



Hunting in Range

At the top of my most frequently asked questions list is: “How can I get my dog to hunt in range?” A close second comes from aspiring puppy owners: “How big do your dogs run?”

Here I’ll impart some “tricks of the trade” for getting your dog to hunt for you rather than you having to hunt for it. I’ll also explore a few myths regarding big-running dogs.

In my training schools, workshops and previous columns I have stressed the importance of genetics. Genetics plus training plus nutrition equal a bragging-rights shooting dog. I encourage everyone to buy a dog with the best genetics they can find (or afford). For me, one indication of good genetics is an untrained dog that hunts with wild abandon, running with an almost maniacal purpose of finding birds. It’s easier to reel in a dog than cast it out, and a dog that doesn’t venture too far may actually lack hunting desire and drive.

For the walking hunter, I also advise looking for certain characteristics in a pup’s family tree. Just as a fine shotgun should fit the individual, so should a dog’s genes complement the hunter’s objective. Look for a pup from parents that are bid-dable and demonstrate a strong desire to please. I advocate buying a pup from a line with strong field-trial credentials—but from the type of field trial compatible with your style of hunting. Accordingly, I would advise walking gunners to stay away from a pointing dog with a blue-ribbon background in endurance or free-for-all trialing. These dogs are no doubt great animals but may have more independence and game-seeking desire than you want to try harnessing. I’ve had tremendous success with pups from the shooting-dog trial circuit as well as from the grouse and woodcock wild-bird field trial game. A pup from shooting-dog or grouse/woodcock trial stock will normally have the genes to be a good hunting com-

panion. Of course, keep in mind that there is no such thing as a self-trained dog that will meet the high standards of a gentleman’s shooting dog. You must add the proper dash of training spices to the stock.

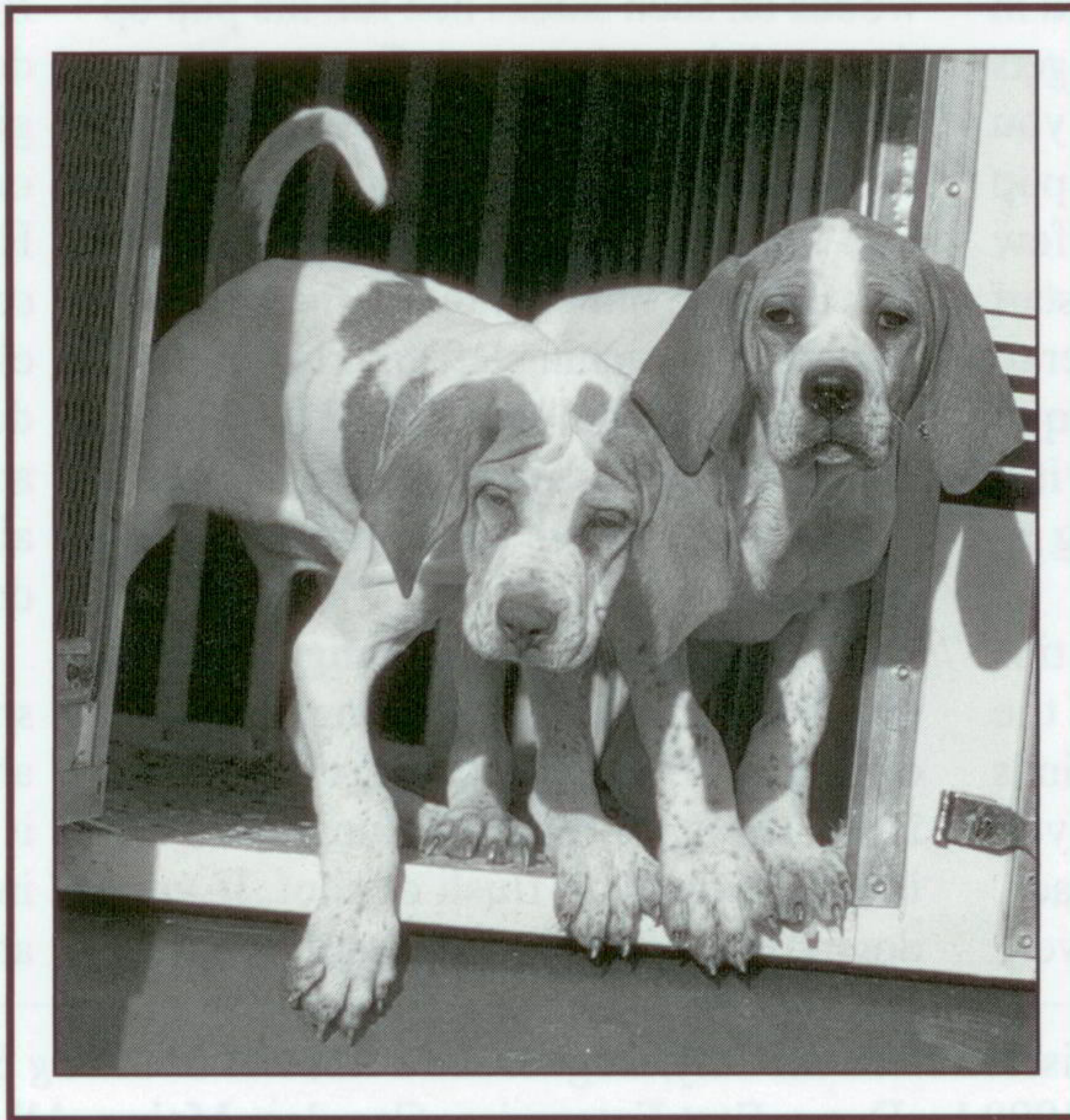
The English springer spaniel trial circuit is an effective proving ground for superior hunting genetics and trainability. In the springer game, in order to attain field champion status, a dog must hunt

