

## A Doggone Good Way To Learn

**T**here is much to envy about George Hickox. For more than 20 years, he's been the "it" guy in bringing better gun dog training methods to the boot-leather bird hunter. Off his lead or from his breeding program, pedigrees are filled with national champions, high-point dogs, and bird dog hall of fame recipients that have elite hunting experiences on virtually every species of game bird on this continent. His writing byline is a fixture in wingshooting publications. If there's a television program about training or hunting with gun dogs, Hickox has been featured at one time or another.

Ask him of what he's proudest in his career and he won't hesitate. It is his consulting and training with canine military and law-enforcement units in service around the globe. At no time do Hickox' eyes burn with more intensity than when he honors brave servicemen and women and their rugged Malinois and shepherd war dogs.

He's also one helluva whistler. Hickox' whistle isn't human. It comes out of nowhere and screams everywhere, just the ticket for directing distant dogs on the tundra of Alaska, cutting through a Kansas prairie gale, slicing deep into the piney woods of Georgia, or bringing to order a half-dozen nervous gun dog owners scattered in a training field, trying hard to Do Things George's Way during one of Hickox' popular four-day training seminars.

Over here is a falconer, come all the way to Ohio from the highlands of New Mexico with her eager young shorthair. She's never even hunted with a bird dog before but sees the triad of falcon, falconer, and pointing dog as the highest expression of her arcane sport.

Next to her is a quiet gentleman with a wire-haired pointer, a veteran of three other Hickox clinics. He marks each one as a critical part of his ongoing gun dog trainer/handler education.

There's a serviceman whose stoic weimaraner, a hulk the color of gun metal, is to be a sometimes hunter as well as full-time jogging companion and creep-deterrent for the soldier's wife during long deployments. A leggy English setter quivers alongside an equally leggy and eager Michigan grouse hunter come to learn better ways to harness the field trial rocket fuel coursing the veins of that white and black-ticked dynamo.

Finally, there's the Labrador and the lady. The lady is nervous. She and her husband have recently purchased the dog as a "finished" retriever, one educated to sit on the flush or flight of game, mark through the shot and bird fall, and take whistle and gesture commands to find and retrieve. She was not present when the dog was demonstrated before the purchase. Privately, she is still a little bit in sticker shock about the money she and her husband traded for this new partner in their shooting lives.

The Labrador is nervous, too, ears down, tail wagging uncertainly. He and his lady are like two youngsters at their first formal dance. One of them's mother made him take a crash course at Arthur Murray; the other likes music and has watched a night or two of *Dancing With The Stars*. Both are mightily afraid of messing up.

Enter George Hickox, choreographer and orchestra leader



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for the weekend. He asks the big dog to come with him. The dog goes because he knows he must, head down, tail tucked. The lady stands back, shifting from foot to foot, her arms wrapped tightly around herself. Hickox turns and asks what commands have been used to work this dog. The lady doesn't know.

From Hickox' ubiquitous orange mesh shoulder bag comes a pigeon. He locks the wings so the bird can be tossed without taking flight. The dog perks a bit as Hickox arches the pigeon underhanded into the short grass, bends slightly, and quietly speaks the dog's name.

The Lab starts fast, then hesitates, looking back over his shoulder a few times. Hickox stands quietly. The lady studies the toes of her boots.

The retriever lopes toward the bird rocking on the newly mown grass. From 50 yards away, it's as if one can feel the dog's mind spin. So much that's new. So far away from where he was bred and raised and trained, so different from the people who've handled him so far.

But his schooling holds. Almost resignedly, the rangy black dog picks up the bird and trots back to Hickox, sits to present the pigeon, then is heeled around to mark another toss.

By the third throw the Lab forgets himself. Hickox whistles him to a stop. The dog settles into an obedient sit, waiting for the next command. He goes out more confidently, returns more happily, responds with a bit of snap and dash. When Hickox finally walks the Labrador back to where the lady and her classmates have been waiting, the dog's head and tail are up. He relaxes while Hickox talks quietly about the general course of study the lady and her Labrador will follow during the next several days, about what she needs to do to "get with" her new companion. Hickox' hand strays over to the dog's head, stroking those silky ears. If a dog could breathe a sigh of relief, that's what the Lab does, as if to say, "It's gonna be alright. This guy speaks Retriever."

He does. And Gordon setter, German shorthair, Italian Spinone, American water spaniel, French Brittany, Irish setter,

Nova Scotia duck toller, and English Cocker.

He also is fluent in Southern Redneck, Tweedy Northern Industrialist, Suburban Homemaker, American Leatherneck, Yankee Alder Dodger, Desert Cactus Spine Puller, even Ink-Stained Self-Inflating Journalist. Hickox can do all this because he has been there, done that, thought about it, then has gone back and done it better—all the while trying to figure out how to help dogs and people make connections.

Visit a George Hickox seminar on day one. Most of the dogs and handlers are all out of rhythm. One's doing the tango, his partner the Dougie; over there a doggie fox trotter is trying to make sense of her handler's electric slide.

