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'Whoa' Isn't for the Birds

Holding point is the most important job your pointing dog has. A pointing dog that busts birds before the sportsman can approach is best relegated to cleaning up table scraps. If you aren't going to train your dog to hold point, leave it home while you go hunting.

Teaching a pointing dog to hold point and stand birds with style and intensity depends on a solid foundation of the "Whoa" command. This command is also a prerequisite to training a dog to back, be steady to flush & shot, and stop on running birds. It may even prevent a dog from getting snakebit or running in front of a speeding car.

It's important to understand that the place to teach "Whoa" is not in the field on birds. That is teaching the dog to hold point. Training a dog to hold point should come after the dog is comfortable with "Whoa" and when it responds with excellence the first time the command is given. Holding point, backing and—the icing on the cake—steadiness to wing & shot are all built on the yard command "Whoa." "Whoa" is simply a command, or cue, instructing the dog to stop where it is and stay put at that spot until instructed otherwise. Attempting to teach a dog "Whoa" by leading it on a check cord to a planted bird and giving the command prematurely can create disastrous results such as blinking.

As with most commands, trainers use a variety of methods to teach "Whoa"—and with varying results. An individual trainer's patience and ability to read a dog is important in creating a stylish response to the command. Terms such as the "rope-and-sling" method and "'Whoa' post" as well as training tools like flank hitches and prong collars are only a sampling of things that have developed through the years in connection with "Whoa" training. Personally, I have borrowed, tweaked and improvised in developing my approach to teaching "Whoa." I use a combination of the "Whoa" board, the "Whoa" table, barrel training, the suitcase handle and remote training collars.

Association and reinforcement—both positive and negative—are powerful learning tools for dogs. I prefer to make the command "Whoa" a positive one. I have seen too many dogs cringe in anticipation of something bad happening when they hear "Whoa." This is the result of trainers either having followed the command with too harsh a correction or having cor-



Barrel training teaches a dog that when it's motionless while obeying "Whoa," its world doesn't rock.

rected the dog before it completely understood what the command meant. In either case the dog now associates punishment with "Whoa." Because holding point, backing and steadiness to wing & shot are taught by association and repetition in conjunction with "Whoa," the association with the command must be positive or there will be no foundation to build on.

Much of my advanced training, such as holding point and steadiness, involves a "Whoa" board; therefore, I want the dog's initial exposure to the board to be positive. A "Whoa" board is simply a piece of plywood roughly 2 x 3 feet. I like a board that can be raised four to six inches, so that later the dog will have to step up onto it. In advanced training, I teach the dog to remain on the board while birds walk around it or flush from remote launch-

ers. Because dogs are place-oriented, it is much easier to teach the dog to remain steady at a specific place before progressing to an open-field situation.

To achieve this positive association with the board, I begin feeding pups as young as six weeks old on it. I place the board on a pigeon crate so it is just a little too high for the youngsters to climb onto it by themselves. I place the pups' food on the board, then lift them onto it for dinner. This way, not only will the board be associated with a positive experience, but I will be viewed as the provider. At this point, I have not yet introduced the pups to the word "Whoa." That will come later, as will teaching the pups to stay on the board. I will continue feeding the pups on the board for at least a couple of weeks.

After the pups begin thinking of the board as a good place, I will continue this positive association. I do this by having "Whoa" boards everywhere. There is a board by the pups' kennel; there are boards scattered throughout the kennel yard. If your dog lives in the house, place a board by the door the dog normally goes in and out of. I pick up pup and place it on the board. I hold it gently by the collar to prevent it from bolting. While restraining the dog non-threateningly, I repeat "Whoa, Whoa, Whoa" in a soothing, non-disciplinary tone. I then give the dog a pat on the shoulder and allow it to come off the board. I am simply teaching the dog what the word "Whoa" means. It will be easier for the dog to understand that "Whoa" means to stay put on the board than it would be to get it to stay in one spot in a wide-open field. If I stop the dog on the board repeatedly, it will come to expect to stop whenever it is on the board. When walking the dog by the board, it is imperative to always stop it on the board. If sometimes the dog is stopped and sometimes it isn't, the dog will not see the board as a place where it must always stop. The key is to be consistent and not confuse the dog.

As the dog begins to anticipate having to stop on the board, gradually length-

en the time it is kept on the board while you repeat "Whoa" gently and reassuringly. If the dog tries to come off the board, simply place it back on the board non-emotionally. Show it what you want at this stage. You are a teacher, not a harsh disciplinarian. Demanding excellence will come later. After the dog has been consistently stopped on the board, it will begin walking onto the board and whoaing itself, as long it associates the board with a positive place. As the dog gradually spends more time on the board, you can begin stroking its back rewardingly while repeating "Whoa."

