

The Bird Dog Equalizer

*Looking to train bold or mild pointers without ruining them by force?
Stop-to-flush training may be just the equalizer you're looking for.*

An article from *Hunting Dogs Magazine*, February 1990 by Larry Mueller, Editor. Reprinted with permission.

Brace yourself, bird-doggers. It's going to hurt before it feels better. Nobody enjoys learning he's been wrong his whole life. And when someone says your father was wrong before you, it's infuriating. But it gets worse. The man I'm about to discuss is insisting that despite bird dog training having a history older than shotguns, it's been wrong since day one.

Before dismissing this fellow as being one BB short of a load, however, ask yourself these questions: Have you ever owned a bird dog that wanted to creep? Has a young dog of yours ever been more interested in running than searching? Has your dog, young or old, had to be "broken" by harsh means to stop it from chasing birds? Has your dog never quite gotten over its desire to chase? Have you ever owned a dog trained steady to wing and shot, only to have it forget its education and return to busting birds, probably because you shot birds that the dog accidentally flushed? Have you ever had to pass up good shots on accidentally flushed birds out of fear that this could destroy your dog's training? Has your pointer ever gone berserk, forgotten its training, and chased madly because a continuing flush of too many pheasants was more pressure than the dog could stand?

If your answer is "no" to all of the above questions, you are either the world's luckiest man, its worst liar, or you bought your first dog 10 minutes ago. If there's a "yes" answer somewhere, meet Jim Marti,

the man who can show you the simple training sequence that prevents every one of those basic bird dog problems.

Marti intended to be an English professor, and he got his degree before realizing that he is too physical and outdoor-oriented to tolerate the sometimes tedium of the academic community. Dog training was more attractive.



Positive Reinforcement

It's outdoor work that can challenge the best of minds. But Marti grew tired of the enormous effort and poor rewards of trying to make silk purses out of all of the sows' ears brought to his kennel. He switched to breeding his own strain of trainable English Setters. I define these dogs as intelligently submissive. They're receptive to human guidance. Marti calls them "well intentioned" dogs. Rid of having to deal with the

inconsistent behavior patterns of poorly bred dogs, Marti was then able to refine his training program. He quickly proved to himself that, yes, traditional bird dog training methods may work on aggressive, dominant animals. And yes, indeed, those methods work in developing hard-going, wide-running horseback field-trial dogs (which is mostly where

"Traditional training encourages the dog to chase birds to build desire." Marti pointed out. "He gets adrenalized. Like a jogger, he feels the morphine derivative after running. He's high on chasing birds and high on running, and just when the whole thing becomes a 'good trip' habit that's hard to break, you say, 'No more of that!'"

"The dog doesn't believe you. Chasing is too much fun. It makes no sense to quit. So he charges out, hits the end of the check cord, does a midair flip, and is jerked down on his back or head. Unless that dog is one tough customer, he just may decide he wants nothing more to do with birds that kick like that."

Even with a dog that doesn't need chasing to build desire, Marti says, traditional training makes no sense. The dog runs hard, becomes excited, scents a bird, becomes more stimulated as it points, and then the bird flies. That does it! The stimulation is now far beyond its newly acquired and inadequately learned self-control, so the dog chases. The trainer has no alternative but to jerk the dog down without warning. And the dog has had an experience with birds that might be as negative as the unexpected shotgun blast that causes gun-shyness.

Dogs that come through this kind of training intact never forget the fun of chasing. If one is owned by a hunter who tends to be loose with his dogs, the training won't last a full season. First, the dog steps forward and flushes the bird

conventional training evolved). But, no, traditional methods don't work well at all for entirely too many good, well bred hunting dogs. The extra-bold dogs that contest you for authority succeed. The eager-to-please intelligently submissive dogs (we're not talking about timid here) that should be at the heart of hunting-dog breeding programs because they cooperate so well, altogether too often end up as culls.

instead of waiting for the hunter to do it. Before long, the hunter is running across the prairie to get a shot before the dog breaks. Eventually, the dog flushes before the hunter catches up. And finally, the dog doesn't bother to point at all, becoming a 200-yard flushing dog.

In the back of his mind, Marti kept thinking about his start in the dog business. He had brought the concept of force-training retrievers to North Dakota. He had become very familiar with the fact that force training is a great equalizer. Bold, aggressive dogs meet discipline and find self-control. Milder dogs learn confidence through consistent success. All become much better retrievers. Wouldn't it be great, Marti kept thinking, if there were such an equalizer for training pointing dogs to handle birds?

One day it occurred to him that stop-to-flush could be the equalizer. To clarify, you will recall that stop-to-flush is the act of a dog stopping in its tracks and standing steady when a bird is accidentally flushed. This is not to be confused with steady-to-flush, which is continuing to stand on point while the bird is flushed by the handler.

