

Teaching Backing

In the world of fine pointing dogs, a gentleman's shooting dog is expected to back, or honor, the point of its brace-mates. A dog that fails to back another's point and rushes in to bust a bird or steal a point is the equivalent of a street urchin eating caviar with his fingers at a black-tie affair. Many a re-invite has been for-

(March/April '99) will give you the necessary tools for teaching backing.

Now sometimes hunters get "lucky"—although I believe this is more often the result of a well-thought-out decision—in that a pup may boast strong genetics to be a natural backer. Quite often a blue-ribbon youngster will back from the get-

will be approaching. In addition I place two or three remote bird launchers with quail, chukars, pigeons or pheasants in the area of the autobacker.

In the early stages of teaching backing, I work the dog with a 20- to 30-foot check cord. (I'm presuming that when the dog was younger it ran free dragging a cord and therefore is comfortable with one. If to this point the cord has been associated only with "Heel" or "Here," using it may make the dog apprehensive and prevent it from casting out in the field. A lot of training is based on a building-block concept, and it is important to recognize the effect of early lessons on future teaching.) I begin by walking the dog into the field in the direction we'll be traveling—with the

wind at our backs. (This is a visual, not a scenting, exercise.) I also incorporate a quartering, or patterning, drill into the training. If we're traveling from north to south, I'll pattern the dog east-and-west. It is best not to do a patterning or backing drill in waist-high cover, and for this reason I prefer using a field with cover eight to 12 inches high. This way the

dog can run easily, the check cord will not tangle and the dog will be able to see the silhouette when it pops up.

Before allowing the dog to cast out, I "Whoa" it to both reinforce that command and establish control. I then release the dog with a tap or a verbal or whistle command. When the dog is on the right side, I'll give two short tweets on the whistle followed by a quick tug on the check cord. The dog should reverse directions to run across in front of me. When the dog reaches the end of the check cord on the left side, I again tweet the whistle and jerk the cord. The dog should reverse direction and cross again. I continue this as we progress down the field.

Over the course of its training, the dog will repeat this exercise enough times



An autobacker (above, right) can be used to train for one of the prettiest sights in all of dogdom: a pointer backing its brace-mate.

feited due to an ill-mannered pointing dog that refused to back.

Teaching your dog to back is easy. Unlike some other training exercises, this one doesn't take thousands of birds, hundreds of acres of property or unlimited time. The investment in effort and money is minimal once the initial groundwork is complete.

The prerequisites for teaching backing are that the dog is birdy and knows the "Whoa" command. As I've mentioned in the past, I'm an advocate of using low-level electronic stimulation. I strongly recommend that a dog learn how to turn off and avoid stimulation through proper conditioning (see "Electronic Training," Sept/Oct '97) before using the collar for more-advanced teaching. Although the e-collar is certainly not mandatory for teaching backing, it can definitely make the job easier. In May/June I covered teaching "Whoa." Reviewing that article along with "Right Time, Right Place, Right Start"



go or shortly after its first exposure to birds. But even if your dog is not a natural backer, it's no big deal. A dachshund can be taught to stop at the sight of another dog standing still.

Once your dog is reliable with "Whoa," knows that the field is its office and its job is to find birds, and performs with confidence, you are ready to begin work. As Pavlov proved, dogs readily learn through association, and learning backing is no different.

For this exercise I use a remote autobacker, which is a dog silhouette that pops up and down when signals are sent from a hand-held transmitter. I place the autobacker in a field or hedgerow in the down position (so the dog is unable to see it) and downwind from the direction the dog

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that it will become conditioned to turn on the whistle, which makes tugging on the check cord no longer necessary. Repetition and consistency are what training is all about, as the object is to condition a dog to respond in a constant and confident manner to specific cues. These cues may be touch, sound, scent or, as in the case of backing, sight.

I'll let the dog make several (the exact number is not important) back-and-forth casts, then when it is in position to see the autobacker, I'll press the button to pop up the silhouette. As soon as the dog sees the silhouette, I'll command "Whoa." If the dog moves from the spot where it was when told to "Whoa," I'll *unemotionally* pick it up and stand it back at the original spot. I treat these early efforts as "show pup" exercises, in which I'm showing the dog what I expect of it. I don't harshly and unfairly correct the dog for something it hasn't learned how to do. As this is the first time the dog has seen the autobacker, it may be curious, confused or even skittish. Not until the dog has stopped either when the autobacker pops up and I've given my initial "Whoa" or when it's been set back at the original spot do I release a bird.

If you have trained your dog to be steady to wing, it should remain staunch when the bird goes up. If the dog is not steady to wing, it will likely lunge and pursue the bird. Obviously, if the dog is not steady, use only one launcher, as you don't want the dog getting into a loaded trap and having a bird launched in its face. Also remember that now is *not* the time to introduce a dog to being steady. Training should be done one step at a

time (remember those building blocks), and now you are teaching backing. Therefore, let the unsteady dog take off after the flier—unless, of course, it *was* trained to be steady and is simply disobeying, at which point it should be corrected. It is for these reasons that I gener-

THE LONG & SHORT OF IT

When teaching backing, it's also important to train your dog to back all kinds of pointers—whether they have long tails or short, brown coats or white.

This hit home like a bomb while I was making a video on putting the polish on pointing dogs. While filming the segment on backing, the plan was to use my English setter Laddie to back a friend's shorthair, Lynette. Well, wouldn't you know it that as the camera was rolling, Lynette went on point, Laddie came racing around the corner, and with a disinterested glance and never breaking stride, the setter raced right past the shorthair.

After recovering my senses, I realized what had happened. All the pointing dogs in my kennel are primarily white and my autobacker is white. Lynette is brown. Laddie had never seen a brown dog on point and thus made no connection between the shorthair and backing.

The bottom line is that dogs really are creatures of habit and that training is all association.

Oh, and Laddie now backs brown, short-tailed dogs —G.H.

ally don't teach formal backing until a dog is steady to wing & shot.

This is straight Pavlovian pre-cue/cue. We are using the power of positive association. The autobacker popping up is the pre-cue. Once the silhouette is visible, we issue the previously taught cue, or command "Whoa," meaning stop. With enough repetitions of the backer popping up and the dog hearing "Whoa," eventually the dog will stop upon seeing the backer alone, simply anticipating the "Whoa" command. Now the dog has been *trained* to back, which is different than merely having the genetic instinct to do so.

If a bird is always launched after the backer pops up, the dog will associate the silhouette of a standing dog with birds. The expectation of birds is what puts style into the backing dog. If the dog is steady to wing, additional birds can be launched at random to keep the dog "looking good."

The reason I use an autobacker at the outset is because it never breaks point, is always where I want it, and it allows me to devote my full attention to the dog. Once the dog is performing reliably with the autobacker, I'll progress to using a live model. Obviously, the lead dog should be one that reliably holds point, and I prefer using a seasoned dog that won't become nervous should I have to pick up the backing student.

A dog that handles comfortably and in range, holds point with style and honors the point of its bracemate is truly a bragging-rights bird dog—one that any shooting sportsman would be proud to hunt over.