While the introductory board work is going on, I am also using a barrel and a "Whoa" table. For barrel training, I use a 55-gallon drum laid sideways on a sheet of plywood, to which is nailed a three-foot 2x4 to prevent the barrel from rolling off. I can make the barrel stationary by pressing my knee against it to hold it firmly against the block. I place the dog on top of the barrel, initially holding it by the collar to prevent it from jumping off. I repeat "Whoa, Whoa, Whoa" while the dog stands on the barrel. When the dog moves, I release the pressure of my knee and allow the barrel to rock. This makes the dog uncomfortable. When the dog is stationary again, I once more press on the barrel. By doing this, the dog quickly learns that when it is motionless, the barrel does not rock. As the dog learns to stand still, I will stroke its tail up, if it is a long-tailed pointing breed. With my free hand, I prevent the dog's head from moving. By placing my thumb in the V of the dog's lower jaw, I can hold the dog's head up while preventing it from turning to the side.

My "Whoa" table is simply a 12-foot-long, 12-inch-wide plank. The plank can be nailed to sawhorses to raise it to approximately waist height. I then place the dog on the plank. The plank is narrow, so the dog will not move its feet. As when the dog is on the barrel, I stroke its tail up, prevent its head from moving and soothingly repeat "Whoa." My objective is to teach the dog to stand tall, with head

erect and tail high.

Everything I have done to this point has taught the stationary dog to stay put and be comfortable with the word "Whoa." I have not yet taught the moving dog to stop on the command. I only begin this next step after the dog is comfortable remaining still on the table and barrel. To teach a moving dog to "Whoa," I use a "suitcase handle," which is made by tying a snap on both ends of a 36- to 40-inch piece of check cord. I run one end of the cord around the dog's flank and through the snap. I run the other end around the dog's neck and through that end's snap. The result is a slip lead around the dog's abdomen and another around its neck. This way I can pick the dog up off the ground with my "suitcase handle."

While walking the dog along I give the command "Whoa"—one time. Naturally, the dog will not respond the first few times, so I will pick it up with the suitcase handle and return it to the spot where it was when I gave the command. Once the dog stops immediately upon hearing "Whoa," I walk away from the dog after it has halted. If the dog moves, I do not give the command again. I simply pick the dog up with the rope and return it to the original spot.

It is important to not repeat the command "Whoa." If I command "Whoa" at point A and the dog moves to point B and I say "Whoa" again and the dog stops, I have dug myself a hole. Now when I move the dog from point B back to point A, I will be confusing it and sending the message that I really did not want it to stop when I said "Whoa" the second time. If I do not correct the dog, I will be teaching it that it doesn't have to stop when the command is given the first time.

Now I have a dog that understands I want it to stop and stay stopped when I command "Whoa." Of course, this does not mean the dog will respond every time. It simply means that the dog understands what it is supposed to do.

To take this to the next step and train for excellence, I use a low-level-stimula-

tion collar. It is very important that the dog has already been collar-conditioned (see "Electronic Training," *Hunting Dogs*, Sept/Oct '97). I place the collar on the dog's belly, just behind the rib cage, and put the dog on a 20- to 30-foot check cord. The reason I place the collar here is that when the dog was collar-conditioned the collar was around its neck. The first way the dog learned to turn stimulation off was by heading away. By placing the collar around the abdomen, the dog will not tend to move away when it feels stimulation. Also, with the stimulation coming from its rear, the dog will be less likely to associate it with anything in front of it, namely me—and, later on, a bird. I now say "Whoa" while the dog isn't near me. If it does not stop, I turn on the low-level stimulation and leave it on until I return the dog to where it was when I commanded "Whoa." Once the dog excels with a check cord, I repeat the drill without a check cord until I can stop the dog anywhere with one "Whoa." By stopping immediately, the dog avoids stimulation.

Now I walk the dog on the "Whoa" board and say "Whoa" once. If at any time before I release the dog it comes off the board, I use stimulation and place the dog back on the board—although by now, if the dog comes off the board and feels stimulation, it will probably know to step back onto the board to turn off the stimulation. At this point I am ready to move on to teaching holding point, backing and steadiness to wing & shot.

People often want to know at what age I teach a particular command. I never teach holding point before a dog is at least a year old—and more often later than that. I let the dog chase birds for at least a year. But as a general guide, teaching "Whoa" on the barrel and bench when the dog is from eight to 12 months, followed by collar work, is fairly standard. The important thing to remember is that every dog is different and reacts differently. Take your time, do things right and only move ahead when you and your dog are ready. You both will be happier in the long run. ✈

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