Like force-fetch training, stop-to-flush conveys clear-cut yes/ no, right/ wrong messages. Whether bold or mild, the dog learns quickly and easily and becomes very sure of itself. By contrast, learning to point birds requires considerable judgment because of the vagrancies of air currents and scent. Acquiring this judgment can be a difficult and lengthy process, and it can be terribly ego-damaging to an inexperienced pup trying its level best to do it right. Marti researched the training literature. No one used stop-to-flush as a training tool. If mentioned at all, it was an add-on, good-manners nicety.

Logic told Marti that stop-to-flush should come before serious pointing practice. This would build the self-confidence in some dogs and teach restraint to others, and the dogs would have no desire to chase when they did begin hunting and pointing birds. That very damaging process of signal switching—urging the dog to chase, then having to “break” it of the habit—would never exist.

Gradually, Marti has developed a system. First, he tests for point on pigeons while the pup is very small, usually 12 weeks old. If the pup points, success is assured, and the pup will get no further bird work until after stop-to-flush training is completed. The dog will ride the vehicle occasionally to get accustomed to travel. It will drag a check cord, and it will get accustomed to sudden noises so that it isn't spooked by anything unusual. Finally, it will be introduced to the gun and be taught “Whoa” on the bench. (Beside teaching the command,

bench training develops the muscles important for standing several minutes on point.)

When the pup gets some leg at four to five months old, it's eager to chase everything in sight and is ready for stop-to-flush training. Teaching it is quite simple. The dog is on a short (15–20 foot) check cord, and the trainer carries a bag of pigeons. When the dog swings past, the trainer pulls a bird from the bag and tosses it across the dog's line of vision. The dog will want to chase, but the trainer doesn't allow it. “Don't jerk the dog down,” Marti said, “and don't say ‘Whoa.’ Don't say a word! Just stop the dog's forward movement.



The Original Game Steward's Bag

You don't want the youngster to develop a fear of birds. But you do want him to gradually learn that he stops when he hears or sees a flying bird. Flying birds then become boring. There's no incentive to chase. Submissive dogs catch on with just a few birds. Dominant hardheads may have to be stopped more firmly and then physically returned to where they should have stopped.”

Though Marti is absolutely silent when stopping the dog to flush, he is absolutely noisy with praise after the dog has stopped. “I say, ‘Wow! That was the best stop I've ever seen’ and pretty soon the dog's skidding to a stop and looking back as if to say, ‘Did you see that one?’ Sometimes, in a week or two, the dog looks a couple of inches taller, his coat looks slicker, everything looks better, and I'm not sure it really isn't. Praise builds confidence, and anything that has confidence will bloom.”

The bird bag that Marti developed for stop-to-flush is interesting in itself. He copied the small opening above a wide bottom from an old canvas fishing creel. The opening snaps shut after a bird is pulled through. Marti's first bag was leather, but then he showed the idea to John Ingram, of DOGS Unlimited, Ingram suggested using nylon mesh about three times as tight as screen-door material. This allows

the passage of enough air for the pigeons to breathe, while at the same time holds most of the scent inside with the birds. This is a definite advantage later on when strong-smelling birds are needed to plant for a dog to point.

Once the dogs understand stop-to-flush., Marti increases the pressure of temptation. The dogs learn to never mind if four birds pop out of a release cage instead of one from the hand. Never mind that several fly unexpectedly from the window of a truck driven by a helper. No matter how different or unusual, they must stop every time a bird flies.

After stop-to-flush, Marti teaches the youngster to back other dogs on point, because the trainer believes that every dog should do it and because he thinks that it may help reaffirm the trainee's pointing instincts.

By this time, the young dog is desperate for a bird of its own to point, and Marti starts planting some. “Pointing is a sacred time for the dog, and I stay out of it as much as possible,” Marti said. “No fiddling with his tail. And I keep my mouth shut! No point is turned into a ‘Whoa’ lesson. This is between the dog and the bird, and the dog is thoroughly enjoying pointing because it's instinctive; and all creatures, humans included, enjoy doing whatever comes naturally. Pointing becomes the dog's reward, and one of our biggest problems—creeping—never occurs. The sooner the bird flies, the sooner the reward ends, so the dog stands inhaling that intoxicating scent instead of turning his reward into a boring, flying bird.”

Gradually, Marti allows the dog to keep its reward longer and longer before flushing the bird. Eventually, this evolves into serious staunching practice, with the dog remaining on point five, even 10 minutes. To reinforce this staunchness, Marti quietly drops an occasional pigeon down his leg to fly off as a reminder to hold the point. “My dogs tend to be very short-ranged at first,” Marti said, “but it's a lot easier to have a youngster somewhat underfoot while he's learning bird manners than it is to open up and range wider. But you can trust them. They're hunting, not running for the sake of running.”

For more information on Burnt Creek Setters, contact Jim Marti at 1 Kennel Rd., Baldwin, ND 58521 (701-258-6373). Marti also has detailed his training system in a self-printed workbook called *The Burnt Creek Method of Dog Training*, which is available for \$20.00 postpaid. For information on the Marti bird bag—called the Original Game Steward's Bag—request a catalog from DOGS Unlimited at 800-338-DOGS (3647) or visit them at their website at www.DOGSUnlimited.com.