

Run, Fido! Run!

Some people say you take a flushing dog hunting and a pointing dog takes you hunting. There are few things more frustrating than having to hunt your or your buddy's dog half the time you are supposed to be hunting birds.

Range in a hunting dog is determined by genetics and training. The breeder selectively breeding pups for the long ranging casts desired in field trials may not be the one to see if you want a short to medium range foot hunter's dog. Look for the field trial titles in the pedigree, FC, AFC, or DC (Field Champion, Amateur Field Champion, or Dual Champion). Many of these guys will tell you that their field trial dogs will "reel it" in when the boss is not on horseback as they are in many field trials. I believe that to a great degree but if you decide to hook a race horse to your buggy, be ready for a training challenge. Having said that, it is probably easier to shorten range on a dog than it is to put it in. Either way, the various training techniques used to make range adjustments are more for fine tuning. So, don't expect to make a boot polisher out of your big running pup from a field trial kennel.

A valuable behavior that I found pretty easy to train my dog to do was to change direction on a whistle or verbal command. I use two toots on a whistle and because I was afraid I would forget my whistle some day, I also can turn her on a single "HUP"!

Start in your backyard with pup on a check cord. (A brief word on this vital piece of training equipment, if your thin limp check cord tangles in the long grass, you need to get one about 3/8' in diameter and quite stiff. They are available in several field training equipment catalogs and some will cut the length to your specification). Give pup about 6-8 feet of slack and start walking the length of your yard on a left diagonal. When pup reaches the end of the cord, give your command and turn 90 degrees to the right and keep walking. You will have to give a quick tug on the cord in the early phases of the training, don't drag the student, make it a quick tug and go. It is important that you make that 90 turn so when pup looks your way, he sees you are heading off in another direction. As an agility trial competitor, I learned from my teachers that under these circumstances the dog takes a much greater cue from your body position than from the audible command. As you are going in the new direction, when Junior comes to the end of the cord, give your command, make another 90 turn back in the original direction giving a quick pop with the cord if needed. Your progress through the yard should be generally in one direction but in a zigzag pattern. As your student catches on, give more and more slack on the cord. When Junior is doing this well in his own yard, take this drill to a bigger school yard or forest preserve field. As in any drill, don't overwork it. If you see Rover's enthusiasm start to wane, quit or go on to another drill. Keep it fun and always end on a positive note.

For great reinforcement, and to further convince your hunter that it pays to stay close to the boss, Take this drill to your training grounds where you can release game birds. Ideally you would have a long narrow field with natural barriers on either side like a tree line or fence row. Some hunt clubs mow their fields with a mowed swath bordered by longer grass. But, you don't have to have these borders to effectively conduct this drill. Visualize a large rectangle and plant your birds along the edges in a zigzag pattern, marking the spots with surveyor's tape. (Don't make the mistake of walking in the same

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zigzag pattern that you will follow with your dog or it will learn to track your scent back to the birds) Put Fido on the check cord and do your quartering drill. It might take a bit of practice on your part but time your direction changes so that your dog quarters right into the birds you plant. He will soon get the idea that it pays to listen to the boss because you know where the birds are. When your dog is changing directions at the full length of the cord, try dropping it and letting him drag it. His range may open up but work him on the planted birds this way. When he goes on point, you have the cord to step on as you walk in to work on his steadiness.

You will find that your dog will catch on to this quartering and likely adjust his search pattern for game so that he stays in front of you. But if he ranges to far right or left, you now have a way to turn him. If you want him to work a tree line or fence row, turn him into it. If he is too close to a road or rail road track, you can turn him away from it. This direction change can also come in handy if Rover gets a bad mark on a downed bird. You can turn him back into the area you saw the bird fall if he ranges too far left or right.

This easy behavior can shorten up the range of the horizon buster you hunt with and put a steering wheel on him which can come in handy under many circumstances in the field. Good Luck and remember, dog training is not a destination, it is a journey. Email your dog questions to grgdubois@comcast.net.