turn the pup loose for solo adventures, as aggressive dogs allowed to run free often become too bold and feel they no longer need their masters.

Assuming you start with good genetics, range is mostly a product of training—or lack thereof. In the beginning, when you are developing the hunting instinct and introducing the pup to birds, letting the dog find lots of birds in a small area will produce a close-worker. I like to start pups, no matter what breed, on good-flying pen-raised quail. If I’m trying to develop a closer-working gundog, I’ll release a bunch of quail from the recall pen in a small hedgerow, apple orchard or grass patch about half the size of a football field. The pup will find lots of birds and continue hunting the relatively confined area because it’s enjoying success. When a young dog does not find birds it starts questing farther and farther out. If your objective is to create a big-running dog, plant fewer birds at greater distances. The young dog will soon learn it has to strike out if it’s going to find anything.

When you take your pup for walks in the woods, expose the adolescent to new areas. And don’t constantly talk to the pup if you prefer a close worker. Handlers who engage in nonstop encouragement (“Hunt ’em up, find the bird, c’mon boy, come around, over here, where’s the bird?”) may do so with the intent of keeping the dog close—however, the litany actually enables the dog to range farther out, always knowing the whereabouts of the handler and thus not feeling it necessary to check back. When you do say something, it should have meaning and the dog will respond better.

A word of caution: You may have heard the advice to occasionally hide on your youngster in the woods. The theory is that because the pup is not yet secure, it will stay closer to you once it becomes afraid of being alone. Well, it probably will. However, this ploy will not build hunting desire,



In order to end up with a bragging-rights shooting dog, the hunter must start with proper genetics.

in gun range, prove a superior marker of downed game, be steady to flush and retrieve to hand.

Choosing one of the retrieving breeds from field-trial or hunt-test ancestry (North American Hunting Retriever Association) will also reduce your chances of acquiring a dud. If versatile dogs are your passion, you would do well to buy a pup from parents that have earned their titles.

Once you have the pup, be sure to spend a lot of time with it, particularly during the first few months. Get to know the youngster and let it get to know and trust you. Without this one-on-one time, your pup may become independent, caring not where you are once you get afield. If you prefer a close-working dog, don’t

Hunting in Range

but the pup look for solo ad entries as aggressive dogs allowed to run the often become too bold and feel they no longer need their masters.

Assuming you start with good genetics, range is mostly a product of training—or lack thereof. In the beginning, when you are developing the hunting instinct and introducing the pup to birds,

confidence or trust—rather timidity.

A good alternative is to carry a bird in your coat or game bag. When the pup gets too far, toss the bird out in front of you without the dog seeing it. When the pup returns it will find the bird. After a few repetitions of this game, the pup will start catching on that birds are found closer to you. This positive training technique encourages the dog to check back without undermining confidence or setting up a training “fight.”

In March/April I offered training tips on effective patterning and use of the wind, which will result in more bird finds as well as more desirable range. If you live in an area ribboned with tote roads, plant birds alternately right and left every

20 yards—about 10 or 15 yards into the woods on each side. Then run the pup up the road, into the wind. Encourage the young dog to get into the cover to find each pot of gold. You may have to walk into the cover with the pup on the first few outings, but eventually the dog will learn that by running left and right instead of straight out and back it will find birds. This “windshield-wiper” pattern will result in few holes where a bird might escape detection.

A dog hunting out of range is often out of control. If it is a pointing dog, quite often it will not hold point reliably. If it is a flushing or retrieving dog, odds are it is not steady to flush or shot. If your dog is out of control in the yard, it's unre-

alistic to think it will be in control in the field. Make control a lifestyle for your dog. Demand the pup waits before you give the release command for it to come out of the kennel. Make the dog Whoa, Hup or Sit before eating dinner. Collar condition the dog as outlined in my article in September/October '97. Walk the dog at heel and stop it before releasing it at home and in the field. Often a remedial yard-training session—or five—will do wonders to establish control.

The proper training of a bragging-rights shooting dog begins with good genetics and includes plenty of time and effort. But it will all be worth it when you're holding that first hard-earned bird in one hand and petting your dog with the other. ✈

Reprinted by permission from the July/August 1998 issue of *Shooting Sportsman Magazine*.

Copyright ©1998 by Down East Enterprise, Camden, Maine. All rights reserved.