

From the Field  
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## **A Preventive Edge on Training**

By George Hickox

Preventive measures are far better than surgery. When it comes to dog training, learned behaviors are far more difficult to extinguish or degrade than teaching new behaviors correctly from the start.

Many of the problems that I see at our training schools for owners and their dogs would never have necessitated a fix-it program if they had used some fundamental canine training principles and guidelines. Owners most often seek help for training issues that fall into three categories:

- Obedience and control training, or the lack of, is a common handicap to developing a dog that handles and finds birds with style and exhibits proper field manners. A dog that does not “whoa” upon command, does not respond to the “recall” command or ranges farther in the field than the owner wishes falls into this category.
- Improper introduction can lead to problems involving the sound of gunfire or the flush of a pheasant or quail.
- Not adequately preparing a puppy before advancing to the next grade represents a wishing and hoping strategy of canine training.

Other problems owners encounter involve the bird finding abilities of their dogs. I

hear people complain: “My dog does not seem to be able to find birds”; “My dog does not point”; and “My dog does not appear to be interested in birds.” These issues may be due to a lack of strong genetics. Not all dogs are born equal.

Obedience training for bird dogs should start with yard training. Generalization is the process of teaching a dog that he or she must respond to a command in a number of different areas, not just where the command was first learned. The benchmark for beginning the process of generalization is when a dog responds with excellence to a command in yard training. It is then time to introduce the command in the field.

A basic rule of dog training is that a dog should never be corrected if he does not perceive why the correction was given and if the dog does not fully understand the solution of preventing the correction in the future. Additionally, dogs have a strong propensity to associate positive or negative consequences with the place the correction or reward occurred. By using the benchmark of complying with excellence in yard training, the trainer ensures that the dog has a solution of avoiding a correction and will not associate the bird field as a bad place.

Unquestionably, the generalization of the commands “here” or “come” will help prevent many owners from becoming prematurely gray. It is no fun to go to the field with a dog if you are constantly afraid you will lose him or that he might be hurt. The solution is not to take a dog to the field and give the “here” command repeatedly while watching the dog disappear over the horizon. It is better to teach the dog the command in yard training and be in position to correct the dog for noncompliance if he does not respond the first time the command is given in the field.

In addition to teaching a dog to respond reliably to the “recall” command, the pointing breeds should be taught to “whoa,” and the retriever and flushing breeds should learn to “sit.” Versatile dogs that will serve duty in the duck blind or dove field as well as point upland birds should be taught both “sit” and “whoa.”

I view the teaching of obedience as a cause and effect pairing. The rule I use for rewarding and correcting is as follows: I reward the dog for giving an effort to respond in a timely manner to a learned command/cue the first time the command/cue is given. I correct the dog for a lack of effort to respond in a timely manner to a learned command/cue the first time the command/cue is given.

The optimum word is “learned.” If the dog has not learned the command, a correction should not be administered. I teach the desired behavior by identifying the behavior – I use clicker training and positive reinforcement to develop the desired behavior of responding to a command/cue.-- and rewarding before implementing avoidance training and corrections.

It is important to understand that corrections should be used to teach excellent response to a known command/cue. A dog should not be corrected for making a mistake. Mistakes are mistakes. On the other hand, a lack of effort to respond in a timely manner to a learned command/cue should be corrected if the dog is to learn that there is no option that is acceptable other than trying. Once a dog learns to avoid corrections by giving an effort, he has become a finished, polished performer. Proper genetics and training that meshes obedience training are part of the formula.

I am often asked when a trainer can stop rewarding the dog. The question should be when corrections can cease. Once corrections are no longer needed, the dog is trained. However, rewards should always be part of any successful training program.

Gun shyness and apprehensions around birds are environmentally induced. A bold, confident youngster is much less likely to develop a problem with either the sound of a gun or the flush of a bird. I begin with pen-raised quail and pigeons before bringing the pup to the field and exposing him to wild birds. A thundering pheasant or grouse taking flight can scare any pup.

When introducing a canine pupil to the gun or birds, I want to control the situation and guarantee the outcome. The same goes for introducing a dog to the check cord. I want the dog to be totally comfortable running with a check cord and feeling me on the other end of the cord before teaching “heel” or the “recall” command with a leash or check cord. It is a handicap to try to teach a dog bird manners if he is apprehensive when attached to a check cord.

It all starts with genetics. It is much easier to be a good dog trainer when working with genetically talented dogs. Strong genetics are exhibited early. Developing a young pup that has all the ingredients is fun and rewarding. The trainer’s job is to maximize the genetics of the canine hopeful. If the dog associates pressure with birds or does not have solutions to solve and prevent problems, the dog may be apprehensive in the bird field. This is a trainer problem, not a genetic problem. A dog boasting a blue ribbon heritage, developed with a realistic and sound training program and fed top-tier nutrition will develop into a dog that makes the owner proud.

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

Edited:

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