

The Right Start for Hunting

by Anne Everett

Finding the Right Puppy

The first step in finding the ideal hunting partner is to find the right puppy. Make sure you do your homework and locate a breeder who is producing the type of puppy you are looking for and who obtains the appropriate health clearances on their dogs. Both field and show lines can produce good hunting dogs. More important than a specific bloodline are structure, soundness, overall health, size, birdiness, prey drive, trainability and temperament.

Before you start looking, a good question to ask is “what will I be hunting?” We use smaller dogs for upland work and a larger dog for hunting the “big boys” i.e. Greater Canada Geese. Whatever you are hunting, a dense water repellent coat is essential. A shorter coat makes maintenance in the field, particularly in cocklebur country, much easier. Look for a litter from parents that have field titles and actually hunt. Be up front with the breeder on what you are looking for as breeders are very good at sending you what you ask for. Ask how the breeder socializes his or her puppies. Do they incorporate early neurological stimulation exercises in their puppy development program? Have the puppies met all types of people, have they been outside (weather permitting), have they been exposed to sounds, birds, decoys, water, training equipment, crates, and car rides.

If you get a chance to look at the litter, structurally evaluate it. If this is a grey area for you, then take along a knowledgeable

friend who can help. A working puppy needs to be structurally correct. Pay particular attention to rear and front limb angulations. Rear angulation is essential for a dog to be able to generate power from the rear. Straight rears can be prone to cruciate ligament problems. If you can visualize a straight line from the heel or pastern of a dog to the bone at the back of the pelvis then a dog has a straight rear. Make sure the pasterns are vertical from the feet to the hock when you are looking at this. Front limb angulation refers to the position of the shoulder blade and the length of the upper arm on a dog. Shoulder layback refers to the position of the shoulder blade. When the shoulder blade is more vertical than angled back, the front movement of a dog is compromised resulting in a shortened stride length and a reduction of the ability of the front legs to absorb impact when a dog jumps a ditch or is running over rough ground. This in turn can lead to elbow and shoulder problems down the road. Another structural issue that can create similar problems is a short upper arm. To ensure that you and your new partner have a long happy association together in the duck blind, it is important that you start with a puppy that is reasonably well put together.

dently with its tail up. The puppy that cowers in the corner and isn't interested in a wing is probably not a good bet for a hunter who needs a dog that can deal with new situations and locations and make intelligent decisions in the hunting field. Colour and gender make absolutely no difference to hunting ability, but are personal preferences.

A good hunting dog also needs to be a good family dog. Most hunting dogs spend 30-45 days in the field and the remainder of the year are companion dogs for their owners and their families. This type of dog needs excellent obedience skills, has to behave in the house, as well as get along with other dogs and people. Hunting situations are often in close quarters with two or more dogs and people sharing a small blind. Also, multiple dogs can be working on the same field picking up birds that hunters have dropped. Dogs with non-existent obedience skills and/or behavioral issues will not be welcome in this type of environment.

Training Your Puppy

Once you have your future hunting partner home, training should begin immediately. A general timeline is presented below. Based on his immunization status, expose your puppy to as many different people and life experiences as you can from seven weeks onward. Our pups ride in the truck with us when we go training and are exposed to the routine and noises of a training group from day one. Later on when they are fully immunized, they come with us when we set up gun stations and spend time behind the line watching the big dogs work, before running their puppy marks.

From seven to 12 weeks you can begin simple retrieves with your puppy, introduce your pup to duck and goose calls, as well as to live birds if not already done. House rules, the quiet command, house breaking, car rides, socializing, and crate training should be included in your pup's daily routine. The basic obedience commands, i.e. sit, down, come, no jump, and stay can also be taught. When you introduce your puppy to live birds, use small birds like pigeons. Exposing a small puppy to an angry rooster pheasant or a



Exposing puppies to holding blinds, goose blinds and decoys is all part of the socialization process



A confident puppy makes a retrieve through decoys at six weeks of age.

Other things to look for in a litter are attraction to humans, birdiness and retrieve drive, as well as confidence. What you are looking for is a pup that comes willingly to you and makes good eye contact, a pup that will chase a wing, pigeon or bumper and bring it back to you, as well as a pup that explores confi-



A seven-week-old pup retrieves a teal. Puppies can learn retrieving and recall skills at an early age.

Canada goose during a critical fear period has the potential to ruin a promising youngster.

During the 12 to 20 week period your puppy can experience tie outs, road trips, boat rides, guns (if not already done), longer retrieves and the command "hold." We introduce hold in an informal way using a stuffed toy and/or paint rollers. Continue obedience training. Enrolling your puppy in a good puppy class is an excellent idea at this point. Be cautious exposing your young puppy to gunshots particularly if it is for the first time. Young dogs should be gradually habituated to training pistols and eventually shotguns to avoid any possible development of gun shyness.

At about six to nine months formal training can begin. We formalize the recall and then move on to formal obedience, force fetch, as well as single and double retrieves in the field. Once the recall is reliable your puppy can also be introduced to upland concepts without a steadiness requirement. Handling drills can be started after the force fetch and collar conditioning are completed. Whistle sits are also formalized at this time. Your puppy is now ready for a more advanced obedience class.



