

Holding Point

by George Hickox

The number one priority in training the pointing breeds for the hunt is to develop a dog that will HOLD POINT. Hold point does not mean that the dog flash points momentarily before taking the covey out and putting the birds to flight. Hold point does not mean pointing and then creeping or cat walking closer to the bird. Hold point means the dog locks up solid upon scenting the bird, stands staunch, does not creep, and allows the gunner to move in front and flush the bird. If the pointing breed does not hold point then it is a flushing dog by action. Flushing labs and springer spaniels do that job very well. The pointing breeds' job is to locate the feathered quarry, point it, and remain on point until the bird is put to the air.

The better the dog understands and complies with the command of "Whoa" the easier the process of teaching staunchness will be. The more point a dog genetically has and the more confident and bold he is around birds the easier teaching hold point will be. In fact the command of "Whoa" is the most important command to teach the pointing breeds for field work. If the recall command of "Here" or "Come" was never taught but the dog responded with excellence to the command "Whoa" the owner could say "Whoa", put a lead on the dog, and take him back to the vehicle. The recall command does not put any game in the bag. The command of whoa does.

To understand why the command of "Whoa" is a monumentally important tool in teaching a dog to remain staunch on scent let's review how dogs learn. Dogs learn by association. Pavlov's experiment of ringing a bell and then presenting food to the dog clearly demonstrates that dogs associate. Pavlov first rang a bell and then offered the dog food. With a number of consistent repetitions of the bell followed by the food the dog salivated when the bell was rung even though there was no serving of the food. As trainers we need to understand that with enough consistent repetitions of something new followed by something learned the new will illicit the same response as the original learned cue. For example, if a handler snapped their fingers just prior to giving the verbal command of kennel the dog would learn after some amount of consistent repetitions to go into the crate when he heard the snapping of the fingers. At this time both the finger snapping and the verbal kennel would be commands that ordered the dog to go into the crate. This is predicated on the fact that the dog understood and responded with excellence the first time the verbal command was issued. If the dog does not first understand

what the command kennel means he cannot learn that the snapping of fingers preceding the “what the heck does that mean” verbal is a command to go into his crate. To teach a dog to respond to a second cue, command, or stimulus we pair the new with the learned. The optimum word is learned.

Now let’s apply the new before the learned to teaching a dog to hold point. It is important to understand the command of “Whoa” is not taught around birds. Far too often owners give the command of “Whoa” to the canine student when the dog first smells the bird or is creeping in on the bird to a dog that does not comply to “Whoa” in the back yard with no birds involved. If the dog has not been taught what “Whoa” means and does not comply with excellence (With excellence means the dog gives a timely effort to respond to a known cue/command the first time the dog receives the cue/command.) with no birds there is zero probability a genetically possessed bird dog will comply to an unknown command. How can he succeed? The owner might as well have said to the dog “Take the keys to my car and run down to the store and pick up a six pack.” It would all be globally gook to the dog.

So we want to first teach the command of “Whoa” in the yard training phase of the curriculum. It is a simple rule: If the dog does not respond with excellence in yard training do not give the command in the field. I utilize clicker training and identification/reward training to first get the behavior of standing. When the dog stands I identify to the dog the behavior of standing will earn him a reward. I identify the desired behavior with a click and then reinforce the behavior of standing with a reward of a food treat. The steps of teaching commands are as follows:

- 1) Get the behavior
- 2) Identify the behavior with a click
- 3) Reward the behavior
- 4) Shape the behavior (Getting a high head, tail up, timely effort to respond, etc.)
- 5) Add the cue/command while the dog is offering the behavior (If I gave the command before the dog was offering the behavior the dog would not be able to comprehend what the cue/command meant. It would be another case of globally gook to the dog.)
- 6) Teach avoidance training in the yard. With avoidance training the dog learns there is a consequence to not giving an effort to respond in a timely manner to a known cue/command. I fully incorporate an e-collar introductory program in the yard training.
- 7) Generalize the command. (*Please refer to the 2011 May/June article “Generalization”*.) Generalization means that the dog gives an effort to respond in a timely manner to a know cue/command in a number of places and situations. I incorporate proofing first in the yard training before adding distractions outside of the original yard training area. Proofing means the dog responds to the cue/command with distractions. For example, I will give the command whoa and then throw a half dozen

tennis balls across the floor. I am teaching the dog that whoa means whoa. I do not first teach generalization and proofing with birds.

