

Kennel Talk



photo by Wm. Glasheen

By Ken M. Blomberg

New Year Rules

If you're like me, you can always use a few dog-training resolutions. Over the past thirty-some years of working with gun dogs, I've collected a few training rules to live by. With the beginning of a new year, it wouldn't hurt to take a good look at our training methods and resolve to;

Keep it simple

Training dogs isn't rocket science. Approaching the task at hand without complicating matters can mean the difference between success, and failure. If you're confused, imagine how bewildered your dog is. Limit the number of commands you teach and avoid buying all the electronic gadgets on the market. There's a time and a place for their use and by seeking the advice of more experienced trainers, you may avoid creating problems that don't exist.

Think obedience training

The job of a trainer is to teach our pups manners at home and in the field. A well-bred hunting dog is born with the instincts necessary to locate and retrieve birds. I was lucky with my first gun dog. After getting the upper hand on obedience, I let him hunt on his own. He taught me how to hunt birds and left me with a lasting impression. All the dogs that followed got the opportunity to use the hunting instincts their parents passed on. When they faltered, I stepped in and gave them a hand.

Never give a command that you can't enforce

During the early stages, soft control can be assured with the use of a light check cord. As the dog matures, a heavier hand can be used. Be sure you'll be able to immediately correct mistakes.

Never punish a dog unless he knows what he's getting it for

Pretty self-explanatory, but important enough to discuss. After-the-fact discipline can be tricky. A good rule of thumb is to correct mistakes immediately after the infraction. If too much time has elapsed, set the dog up to repeat the offense and then immediately let him know what he's getting it for.

Repetition and consistency

Repeating commands over and over is a key ticket to success. Repetition is critical during early lessons - like teaching a dog his name, being taught the meaning of "No!" and coming when called. Repeat the same

command like "Here!" or "Come!" again and again until it sinks in. And it will.

Association

Another key component in training is making sure your dog associates various situations with something pleasurable. For example, by introducing your pup to loud noises while he's feeding, chasing birds, or retrieving training dummies, he will learn that noises won't hurt him. Later, he'll associate loud noises like gunfire with things that are pleasurable, like finding and retrieving game birds.

Shorter is better

Keep your training sessions short and sweet. Multiple ten, or fifteen-minute sessions are much better than longer, thirty-minute ones. Keep an eye on your pup's attention span, which grows with age. Loss of interest is a good indication that it's time to end the training session.

Don't rush the process

Most pros will tell you that the first six to eight months should be considered "play-training". Beyond that, more formal, "restraint-training" should begin. Heeling is a good example. Steadying is another. Applying too much pressure to a young pup can backfire and set the progress of your training backwards.

It takes birds to make a bird dog

Wild birds are best, but in their absence, pen-raised pigeons, quail, pheasants and ducks will work fine. Find a source and keep an ample supply on hand. Check local and state regulations on permits and licenses.

Always end training sessions on a good note

Before you kennel up your dog on a sour note, sit down with your canine buddy and count to ten. Then throw the dummy, or practice a command you know is working and end the session with praise and a hug. It'll make you both feel better.

Join a club

No matter what breed of gun dog you own, there's an organized group of enthusiasts with similar interests. Do some research before the spring training season begins and become a member. Before you pay your dues, a word of warning may be in order. Be prepared to get an earful of free advice. Some good and some not so good. If you get confused, go back to training rule #1. ■

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