Zinga at six months after a successful upland session

Right Start for Hunting, *continued*

Quartering is one of the first skills we teach a young pup after a recall has been taught. It is fun, low key and teaches them how to use their nose and the wind. A simple way to start is to plant a pigeon or chukar in a ditch or tall grass and start the puppy towards it, working into the wind. This encourages natural quartering behavior. If your pup is slow to get the hang of this, walk back and forth across the area with your puppy to encourage the correct pattern of movement. The flush at the end is a very positive motivator to a young pup, who has been properly introduced to birds. Take care to make this introduction before trying quartering with your pup, otherwise the flapping of wings when the bird takes off can startle the pup. The photo at the bottom left hand side of this page is of Zinga when she was six months old after an upland hunt training session last summer. We set up a controlled hunt situation for her where the bird was planted. Starting downwind of the bird, Zinga quartered and trailed a hen pheasant. Her training had progressed to the point where I had shooters on either side of me. She put the pheasant up and the shooters dropped it. She then made the retrieve. She was not required to be steady.

When your puppy is 9 -12 months old you can start to work on steadiness, multiple marks, and work towards simple land and water blinds. Once steadiness is progressing we introduce sending off duck platforms, out of boats, from in front of blinds, from inside of coffin blinds and pretty well any hunting situation you can think of. For example, waiting in a coffin blind for geese requires excellent obedience skills from a dog. In a typical field shoot they can be required to maintain a down stay for a considerable amount of time. They then need to remain down while you and hunters around you call in the geese, while the geese are calling and circling overhead and finally when the blind top pops up and you sit up to shoot. Nothing is more infuriating than a dog that breaks out of a blind prematurely and flares an incoming flock. Sending off a platform in front of your duck blind also requires excellent stay skills during calling, the approach of ducks and the shooting. The presence of another dog on the platform should also be trained for.

Another skill often overlooked in training is when one dog is coming in with a bird, another bird is shot and a second dog is sent out for the other bird. The first response of an untrained dog can be to try and grab the bird away from the first dog.

In the meantime, the second bird often is lost, particularly if it is a cripple. Include this type of scenario in your training so that your dog is comfortable with it in the field. Don't forget to expose your dog to motorized decoys and decoy spreads. Not just two or three decoys on the lawn, but



Exposure to hunting scenarios in training ensures productive days in the field.

up to 500 snow geese rags, or 100-200 Canada goose shells, bigfoot decoys, magnum decoys, and electronic calls. The place to do all of this is in your yard or other controlled setting with your training group, not in a field or marsh the first time you take your pup out hunting.

Preparing for the Big Day

Our rule of thumb is that a pup isn't taken on a "real" hunting trip until it is doing Senior level work. One of our recent hunts in Saskatchewan illustrates why. We were in a group of four hunters and four dogs on an island pass shooting canvasbacks. During one short period three ducks came down. Three dogs were sent, then one more duck was shot as the three original dogs were on their way back with their ducks. The fourth dog was sent to retrieve



Success! Arnie after a specklebelly shoot in Saskatchewan.

Right Start for Hunting, *continued*

the last duck. The skills required here from all the dogs included a solid recall, go where sent, steadiness, delivery to hand, an ability to deal with diversions, as well as coping with other dogs working simultaneously in the field. These are skills that a six-month-old puppy should not be expected to have.

To summarize, before going on that first trip where your puppy is expected to be a useful hunting partner, he should have been exposed to gunfire, the type of equipment you will be using and the type of birds you will be hunting. He should be reasonably steady, be able to deal with multiple marks and diversions, stop on a whistle and take basic hand signals. If these basics are in place, your trip will be the first of many enjoyable hunting experiences with your new partner.

Photo credits: *Arlene Bishop (for puppy shots); Alexis Pearson for photo of Zinga with pheasant; Anne Everett for photos of adult dogs in hunting field.*

*Many thanks to the puppies (FC-AFC, OTCH; Can FTCH-AFTCH, OTCH TNT's Stanley Steamer MH, FDHF ex UH, HRCH, GMH Doublegold Spitfire Can MH**, WCX, OD); to "Arnie" (UH, HRCH Heads Up Running Man MH**, WCX); to "Diva" (UH, HRCH, GMH GoldnGuns Dynamite Diva Can QFTR***, MH, WCX); and to Diva's daughter "Zinga" (Heads Up Red Zinger JH), by FC-AFC Glenhaven HTRS MN Baronet MH, OS, FDHF for agreeing to the photo shoots!*

About the Author:

Anne Everett lives on Vancouver Island in British Columbia. She and her husband, Bob, run hunt tests as well as UKC events and CKC field trials with their dogs. They hunt their dogs hard each fall and make an annual trip to the BC Interior and Saskatchewan to hunt ducks and geese as well as upland birds. Anne also breeds Golden Retrievers under the Heads Up prefix. Anne can be reached at www.headsupkennels.com.

Submitted by the Field Education Committee.