

The Pointing Dog Journal

The Sporting Dog Authority

Features

September 2007

Maybe It's His Nose

by John L. Rogers

We know that the canine nose is a marvelous instrument, used for scent-tracking fugitives, sniffing out contraband, and locating missing persons. Scientists tell us that dogs have from 20 to 40 times as many olfactory receptor cells as people, and that the part of the canine brain devoted to smells -- the olfactory lobe -- is four times larger than a human's.

But no matter how genetically blessed with a good nose a pointing dog may be, that doesn't always mean he will automatically use it to its best advantage. In fact, the dog with an average nose may make better use of his nose and find more birds than the one with the keener nose. Why?

Four factors came together to prompt this discussion.

First was my friend Frank's concern about Jenny, his second-season English setter. Second was some correspondence with Jim Marti, who recently retired from operating Burnt Creek Setters in Baldwin, North Dakota, after more than 35 continuous years of producing a prominent line of gun dog setters. Third, a quotation from that legendary American trainer and father of modern bird dog training, Er M. Shelley. Fourth was my recent acquisition of Buck, a weanling pointer pup.

Frank, who is retired and lives in some of Michigan's best ruffed grouse country, is baffled with Jenny. He likes everything about her: her consistently forward running pattern; her handling responsiveness; her looks; and her affectionate disposition. Everything, that is, except for the fact that despite being hunted nearly every day of the open season, she has pointed very few woodcock and fewer grouse. His other setter, a five-year-old female, is a most gifted grouse dog. Frank has concluded that Jenny points few birds because she has a faulty nose.

I thought of Frank and Jenny when I came across what Mr. Shelley wrote back in 1947: "The greatest natural ability a dog can possess is a good nose. There are a great many dogs today with faulty noses. Since the gift of scent is a natural quality, nothing can be done to remedy this fault." I shared this passage with Jim Marti in a letter.

Marti, whose experience with bird dogs is long and deep, agrees with Mr. Shelley--to a certain extent. Jim would want to know, before making a decision, if a young dog's nose had been properly awakened and evaluated objectively before judging the youngster as having a faulty nose.

Speed, stamina, prey drive, bidability, style, and all those other prized bird dog qualities are important, he agrees, but he asks what good are they if the nose isn't up to snuff? He makes a strong case for awakening a pup's nose early in the game. Jim's thoughts on the nose were timely and are being put to immediate use in my pup Buck's early education.

In his letter, Jim says, "I am dedicated to helping the nose in puppies and young dogs by set-ups [planted birds]...arranging for every possible thing to allow and induce the nose to do its work. Awakening of the nose is the start of every single thing that is important in a bird dog. It only makes sense to get as much scent experience as possible. We need to get that nose discovered, going, usable, improving, and expanding," he insists.

One writer suggests awakening the nose by dragging a piece of steak fat or chicken skin along the ground to lay a scent trail. In his *Troubles with Bird Dogs*, George Bird Evans tells of hiding a dampened grouse wing in birdy-looking places and bringing the young dog in from downwind of the planted wing.



I had forgotten about the latter technique until a friend mentioned using it with his setter pup. Curious, I tried it with Eddy, a pointer pup I was starting last year for a field trialer, and got indifferent results from an otherwise precocious and birdy prospect. I abandoned the practice and resumed using quail. After all, only live birds that flush and excite the pup can confirm what his nose has told him.

"Let's get that puppy nose switched from dog-food scent and kennel odors to bird scent as soon as possible," Jim Marti urges us. Because the sooner the pup is turned onto and tuned into bird scent, the sooner we can expect him to develop as a bird dog, he maintains.

Dogs that use their noses poorly (not necessarily the same as having a poor nose) are often the ones that spend most of their time in the kennel before they are exposed to situations requiring a sense of smell.

I'm taking Jim's advice, and it's paying off. Buck, at just 11 weeks of age, had four contacts with lightly planted Coturnix quail (smaller than bobwhites or pigeons and with less potential for frightening a youngster). Three of these have resulted in nice, scented points.

I work him on a light checkcord, only to hold him and prevent him from catching the bird but allowing an abbreviated chase, gently braking him to a stop without jerking or upsetting him -- and without saying, "Whoa." (We are awakening the nose, not teaching commands or discipline.) Further, we keep pup pretty much in the bird zone, not allowing him to run and become winded.

The seasoning of a nose comes quicker and is more finite than the hunting/seasoning of a bird dog, so it just makes sense to get as much experience with scent as possible. If we are conscious of our dog's nose, awakening it and reading it while he is still a puppy, we are better able to work out ways to help him use that nose to find game, Marti says.

Take the youngster that is a bit slow or weak in the pointing department, or the one that seems light in the nose department but shows a strong pointing instinct. The two faculties can be "tuned" to work together *if* the nose has been awakened and evaluated. Without that, we cannot hope to bring out our prospect's latent--and possibly outstanding--ability to handle birds. We owe it to our dog the opportunity to learn, and help him rise to, his potential.

We can learn much by watching our young dog's nose reactions while learning a lot about his application at the same time seeing him "trying to balance his brain with his nose," as Jim Marti says. With some youngsters, the process of nose awakening and ripening of scenting ability may have to be repeated several times. We need to make this as easy as possible for the pup, never forgetting our dual objective: balancing pup's brain with his nose.

The importance of this "balancing" is too often minimized when we are blinded by qualities that are more cosmetic than functional.

"A gun that doesn't shoot straight, even a London best, is no gun at all," wrote George Bird Evans about his tribulations with an off-shooting but sweet-handling 28-bore. In similar vein, I would say that a bird dog, even one with a royal pedigree but having a non-working nose, is no bird dog at all.

Expect some bumped birds during the transition from the scent of pen-raised birds to wild birds. It will take time and bird exposure but will go more smoothly and sooner if we have properly awakened the pup's nose at the outset. British General W.N. Hutchinson's words, written in 1898, are as valid today as they were back then: "As with every other faculty, the dog's sense of smell is apt to improve the more it is exercised."

Faulty nose? Or have we failed to awaken its development? 