

Introducing Your Dog to Gunfire

Introducing your hunter to gunfire while not really a behavior that you teach, is one of the more critical elements in your training program. Most of the behaviors that we actually teach our dogs are really things they already do such as sit, come and fetch. What we are really teaching them for the most part is to do those things when we tell them. Gunfire on the other hand is an artificial element we are introducing them to and unless we make the association of this very loud noise with something equally pleasant or compelling, we run the risk of having a gun dog that is gun shy.

The artificial nature of gun fire is one reason that introducing your dog to this necessary part of the hunt makes me nervous. This is not like teaching your dog to sit. If you somehow mess up teaching sit, it is a whole lot easier to fix than a gun shy dog.

In past articles, I have mentioned that there are different ways to train a behavior and I firmly believe that. However, for introducing your dog to the gun, you will be hard pressed to convince me that there is a better way than the one that I am about to describe.

As I mentioned earlier, we must make the association of the report of the gun with something that is powerfully pleasant; for a bird dog, I can't think of anything more pleasant or attractive than a live, flapping bird. Now, before we go any further, your pup should be boldly and fearlessly chasing and catching live flapping pigeons or quail before it ever hears gunfire. If there is any caution or hesitation with these birds, it is not time for the gun. If you need to build some bird confidence in your pup, you can use the rig I will describe later to help with that. By the way, there is nothing like a bold littermate or similarly aged pup to help your cautious pup with its confidence. If you put that bold pup and the not sure pup on birds together, you will soon have two bold pups.

The rig I use for this process is a PVC pipe $\frac{3}{4}$ to 1" in diameter and 6-8 feet long. You decide what is comfortable for you. Tie a length of stout string or fishing line (about twice the length of the pole) through holes drilled in the end. To the free end of the line, tie on a heavy snap swivel out of your tackle box. Now you have a stout fishing pole and here is how you bait it. From many of the gun dog catalogs you can buy a leather harness that buckles on your quail or pigeon. This harness lets them run or fly. On the back of that harness is a D-ring, which is where your snap swivel goes. Bait your line with that harnessed bird and you will catch a bird dog pup on every cast, guaranteed! I have found that pigeons hold up better in this role than quail.

This process involves the use of gradual steps starting with a blank pistol at a long distance and gradually moving to the heavy artillery at short range. To start with, send your assistant with a blank pistol about 75 yards away from you, the fishing pole and the pup. As in any training endeavor, timing is important. You want the gun fired when the pup is just about to pounce on the bird. When my dear wife assists me with this, I raise my free hand in the air as a signal to fire. What you want to see from your pup is absolutely nothing; no reaction what so ever when the gun goes off.

With your assistant ready, get your pup's attention (which should not be difficult under the circumstances), toss the bird towards the ground. As the pup is diving in for the bird,

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the shot is fired and you pull the bird out of harm's way. I try to minimize how many times my pups catch the bird. After the shot is fired from 75 yards, and the pup showed no reaction, move the assistant to 65 yards and repeat until the gun is fired within a few feet of you and the pup. If at any time the pup reacts, and that would be something as subtle as looking up from the bird or hesitating in the chase, move the gun back to where there was no reaction and more gradually close the distance again.

When the pup shows no reaction to the blank pistol at close range, send your assistant back to 75-100 yards with the smallest shotgun you can find and repeat the process. When the gun is going off within a few feet of the pup and it shows no reaction, send the assistant back to the 75-100 yard point with a 20 or 12 gauge gun and repeat.

As a point of reference, when I worked my two 4 month olds using this process, I went through about 25 .22 short blanks and about as many 28 gauge shotshells. When the pups were taking no notice to the gun firing near them as they chased the pigeon we took a rest. I then put a pigeon in a remote launcher and let each pup "hunt" it. When one of the pups was about 10 yards from the launcher, I launched the bird and fired the 28 into the air about 15 yards from the pup. As the pup was watching the bird fly away, it turned and looked at me when the gun was fired. That was a reaction so when we return to the training ground, I will go back to the fishing pole drill with the 28 gauge at about 50 yards and work back towards the pup before going to a bigger gun. Keep it fun, don't rush and this process will give your pup a solid foundation for working with gunfire.

On a topic related to guns and gun dogs comes a quick story from the "this won't happen to me" file. A friend and fellow dog club member who has trained dogs and guided at a hunt club for many years had a tragic experience about 6 weeks ago while guiding three clients. On the first point, one client covered several men and the dog with his shotgun muzzle while walking in to flush the bird. My friend stopped the hunt and along with the other two clients coached the careless man on gun safety. On the very next find, the same man while walking in to flush the bird, shot my friend's highly trained German Shorthaired Pointer at close range. Surprisingly, the dog lived just long enough to get to a vet's office. Needless to say all involved were quite shaken, especially my friend who had a great deal of time, effort and emotion wrapped up in his dog. It could just as easily been one of the men that had been cut down by the shotgun blast. We all chuckled as the comedians had their fun with the Dick Cheney incident a few months ago but there is no denying that at close range, your 12 gauge is the deadliest gun in your cabinet.

This incident was a sobering reminder to me and I relate it here to remind you to always practice safe gun handling and insist on the same from your hunting companions. In the NRA shooting classes I teach, the three fundamental rules of gun safety are repeated like a mantra: 1) Always keep the gun pointed in a safe direction, 2) Always keep your finger off the trigger until ready to shoot, 3) Always keep the gun unloaded until ready to use. In this unfortunate situation, the careless hunter violated 2 out of the 3 rules and killed a valuable hunting dog. Sorry to end on such a pedantic note but gun safety dictates our undivided attention.

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The long evenings of summer are a great time to work with your new pup or brush up on some rusty skills with your veteran. So get out there with Rover and keep it fun. Feel free to contact me with your dog training questions at grgdubois@comcast.net.