

Whoa! It is Not Just for Horses

In a previous article I suggested that “come” was perhaps the most important command you can teach your dog. Some well respected bird dog trainers believe, at least for pointing dogs, that “whoa” is the most important. Like “come”, “whoa” can be used in multiple situations at home or in the field. Whether we believe it is most important or not, few would argue that “whoa” is in the top two or three.

The most common use for the “whoa” command is to steady your dog on point. Many handlers will use this command to control their dogs under non-hunting situations such as passing in or out of buildings or vehicles or even on the vet’s scales. In the article on the “stay” command, I mentioned using the “whoa” command in both the conformation ring and the competitive obedience ring.

As I have said before, there are many ways to teach a behavior and whoa is no different. There are methods involving multiple collars and check cords and unstable barrels for the dog to stand on to name a few. The method I have had success with uses a simple table made from one sheet of $\frac{3}{4}$ ” plywood. Cut the sheet into equal 2’x8’ pieces. Then cut one of those in half to make two, 2’x4’ pieces. Fasten the short pieces to the ends of the long piece with hinges. Place the 2’x8’ piece on two saw horses and the hinged ends will make ramps at either end. There are multiple benefits to the whoa table. It saves your back in the early stages by getting the dog off the ground. Also, by having the dog off the ground, on a table that is by design a bit shaky, he will remain still for you in the early phase of the whoa training.

Have your dog walk up the ramps or lift him onto the table. Get his feet in a natural position and give the “whoa” command. When he moves a foot, tap that foot and put it back where it was. After just a second or so of compliance, give your release word and give him a rest for a few seconds. Give plenty of praise during this training when you are getting what you are asking for. Gradually increase the amount of time you expect no movement before you give the release word. When your dog is getting the idea, you can take your hand off the collar, keep praising for compliance. When you are getting the whoa for 15 -20 seconds with no movement, you can take a step or two along the table. Always add time before distance. Mix up these lessons with some play time.

When your dog is holding steady for you on the table while you walk around it, you can move to the ground. An interim step you could try before fido’s feet are on the ground is a whoa board. This is nothing more than a sheet of plywood just big enough for Rover’s four feet while standing. Dogs by their nature understand the boundary of the board. Steady up your dog on this board before going to the ground. When the student is steady on the ground put on a check cord or flexi-lead and go for a walk. Keep the student close to begin with and give that whoa command on the move. If necessary, give a pop on the lead if Fido takes too many steps. Put him right back on the spot where he heard whoa and make him stay put until released. Keep these training sessions fun, break him out after a few minutes and play for awhile.

When you getting compliance on the move, you can add birds to the equation. Don’t be afraid to go back to the whoa board when you start expecting compliance with the whoa

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command in the presence of birds. In the early stages of this bird work, you can harness the bird so it just walks around or if it does fly, it will not go far. When you are working birds in the field, keep that check cord on and use it to stay in control. Keep the tension off of the line when you have a point but have it ready for a correction.

Don't make the mistake of introducing birds before the whoa command is solid. Practice that whoa in your everyday routine with your hunter. Make him whoa before going through a door or before exiting his kennel. At feeding time, put him in a whoa and put his food bowl down and make him hold for a few seconds before releasing.

Good luck with this very important pointing dog command. If you have a pointing breed give some thought to entering or even just coming out to watch an AKC hunt test. The German Wirehaired Pointer Club of Illinois is holding tests on the 18th and 19th of March at the Des Plaines Fish and Wildlife Area south of Joliet. The German Shorthaired Pointer Club's tests are April 8th and 9th. Spectators are always welcome. For more information, go to www.gwpci.com or email grgdubois@comcast.net.