



The Dog *Always* Nose

BY TOM KEER

In his 1946 book *Eastern Upland Shooting*, Charles A. Norris said, “Without a dog, upland shooting is a poor, drab, lonesome, and generally unsatisfactory, business. Much of the joy of shooting is dependent upon the companionship of a favorite dog.”

Bird hunters cherish solid points and they endure flagging points. Training routines are planned to get young pups on birds so they can learn the difference between ground and body scent. Exposure to a variety of different species of birds in different terrain is critical for a broad-based education. During the off-season, early morning training sessions condition pointers, setters, shorthairs and their sporting dog colleagues for opening day. When the prep work is complete, we dog handlers need to back off and let them hunt. Trusting that they have learned their lessons is critical to their continued growth and development. In a way, it's like handing your 16-year-old the car keys.

Throughout history, our dogs have been clearly differentiated from other aspects of our lives. There are many reasons for it, and perhaps their steadfastness to our demands tops the list. The common name for a pooch is Fido, the embodiment of our relationship with them. Fido is a shortened rendition of the Latinate “fidelis,” which means faithful. The description “man's best friend” is probably tied in to a dog's faithfulness, and hunters with good bird dogs understand that when Fido points, a bird is close at hand. A point is a point, no exception.

The age-old argument of reason versus instinct inevitably kicks in, particularly when our brains tell us that we know better than our dog. When our gray matter jumps into high gear, our thoughts overshadow our instinct. When that occurs, we are lead down the path of overthinking the situation. Our minds tell us we need proof. However, what we really need is to rely on our instincts. Our eyes don't always see what our dogs, our Fidos, instinctively know to be true. Have faith.

A few years ago I learned that Steve, my UPS driver, was a bird hunter. One crisp September morning he was dropping off a package with my new sporting dog beeper collar. We chatted about his shorthairs and he gave me a few dog biscuits that he keeps in his truck for these kinds of occasions. We had to inspect the e-collar, so I stuck the bones in the inside pocket of my jacket. We chatted away for about a half hour and then parted ways.

I have two setters, one a tricolor and the other an orange belton, and they are always happy to see me. Still, the reception I received when I walked back inside was overwhelming. I hung my jacket on the hook in

the closet and went upstairs to my office. Both dogs were on my heels, doing circles around me, barking, and running up and down the stairs as if I were walking towards the truck with my shotgun. After a half hour of this chaos, I finally figured out what they were after; they smelled the bones in my pocket and believed I had forgotten to give them one. And they were right.

Those same character traits carry over into the field. A friend from South Carolina simply says, “Good bird dogs don't lie.”

I recall several events where I questioned my dogs. One time was last year while grouse hunting in Vermont. My two-year old Rowdy locked up solid in an alder run. There was a woodcock right under her nose that was holding so perfectly tight that I decided to pull out my camera and snapped a few images. I did and on about my twentieth shot the bird flushed and took flight. Rowdy stayed on point, so I traded my camera for my 20-gauge and got ready.

I walked in on her and nothing flushed. I widened my circle, moved around, back and forth, gradually increasing my epicenter. After enough time had passed I walked back to Rowdy who was still locked up. I broke open my gun and said, “No bird.” That was a mistake, for at that moment a grouse started at the sound of my words and rocketed out of the tree.

Another time my four-year-old Ocracoke pointed a covey of quail. I walked in to flush them, and seven erupted from the switchgrass. My friend Cabe and I each shot a few birds from the covey, and we were pleased with the dog work and our shooting. Ocracoke was still on point so we marked our downed birds and I began tramping around in the grass. Nothing. I thought that there must be some feathers, or that the dog was smelling where the covey was. I broke open my gun, kneeled down in front of the dog, and pushed the grass aside. A quail erupted from the cover, dang near knocked my hat off, and flew straight away. Cabe shot it. The very small bird was probably from a late second clutch and was smaller than the other birds in the covey.

There is no question that game birds, and ruffed grouse in particular, will get the better of us. They zig and they zag, dodge and weave, fiddle and diddle, and cause us to miss the shot. But “Every saint has a past, every sinner has a future,” says Oscar Wilde, and the next time we'll be able to outfox that under-two-pound bird. It will come when we honor our dogs' point. And in that moment we will understand that redemption is granted not by the sound of our shotgun or the tumbling of a bird, but rather by the good grace of our bird dogs. ■