Hickox is everywhere—teaching, preaching, cajoling, scolding, marking every improvement no matter how small. By day four, in the vast majority of cases there's a clear sense between each dog 'n' handler couple about who's leading, the tune that's being played, and how to begin and end together, maybe even with a skosh of style and class and efficiency for good measure (412-773-7310; [www.george-hickox.com](http://www.george-hickox.com) for info on training seminars hosted nationwide, instructional DVDs for the pointing and retrieving breeds, and guided bird hunting opportunities in Kansas and North Dakota).

Group instruction in any endeavor is tough duty. When the group lesson became the mainstream delivery method of wingshooting education in this country, even some of our top coaches struggled. For starters, they committed the most egregious sins of our least effective public school teachers—they talked too much, trusted too little, gravitated toward students showing the most progress, and made it all about themselves, from the lesson to the credit for improvement.

With shotgunning instruction, as in gun dog training, it's tempting for teachers to want to tell the class everything up front, especially for those in love with their own voices, those insecure enough to want to establish themselves as the most knowledgeable person in the room. Far more effective are the instructors who gather their class, have them shoot some rudimentary birds, stay quiet other than safety or recoil comfort reminders—all the time making a plan: What's the most important information the group needs for overall improvement? Which students are the most alike, or most different, in terms of skill set and need? What's the first thing we need to do together to get better?

It's what Hickox does when he has handlers share their dogs' age and training background, then invites those with the least experience to let him expose their partners to a released or wing-clipped pigeon. It's what he was up to with the big Labrador. All of that's student-centered, not method-centered. After Hickox sees where his students are, he can plan the best strategies for bringing instruction to *that* place to move each dog, man, and woman on the path to where he or she wants or needs to go.

George Hickox' time is the same as Mike Mohr's, Pat Lieske's, Gil or Vicki Ash's, Bobby Fowler's, Dan Carlisle's, Dave Dobson's—extremely valuable. There are obvious advantages to a one-on-one lesson, but to tie up a top-shelf tutor is a pricey proposition. The cost savings to the student enrolled in a small group can be translated into additional instruction, cartridges, range time, entry fees. Besides, the best of our teaching pros know how to make a group lesson *feel* like one-on-one. They know how many students they can effectively teach at one time. They are organized and manage time well. They do not let one gifted student, or one supremely challenged one, affect the entire class's progress. They can multi-task, keep track of everyone's name (an extremely underrated quality), and come to the lesson with en-

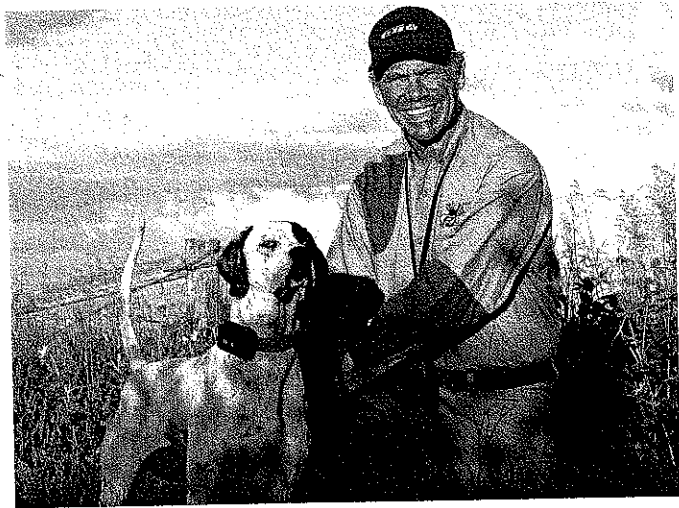


Photo courtesy of Bill Buckley


**George Hickox's training seminars and guided bird hunts teach shooters how to develop efficient, happy, and enjoyable bird dog hunting partners.**

ergy, with purpose. They start and end the lesson on time. If they shoot with their students, they do so with a specific purpose in mind, and, if I may invoke a personal peeve, come with shells of their own to illustrate a point.

Elite teaching pros outwork every student in the class. They want all the students to feel as if they got good value for their tuition and end their instruction with individual practice plans for each student's improvement. They may include an exercise in goal setting and a realistic appraisal of what each enrollee needs to do to have a shot at reaching those benchmarks. Best of all, they invite students to stay in touch, not just with the teacher but maybe also with other attendees as a way to support the learning begun during the formal sessions.

The great team sports coaches are the absolute masters of effective group instruction. The best and brightest among them honor and grow the individual while leading the entire team toward success. Jim Steen, recently retired swimming and diving coach at Gambier, Ohio's, Kenyon College, has since 1980 overseen what is unquestionably the most dominating run by any collegiate athletic program: 50 national titles, including 31 consecutive national team titles for the Lords' men, 23 for the Lady Lords. In a recent *Columbus Dispatch* column by Mike Arace, Steen's approach is described as "the liberal arts methodology of using provocation and inspiration as pathways to understanding."

Invited to give the 2011 commencement address at Kenyon, Coach Steen told newly minted graduates, "Imparting a body of knowledge [is] less central to the process of learning than imbuing a sense of self-discovery. Fundamentals...are important, but a greater concern is challenging someone to decide what it is they want to do and why, and how one is going to get from point A to B without losing oneself in the process."

Whether it's a Labrador retriever looking for leadership or a wingshooter seeking a sustainable stroke to the target, group instruction led by a maladroit pedagogue is just whistling in the dark. Headed up instead by a thoughtful adroit professional at making connections, it's a doggone good way to learn. 

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