

Getting Better By The Handfuls



Whether seeking training for your gun dog or your shotgunning stroke, group workshops offer advantages that even the best individual instruction cannot match.

By Randy Lawrence

We of the gun dog faithful come to George Hickox in search of a better way. We show up with our eager, fragile selves on one end of a supple check cord, our idea of a shooting dog prospect drooling and dancing on the other. Some of us have visions of emerging from one of Hickox' four-day seminars with a hot start toward a polished performer. Others are looking for a different kind of a relationship with a family dog they'd like to take into the field. Still others just want the dog to come when it's called and hold steady in the presence of game birds.

During a recent class hosted on the groomed grounds of the bustling Hill 'n' Dale Club, a first-rate sporting clays and bird shooting destination near Medina, Ohio, a visitor was

struck by the similarities between a well-run class in dog handling and group wingshooting instruction. If students check their egos at the door, listen attentively with an open mind, and engage all they can muster in every activity, they're going to be better by the weekend's close.

Of course, "better" is personal. It's subjective. Mostly, though, what students are after is far more than information. Information, they can find. What nearly all of us want most are new practices that will make a difference in our doing.

Michigan State University football coach Mark Dantonio recently told reporters that his Spartans' success over the past few seasons puts him at an advantage in recruiting new players as well as in closing ranks in his own locker room. "I'm not selling 'hope,'" Dantonio deadpanned, referring to coach-

ing rivals who have only “promise” and “potential” to sell high-school hot shots, alumni, and school administration. “I’m selling results.”

“Hope,” most of us can manage on our own. But to paraphrase that hoary saw, “Hope in one hand, pour gunpowder in the other. See which one fills faster.” We all want handfuls of “better” whenever we pay for a lesson.

“Better” is Hickox’ stock in trade, first in training spaniels, retrievers, and pointing dogs and now war and law-enforcement animals in service around the globe. Few trainers have the breadth and depth of his background or the kinds of pelts he can display on the wall as a trainer and breeder of world-class gun dogs or as a skilled trainer of people—business execs, work-at-home-moms, elite military personnel, field trailers, weekend bird shooters. Any earnest student who attends a George Hickox Bird Dog Training School clinic comes away with practices that get results.

Results are what wingshooting’s best teaching pros are peddling, too. Group workshops or weekend schools offer advantages that even the best individual instruction cannot match.

First, there’s the shared cost. One coach can help a number of learners at a time with tuition covering teaching, materials, and equipment use split between the students. Obviously, that’s how we’ve forever done business in academia; it’s also how we’ve economically and, under the best circumstances, effectively taught leisure recreation skills.

The second advantage is interval learning. When we take a group lesson in gunning sporting clays, we have hands-on learning and personal coaching when it’s our time in the shooting cage. Just as importantly, the active learner has reflective time between his turns at the trigger. We can process. We can review. Research long ago proved that interval, or staggered, learning that engages the whole learner has been the most effective learning model for most people. It is incremental. It can be geared to the individual’s own progress and learning rhythms. Because the student is not constantly under the brighter learning heat lamp of one-on-one interaction, he stays longer in learning mode.

We also learn by watching, by observing other students at work. One of the most underrated aspects of gun dog

training is what legendary trainer/clinician Delmar Smith of Big Cabin, Oklahoma, called “the chain gang,” a method of lining dogs out where they could securely watch and listen as their classmates were put through their paces. Whistles blow, birds flush, and blank guns crack, the whole program laid out before an animated corps of excited chain gang dogs.

Over and over we’ve seen the chain gang break timid dogs out of their shell. Dogs stuck on the learning curve finally connect the dots. Some even pick up on retrieving by watching repeated fetches by other dogs earn a reward upon delivery.

Well-managed group lessons provide a virtual chain gang for wingshooting students. An active learner, when he’s not in the box, stays with the lesson, watching the successes and struggles of others. We can learn from comments, kudos, or corrections the coach makes on another student’s stroke. We can capitalize on their gains by adapting good practices to our own method.

The caveats lurking through all of this are “active learner” and “well-managed group lessons.” As mentioned earlier, active learners check their egos at their door. In a Hickox workshop, they resist comparing their dog or progress with their classmates’. Learning in a group isn’t a competition; it’s a communal effort.

Every time another man or woman brings a dog to the line, active learners are alert for ways they can better com-

municate with their own dog, first by becoming more proficient at reading canine behavior and second by offering crisper, more cogent cues that support what they are trying to get the dog to do. They are looking for any excuse to celebrate and build on improvement, encouraged by a small picture-success that can be broadened on a bigger canvas later. Active learners get pumped up when a classmate’s dog has a breakthrough, see setbacks as opportunity, are eager to offer quiet, appropriate congratulations or a heartfelt “hang in there” as needed.

Active learners in a wingshooting class aren’t there to show off (mask?) their skill set or to measure their progress alongside other students’. They aren’t off to one side, chatting with classmates, fussing with their gear, drifting in and out of the teachable moment. Neither, certainly at first, do they base their every sense of progress simply on whether or not the target breaks. The focus is on process, investing in sound fundamental practices that can yield dividends and broader wingshooting applications with every new target chance.

Human nature is often at odds with our active learner model. We have misplaced notions of pride, and, oh by the way, a certain competitive bent that is not unknown to those who shoot for score. That’s where our other caveat, the one about “well-managed group lessons,” comes into play.

The top teaching pros are the guy in the old vaudeville act, setting chi-



NSCA Level III instructor and Jacksonville University varsity shooting team coach, David Dobson conducts a group lesson at Vernon National Shooting Preserve in New York.