The low level e-collar condition (*Refer to "Electronic Training" in the 1997 Sept/Oct issue.*) that was taught to the dog in yard training now pays huge dividends in the generalization and proofing process. In my opinion there is no other tool than an e-collar that can teach a dog to comply to commands with excellence off lead. The dog should be first taught there is a solution to solve his problem and how to avoid his problem with proper e-collar conditioning in yard training. In fact this last statement applies to any type of correction and avoidance training. In avoidance training the dog learns that by offering a specific desired behavior he avoids a negative consequence associated with non-compliance.

Once the command of "Whoa" has been taught we can move forward to teaching the dog to hold point. It is imperative that there are some additional parameters in place before teaching the dog to be staunch on game. The dog should have been exposed to birds. It is a mistake that can have serious consequences, such as blinking, to teach a dog to hold point if the dog has not been allowed to quest and chase birds initially. As previously stated dogs learn by association. If a dog has not been properly exposed to scent, live birds, and flushing birds an owner is playing Russian roulette if doing formal point drills. It is far too likely the dog will associate that a bird is bad and he gets in trouble if he shows an interest in the bird. Initial bird contacts in which the dog learns birds are fun is mandatory if the object is to develop a stylish dog on point that trains easily. That said, letting a dog root out, creep, and chase birds too many times will make the steadiness process more difficult and require more pressure. I live in bird rich areas. I spend the summer training in North Dakota and the winter in Kansas. I have access to a plethora of wild birds. The best prescription is to run a dog on wild birds until his point develops. When the dog is holding point long enough for me to walk in front and flush with no formal training that is the window of opportunity to graduate to formal hold point drills. For those that do not have access to wild birds and elect not to have a professional trainer expose their dogs to birds then get good flying birds. Birds that a dog can catch and chase down will be a detriment to teaching the dog to hold point.

The dog should have been properly introduced to the gun and exhibit no apprehension with the report of a shotgun. It is far better to introduce a dog to the gun when he is excited about birds and is chasing. In addition to insuring the genetic instincts have been developed, the dog is birdie and has no apprehension around game or with the gun, the dog should be comfortable running with a check cord. The first time to put a check cord on a dog is not when he begins formal point drills.

Once the above is in place and the command of "Whoa" has been generalized bring the dog into a planted bird (I prefer to use a lock winged pigeon as my scent bird. The pigeon will be where it was originally planted and the lock winged pigeon will not run off.) *Please refer to*

the 2007 Jan/Feb article "Dog, Meet Birds". The dog should be brought in perpendicular to the scent cone. This means downwind of the scent bird. Once the dog indicates the scent the command of "Whoa" is given. This is the new before the learned. The learned is the generalized command of "Whoa". The new (because it is the first time the scent has been paired with a command) is the scent. If the dog really understands the command of "Whoa" he will know any correction for not stopping was because he did not "Whoa" and not because he got closer to the bird. It is really important that the dog does not perceive the bird is the cause of a negative. The first corrections are intended to help the dog understand what I expect of him. I will try to help him stand by apply light pressure with the check cord when he moves. Think of the initial cause (his moving) and the effect (the jerk of the check cord) as helping the dog understand. It is a mistake to turn the dog ass over tea kettle when first doing the point drills. I refer to the initial jerks as catching a six inch fish not a ten pound bass. There is no e-collar used at this stage.

It is beneficial if two additional helpers can be employed. The helpers are out in front of the dog, upwind of the plant. Two or three remote bird launchers are placed ten to fifteen yards upwind of the planted pigeon. I never place my scent bird in a launcher. The helpers walk around kicking in a mock effort to flush a bird. The dog is learning that he must remain staunch even though there is action in front. Then I launch a bird. I will run with the dog for a few yards while holding onto the check cord. This way the dog is not off to the races and chasing a bird to the far horizon. I then bring the dog back into the scent cone and have him reestablish point and repeat the procedure. By always having more than one launcher the dog will expect there will be another flush. This will help him remain staunch. The pigeons in the launcher can be tethered with a long lightweight cord. The bird will be able to fly but can be reloaded in the launcher for another repetition. This can save a lot of dollars.

Once the dog is reliably holding point in this drill I plant a bird and cut the dog loose. He should locate the plant and hold point until I arrive at the scene. If he moves I will tickle him with the stimulation that I established in the initial collar conditioning in yard training. If the dog requires constant correct in the field then I suggest moving him back to the controlled drills before embarking on a program of constant corrections in the field. If he keeps failing the culprit could very well be not enough repetitions were done. Usually pick more repetitions than more punishment as a prescription. Training will be more fun for the dog and you.