

The most commonly used force-training methods involve pinching the dog's ear to make him open his mouth and grasp an object, or employing the nerve hitch, in which a length of string is twisted around the dog's two center toes to cause the same reaction.

Both methods have many adherents, but there is one lesser-known technique that is equally useful and possibly better when working with timid or high-strung dogs.

Steve Del Rossi, owner of Quail Hollow Kennels in Salem, New Jersey, calls it the "forcing stick" method. He does not take credit for developing the technique (it was shown to him by his grand-father, who learned it from someone else), but he does find it perfect for training Brittany spaniels to retrieve with consistency and happiness.

Del Rossi uses a stick 30 inches long and three inches wide with a handle-shaped end. He drills a quarter-inch hole one inch from the broad end of the stick and another hole eight inches from the narrow end. A four-foot piece of quarter-inch rope is then looped through the two holes to form a noose, with the trailing end of the rope pulled up so that it can be wrapped around the handle.

When the noose is put over a dog's head and tightened, a twisting motion will exert pressure on the back of the dog's neck, making his open his mouth to gag. Getting the dog to open his mouth so that the trainer can put something in it as he

commands "fetch" is what force-training is all about.

Del Rossi likes the forcing stick method because it is less personal than the ear pinch or nerve hitch. "Some dogs will try to bite the hand that pinches the ear or twists a string around their toes," he notes. "When you're using the stick, the dog can't turn and bite you. He is helpless and totally under your control. Knowing that, the dog is quicker to accept the fact that the only way to respond is to do what you say."

Force-training starts with the dog on a table in a setting free of distractions. Putting the dog on a table allows you to work with him more comfortably and increases the dog's comprehension that he is under your control. Del Rossi's training table is three feet wide and eight feet long and is located in a field away from the kennel.

The lessons begin when his dogs are about 1 year old. "I want the dog to be pointing and holding pen-raised birds in training situations before I start the force-training," Del Rossi explains. During this training period, which commonly takes two months of daily 10-minute sessions, Del Rossi eliminates all bird work in order to have the dog's full attention.

Del Rossi uses frozen birds (pigeons are fine), though he prefers to use quail or other game birds as retrieving objects. "Might as well get them used to feathers and their taste right from the start," he says. He finds that hardmouthed problems do not develop in dogs that are trained to retrieve clean frozen birds.

The technique is simple and logical, a step-by-step progression that anyone with patience can accomplish. With the noose tight around the dog's neck, twist the training stick. When the gag reflex causes the dog to open his mouth, place the frozen bird there and relax the tension on the noose by relieving pressure on the stick. With one hand holding the training stick, use your other hand to support the dog's jaw, preventing it from dropping the bird, and say "fetch, fetch."

At first the dog will fight you,

tossing his head and spitting the bird out. When that happens, tighten pressure on the noose by twisting the training stick again and put the bird back in the dog's mouth gently, saying "fetch" and supporting the dog's lower jaw with your free hand.

The next step is to make the dog reach out to take the bird on command and then hold it until told to "drop." Again, the stick is twisted until the dog opens his mouth, but this time hold the bird a few inches in front of him and say "fetch." If the dog has understood the first lesson and will hold a bird you put in his mouth, he will quickly learn to reach out and take the bird from your hand. Make the dog hold the bird a moment or two and then say "drop" and take it back.

Once a dog will reach out and take the bird from you and drop it on command, proceed by making him reach down and pick the bird up off the table. When he has mastered that, begin tossing the bird a few feet down the length of the table and running the dog out to it, using the stick as a sort of rigid leash. Order the dog to fetch, and run him back to the starting point before commanding him to drop the bird into your hand.

Problems may arise when you take the dog off the table and order it to fetch on the ground. Back in his own element, the dog may suddenly resist your authority. If he does, you must back up and re-teach all the table lessons.

"The big difference between this and the ear pinch or nerve hitch method is that the forcing stick holds the dog in a position that prevents him from biting the trainer. The stick allows you to dominate the dog so that he cannot escape. Once you have force-trained a dog to retrieve in this manner, you have a pupil that is ready to accept you as his master and can be taught other lessons much more easily," Del Rossi observes.

— *Sports Afield* May 1987