This German shorthair pointer named Grace holds point against a cautionary half-hitch applied to her flank.

na plates spinning on dozens of spindly poles, dashing from one to the next, expertly keeping all in rotation. Great teachers seem to be everywhere at once, keeping all students in the best possible place, the most advantageous rotation.

They do this by approaching every session as service. They are at the head of the class not to impress or preen but to help those who've engaged their expertise by being tireless, intuitive observers. When George Hickox starts one of his seminars, he gathers intelligence. He watches people with their dogs. He listens to what they say (and sometimes more importantly, what they don't say) about their dogs' training background, about their own interests and goals. He does his best to disarm the arrogant, bolster the backward, and keep the group gathered and on task.

Unlike the wingshooting instructor who, beyond an absolute regimen of safety, doesn't have to "read" a student's shotgun, Hickox not only has to

monitor his human students, but his canine as well. Each one of the thousands of dogs that have passed through his hands for more than 40 years trots in toting baggage. It's up to Hickox to help handlers recognize and jettison whatever is plaguing their dogs while capitalizing on genetic and/or learned background useful to shaping a well-tempered companion shooting dog.

As Hickox often says, students are not paying him for the countless stakes winners, the national champions, the working dogs that guide on marshes, plantations, and prairies across this continent, the law-enforcement dogs that save lives and keep the peace, the canine warriors that soldier on under the most challenging life-or-death scenarios. "You're paying me for the failures," Hickox says quietly. "For the mistakes. The things that went wrong. The errors I've made and seen made and learned from. Because of that, I can help you solve some problems, but more importantly, head off a whole lot more."

Like MSU's Dantonio, Hickox understands that "hope" has a shelf life; sooner or later the proof comes in the pudding. Only well-bedded "results" attract new students, keep others coming back for more learning.

The pitfalls in group instruction of

any kind can usually be traced to bad leadership. Great teachers are all in all the time school is in session. They bring not only experience and poised expertise but a palpable, almost evangelical joy in a thing done right. Great teachers, like all great leaders, are superior communicators with a strong sense of self without being self-centered. They are not in love with their own voice, their own skills, their many accomplishments. The learning time is never about them, only about what their students can tell and show them for their teacher to help them.

Great teaching leaders are flexible, resourceful. They have a practiced peripheral awareness, meaning they can sense when one of those spinning plates starts to lose momentum. They are clear about what students should be doing when others are taking a turn and can bring learners back into the fold deftly, without distraction or making the wayward feel self-conscious.

Great group leaders have a supreme sense of Enough. They know when to push and when to let up. In wingshooting instruction, no matter what the teacher thinks a student should be able to manage, it comes down to observation. If a learner is overmatched by a particular target angle, the great teacher recognizes when to help a student keep



George Hickox rewards a Brittany named Connor for volunteering to go into the travel crate, the first step in shaping obedience with clicker training and collar conditioning.

pressing and, just as importantly, when to ease individuals back to a place where their skill set can succeed. Meanwhile, the rest of the plates in the room have to be kept spinning; top coaches never stop helping the group understand why successful practice in one place can translate into success if correctly applied elsewhere.

Often that requires a refined sense of what educators call “wait time,” meaning the coach can shut up long enough to give students sufficient quiet time to process a solution. Professional coaches are forever guiding students into making connections, drawing conclusions, seeing, feeling, and recognizing progress so they can be alive to it later when bigger challenges loom.

Unfortunately, there is a coarsening to the coaching of many veteran educators. The good news is that they’ve seen so much. The bad news is they’ve seen so much. For some, the “been there, done that” translates into a jaded, almost cynical management style. Corners are cut. It becomes easier to tell or show in the moment rather than allow for discovery or process. Learning is muscled rather than finessed, devolving into a simple exchange of money for an experience that smacks of nothing more than that notoriously oldest of professions.

Our top tier of wingshooting instructors love what they do. They keep their delivery fresh by constantly pushing their own learning envelope. They are dedicated to understanding more, more, more—from vision and hearing to psychology and kinesiology, from the finer points of gun fitting to how proper nutrition contributes to shooting success. They are not afraid to get excited with a student who hits a progress marker, never fail to brag on a student’s effort and tenacity to get better, constantly deferring the credit to the learner and

away from themselves. Under it all, they always convey their own love of the game, never letting students lose track of the notion that shooting (at) flying targets is meant to be F-U-N.

One of the many reasons to study with Hickox is to watch his hands on a dog. They are as nuanced as those of a safe cracker or card shark, supple and sophisticated in their knowing. One afternoon at Hill ‘n’ Dale, he took over the check cord on the high-wire act of a young pointer, a dog Hickox had bred and placed with a long-time student and veteran of six schools. The dog moved into the wind, making game on a planted quail. With each cast, her puppy foolishness seemed to meld into predator resolve.

The pointer froze, arrested in bird scent. Hickox moved silently down the check cord. He steadied the dog with his hands, bracing her into scent, hardening her resolve. The dog seemed almost to swell with confidence under Hickox’ handling and when the bird finally flushed stood tall and solid in the trance of what her breeding would not let her deny. On the release, she wagged and wriggled as Hickox reeled her in, as if to say, “Wasn’t that amazing? Ain’t I somethin’? Let’s do another one.”

She was almost to him when Hickox turned to me, grinned, and winked. “Wasn’t that amazing?” he seemed to say. “Ain’t this somethin’?” 

For information on George Hickox’ sporting dog training clinics, contact (412) 773-7310; www.georgehickox.com.

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