



# Developing a Blue-Ribbon Bird Dog

BY GEORGE HICKOX

It takes a combination of sound genetics, a proper training program and an excellent nutritional diet to develop a blue-ribbon working dog. If a dog lacks the instincts required to be a top-shelf performer in the field, training will not get him to that high performance level.

Genetics is the cornerstone in developing a dog that trains easily and brings button-popping pride to his owner. However, a genetically talented protégé that is improperly trained only brings frustration. Without adhering to a comprehensive training program, the owner will never be able to maximize the canine hopeful's genetic talent and potential.

Bird dogs are athletes. They put in a hard day crashing through briar tangles or plowing through muck in a duck marsh. Training and conditioning also place demands, both physically and mentally, on the dog. A nutritionally complete and balanced diet is required for any dog to feel good and to fuel the dog's energy level. A dog that is not in good health cannot be a good pupil and therefore is unable to give 100 percent.

Pups that boast a heritage of parents and grandparents that were healthy and proved their ability have a much higher probability of achieving success than youngsters lacking strength in their family tree. Start with a genetically talented and healthy puppy, feed the dog a top-tier food, add in a sound training program, and you and your dog are on the road to success.

## A Blueprint for Training

So now the new pup has arrived. What next? It helps to have a blueprint for the training program. A young pup is very impressionable. Early on is the time to instill confidence, a positive attitude about the world, and lay the groundwork. The period from 6 weeks to 20 weeks is the stage of development when it is critical to imprint birds, retrieving and understanding. Opportunities missed during the imprinting stage make the future working partner a slow study and perhaps a poor team player.

In order to maximize the dog's genetic talent,

we must understand how the dog learns. If we do not understand how the pup looks at the world, how he responds to various stimuli, then we will have a “pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey” training program. We will be running around in the dark and any achievements we obtain will be by blind luck. Fixing is much harder than making.

It is imperative that the genetic drive for questing be instilled in a positive manner during the imprinting stage. We introduce pups to birds at 6 weeks of age. It is critical that bird and retrieving instincts be developed no later than 12 weeks of age. This does not mean that pups lacking in bird or retrieving exposure by 12 weeks of age are destined to be couch potatoes, but it does mean you should not neglect exposing a young pup to the task he is to perform in the field.

Some of the dogs I work with in my training schools are handicapped due to lack of exposure to new surroundings, other dogs and birds. This can make training difficult, particularly if the dog is apprehensive about learning new things. The time to teach

the dog to learn is prior to 12 weeks of age. Dogs denied learning during this formative stage do not accomplish new tasks as readily.

We incorporate a program of clicker and reward training around 8 weeks of age. By rewarding specific efforts, such as going into a kennel or responding to the recall command, we are instilling a willingness to give an effort. This is the optimum stage to prevent fostering a dog that constantly seeks escape hatches to avoid compliance.

A dog is extremely place- and time-oriented. The closer the time frame between the dog's desired effort and the reward, the more likely the dog will associate this behavior with rewards. The

dog also has a strong propensity to associate a negative or positive at the place where the negative/positive occurred. Thus, a dog must be corrected or rewarded at the place and within close proximity of the time of his undesired/desired behavior.

### Variable Reinforcement

It also is important to understand variable reinforcement. Behavior that is learned through



George Hickox trains bird dogs early to help instill confidence, a positive attitude and lay the groundwork for more advanced training.

variable reinforcement is much harder to extinguish. What exactly is variable reinforcement? Let's use the analogy of a gambling addict. The addict goes to the table and loses and loses, but he keeps going back because one time he won. He thinks, “OK, I lost, but maybe next time I'll win.”

A dog that has learned he may get away with noncompliance through variable reinforcement thinks, “OK, maybe next time I'll get away with it.” To extinguish the dog's constant testing or outright disobedience often takes pressure. To avoid falling into the variable reinforcement trap, the owner must be consistent and train for excellence in behavioral responses the first time the command is given.

We all know that the dog is a pack animal, and thus will take advantage of an owner who allows the dog to not comply. Therefore, it is especially important during the imprinting stage to not teach noncompliance through variable reinforcement.

In order for our future bird dog to perform with manners and enthusiasm in the field, the proper groundwork must be laid. Lots of building blocks are taught during the imprinting stage of puppyhood. We want to instill in the pup that birds are exciting and that the field is a great place to be.

It is important that the pup learns that life is not a democracy. Our commands are not to be viewed as requests to which the canine student does not have to pay attention. Through yard training and the teaching of basic commands, the pupil learns structure and accountability. This is important for the more advanced training that will come farther down the road.

Sometimes I hear dog owners say, “I wasn't sure what to do, so I did not do any training.” A dog needs to learn early during the imprinting stage. If no learning or improper learning/behavior takes place, both the dog and the owner are behind the eight ball.

It takes genetics, training and nutrition to develop a blue-ribbon working dog. A nutritionally balanced diet that gives pups all they need to develop strong bones and gives adults the energy necessary to work is critical. *Purina Pro Plan* is as much a part of our program as yard training and fieldwork.

By understanding that a dog learns by association, is place- and time-oriented, and is a pack animal, an owner sees how the dog perceives his world. The better we understand the dog, the better we are able to read him and to maximize his genetic ability. ❏

*A professional trainer and handler of pointing and flushing dogs, George Hickox conducts two- and five-day training schools for owners and handlers. For more information on the George Hickox School of Dog Training or Hickox's training DVDs, "Training Pointing Dogs" and "Training the Upland Retriever," visit [www.georgehickox.com](http://www.georgehickox.com).*