

Opening *the* Dog's Mind

BY GEORGE HICKOX

Preparing a dog to be a willing, biddable and upbeat pupil should begin early in puppyhood. A dog with a closed mind to training and new exposures is quite often a challenge. If a dog has not learned to learn, progressing the four-legged student to higher standards is difficult.

Opening the dog's mind to new learning begins in the imprinting stage of development during the first 20 weeks of life. This is the opportune time to develop good habits in the canine youngster. During the imprinting stage fewer cause-and-effect repetitions are needed to establish a strong and permanent association in the dog's mind.

A knowledgeable trainer takes advantage of this fact. Understanding that a permanent association with places, command or similar circumstance may be imprinted in the dog's mind is critical to molding behavior.

Reaching Full Potential

A dog that has been denied sundry exposures and improperly exposed to others during the critical stages of imprinting will likely never reach his full potential. A number of studies show that there are critical periods that occur during the first 20 weeks of the dog's development.

For example, the ideal time to forge positive associations with humans is from 6 to 8 weeks of age. It is unlikely a dog that has been denied positive

contact with people or dogs until the post 12-week period will develop into the ideal companion. However, studies demonstrate that dogs that have been completely isolated from people for the first seven weeks of life can still develop solid social skills if they are properly exposed from seven to 12 weeks.

The various stages of imprinting are not finite. Each pup has unique stimuli while in the whelping box and is influenced by



George Hickox teaches a pup to "whoa."



Above, a trainer teaches an English Pointer pup the “kennel” command. At right, she socializes a young dog by exposing it to new experiences.

his own genes as well as his mother’s hormones. The prenatal period is when the fetus develops in the dam’s womb. Studies indicate that an expectant mom subjected to high stress during pregnancy may whelp puppies with a decreased ability to learn.

From birth through 2 weeks of age is the neonatal period. The sensory abilities of seeing, hearing and scenting are poorly developed, thus the dam’s behavior and treatment of the pups during this period have a monumental impact.

The transitional period follows the neonatal stage. It is during the transitional stage that the pup’s awareness of the world around him begins. Stimuli received from the environment can affect the developing youngster for the rest of his life. Puppies should be regularly handled during this period.

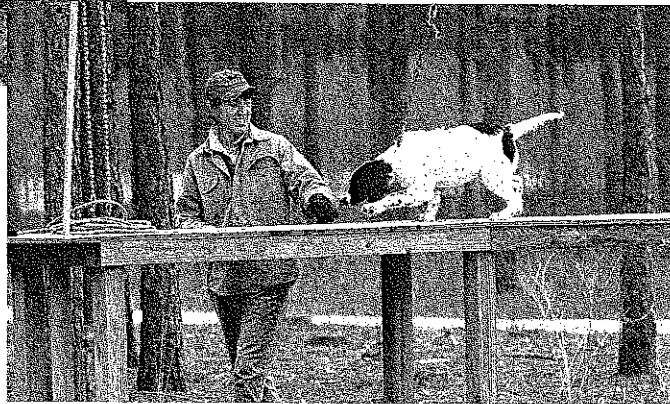
The socialization period begins at 4 weeks of age and ends at 12 weeks. Exposures to outside influences, or the lack thereof, are catalysts that sculpt the youngster’s personality. A pup denied socialization with other dogs during this stage would very likely forever interact poorly with other dogs. Dogs that are not exposed to people during the socialization stage would probably forever lack proper skills with people.

During the socialization stage the pup should be exposed to situations that the canine pupil would be exposed to down the road. Staking the dog out and introductions to horses, four-wheel-

ers, vehicles, the house, and birds should take place during the socialization period up to 12 weeks.

Introducing Birds

The ideal time to properly introduce the dog to the field and birds should take place during the socialization period. Imprinting in the dog’s mind that running through the fields dragging a short



check cord and finding birds is fun at this stage will pay huge dividends when the dog goes into more advanced training. A dog exposed to birds, new grounds and new situations will train easier than a pup denied these exposures.

During the socialization stage a fear factor stage occurs during which the pup is more inclined to view situations with an attitude that the glass is half empty rather than half full. This stage normally occurs around 8 to 10 weeks of age. A pup that is frightened during this stage may show permanent scars in new learning scenarios. If the pup associates the fear with a particular stimulus, the dog may always show fear in a similar situation.

Caution should be exercised in introducing the dog to new learning or discipline during this two-week period. To err on the side of caution, we introduce our dogs to birds after the pup is 10 weeks of age, but before 12 weeks. I prefer to keep the pup in an environment where he feels comfortable from 8 to 10 weeks of age.

After 12 weeks, we encourage the youngster to

explore independence. Down the road, the bird dog has to leave you and hunt. I want the 12-week-old youngster to gain confidence in leaving me and exploring scents and to have the freedom of running in the woods and fields. In my opinion, this would not be a preferable time to teach “heel.” A pup that has been made to stick with his owner like glue at this stage may well lack confidence in a hunting situation later on.

After the pup has been exposed to birds, we start basic obedience and expose the dog to pressure.

A dog that is exposed to pressure and yard training of basic commands such as “kennel,” “whoa” (for pointing breeds), and “here” from 12 to 16 weeks will better handle pressure and not look for escape hatches. Ultimately, he will comply better in more advanced training.

We do not teach our pointing dogs to sit. If we did, we would teach “sit” after we taught “whoa.” Because holding point, steady to wing, steady to shot, and backing are all based on the whoa command, we prefer to first teach “whoa.” For the flushing and retrieving breeds our yard commands are “kennel,” “sit,” “here,” and “heel.”

From 12 to 20 weeks we mix bird and field work with yard work. We do not let the dog blow us off nor do we spoil or baby him. We incorporate short repetitive learning sessions and stay upbeat. By paying attention to the imprinting stage that occurs during the first 20 weeks of life, we will develop a dog with an open mind that will respond positively and eagerly to training.

A professional trainer and handler of pointing and flushing dogs, George Hickox of Millerton, Pa., conducts five-day training schools for owners and their dogs. For information on the George Hickox School of Dog Training or Hickox’s two training DVDs, “Training Pointing Dogs” and “Training the Upland Retriever,” visit www.georgehickox.com.