

Teaching a Lab to Point

By Jim and Phyllis Dobbs

Controversy about how hunting dogs should be trained is nothing new. As is often quoted, "the only thing two dog trainers can agree on is that the third trainer doesn't know what he is talking about".

Some hunters don't even want their dog to be steady. They want their dog to get to the area of the fall quicker. They say that experience has taught them that retrieving in this manner will allow the dog to be more successful when it comes to catching up with "runners". Other hunters insist that it is important for the dog to be steady so that he can be shot over safely. And so it goes, one controversy after another.

Changing Times

The popularity of versatile hunting dogs has increased proportionally with the increased use of hunt clubs. Typically these clubs release birds in a designated area for each hunting party with other hunters in adjoining fields.

Pointing dog breeds tend to range far and can easily stretch the boundaries of an assigned area. Springer spaniels, though close working dogs, drive the birds quickly into the air and are fast and animated. Some people prefer a calmer style of hunting dog.

With the increase in people wanting versatile, close working hunting dogs that will point, it was only a matter of time before someone would look at the various breeds and say: "If the Labrador Retriever would only point, he would be the best dog for the purpose".

How to Train a Lab to Point

Regardless of the breed or its inherent traits, if you would like to train your dog to point birds, here is how you can do it.

Teach the dog to stop to a whistle. Once you feel that he understands, test him by leaving the dog about 20 yards away. Call him to you. Give him a whistle command to stop before he gets halfway to you. If he will not stop he is not ready to proceed to the next step.

Use the same procedure as in step 1 but this time use a bird launcher and a dummy. Place the launcher so that the dummy will land about 10 feet in front of you. Call the dog, launch the dummy and give the dog a command to stop, all in that order. Repeat this sequence several times until you see that the dog starts to stop automatically when the dummy is popped up.

Repeat this set up again but this time use a live pigeon that flies away instead of a dummy. Practice this until the dog shows you that he will stop when he sees the bird launched.

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Hide the bird launcher in the field with a bird in it. *Approach it from the down wind side.* When the dog makes game, launch the bird. Practice this set up in several locations. It usually doesn't take long until the dog will stop when he smells a bird.

Why does this method work? It is a simple process called chaining. What we did was teach the dog a predictable chain of events. The first link in the chain is smelling the bird. The next link in the chain is launching the bird. During the initial training process, the dog was taught that the sight of a bird being launched is always followed by a command to stop. So now the dog chains together the sequence that smelling the bird means stop.

Want a Truly Fancy Gun Dog?

You can continue the training to have a truly fancy gun dog. Steps 5 through 8 will get you there. After you launch the pigeon and the dog has stopped, wait a moment and then toss a bird for the dog to retrieve.

Plant a wing-clipped pigeon in cover not in a launcher. Bring the dog in on the down wind side. This time when the dog stops on the scent of the bird, wait a moment then send him in to fetch the bird.

Plant a bird in cover, not in a launcher. Bring the dog into the scent cone. After the dog stops and indicates game, send him in to flush. As the bird flies away, fire a shot in the air. NOTE: To keep the dog staunch on point, it is important that you sometimes go in and flush the bird yourself so that he doesn't anticipate flushing the bird and going in on his own. He must wait for your command.

After the dog has demonstrated that he is steady to wing and shot, you can then add the retrieve by shooting the bird.

Now you have a fancy gun dog that will both point and flush.