

## About The Cover

Cover Photo By Kevin Billy

# ON THE RIGHT TRACK



### Preparing A Puppy For A Natural Ability Test

Adapted from an article by John Kegel, NAVHDA Newsletter, August 1975

The following article has been adapted from one written by founding member John Kegel, was first published in Pudelpointer Club of North America newsletter, and subsequently in The NAVHDA Newsletter in August 1975. By “adapted from” we mean altered slightly in two specific ways. First, the original article focused on training a specific breed within NAVHDA (Pudelpointers); however, since the concepts presented here apply to all breeds within NAVHDA, we have removed a couple of breed-specific references. Indeed, as Mr. Kegel describes at the end of his article, “Although this article refers to training of a PP pup, there is no reason that these lessons cannot be used for every breed.” Second, the article has been shortened somewhat to remain focused on the broad aspects of Natural Ability preparation.

Finally, while this article was published over 40 years ago, the foundational principles haven’t changed much! Although many of us may use electronic bird releasers to accomplish what was once done with just birds, these techniques will work well—assuming you have birds that fly well. And, as always, there is no hard and fast rule on the age to begin specific aspects of training; the recommendations provided here are Mr. Kegel’s own rough guidelines which may or may not apply to your particular pup.

Those who think natural ability should surface by itself, and dogs entered in Natural Ability Tests don’t need any preparation should think again.

One question I am often asked by new puppy owners is: At what age should I start with the training and how much training does he need? Under my approach, training can start right from weaning and continue until the dog retires from hunting. Only the intensity and frequency of training will vary with the age of the dog.

From weaning to four or five months we might restrict our training to play training. Then after our pup’s hunting instinct has been fully developed, we can progress with an intensive training program. But even the fully trained dog will require some maintenance training from time to time.

I would like to divide the developing and preparation of our pup into three major phases:

**Phase I:** Play training or preliminary training and introducing our pup to the water. Age period – 7 weeks to approximately 5 months.

**Phase II:** Building and developing his hunting desire which will include search and pointing.

**Phase III:** Tracking.



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#### Phase I: Preliminary Training

- 1) Get the puppy used to his name and make him wear a (leather/nylon) collar.
- 2) Make him understand the meaning of the words No, Quiet, and Kennel.
- 3) Teach Sit, Stay, and Come. I don’t teach Whoa, Down, or Force Fetch at this stage.

All of my lessons are preceded by a five-minute play period to give the pup a chance to get rid of some of his excess steam. The playing consists of throwing a small dummy a few times out on the lawn and letting him retrieve it, or I take my fly rod with a pheasant wing dangling from it and let the pup chase it and point it a few times. I’m not convinced that sight pointing a pheasant wing does much for the pup’s future pointing, but, if not overdone, it is fun to watch the pup and also good exercise in a confined area.

The five-minute play period is followed by about 10 minutes of actual training, then I take the pup for a 15 minute romp in the field.

#### Phase II: Building and Developing the Hunting Desire

This is the most important lesson for your puppy. At the same time, it is also the slowest and least interesting period for the novice dog trainer. Searching and pointing are natural instincts for our puppies, but we must provide our dogs with the opportunity to have these instincts developed.

I feel it is very important to get the pup to hunt instead of running only. In order to do that, we must provide the youngster with live bird contacts from the beginning on. Very few of us live in an area where wild birds are abundant so you must do the next best thing. Go to the game breeder and buy 20 *well flying* bobwhite quail. This may seem costly, but you have to realize a well-trained dog does not come cheap.

Now you’ll need to find a field with suitable cover 5” to 10” tall. Take two or three of your quail and place them in some bird looking cover. Go back, get the pup, release him with a command, and walk a brisk pace, always facing the wind at the start. Until he learns what

game-holding cover looks like, it may take a little bit of maneuvering at first to get your dog to the birds.

Don't expect a point right away. He will most likely show signs of making game by lowering his head and wagging his tail, flushing the bird and chasing it. This is normal and nothing to worry about (Editor's note: This is why you need birds that fly well!). After several flushes he will become more cautious and start to stalk and then point his game. *When your pup is approaching game he should be allowed full freedom. He should be permitted to make his point without directions or cautioning from you. This advice is not easy to follow. The handler's first impulse when he sees his dog slow down and go in with nose extended is to "whoa" and caution him at every stop.* This just slows up the dog and keeps him pottering around. *For these reasons I do not teach my dogs to whoa in Phase I. The temptation to use it in the field at an early age is too great.* Once your pup is holding point long enough for you to approach him, flush the bird and let him chase. You can take advantage of the chase by getting the dog used to gunfire – simply fire a cap pistol when the dog is about 30-40 yards away actively chasing the bird.

Field lessons should last about 20 minutes. Fifteen or twenty trips over a period of two months should bring your pup a long way in his development. His search should be aggressive and he should be pointing regularly.

### Phase III: Tracking

There are many rules and techniques about training tracking, but it is not the purpose of this article to deal with the actual training procedures. For this reason, I will restrict my comments to a few general ideas.

Training tracking is relatively easy and does not require many lessons. We need a 50-yard strip of low grassy cover not over 4" tall and a pheasant with flight feathers pulled from one wing. You should choose the cooler hours of the day. You can either drag the pheasant using a pole so you don't leave foot scent on the bird's track, or simply release the pheasant. It is advisable to use a distinct command such as find, dead bird, fetch dead, trail, track, or whatever you like. Some dogs will track like they have done it all their lives, others will track a short distance and then try to search with a high head. Let him work

the entire track (build up to 100 yards). If he does a reasonable job tracking, I would leave it at that and discontinue the lessons. Tracking, I feel, if overdone can have a detrimental effect on your search.

The speedster that wants to do the tracking with his legs rather than his nose needs lots of calming down. A failure to track is more often the result of the dog's relying more on speed than his nose.

Now good luck, and find a place on the wall for your plaque!



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*This is one in a series of articles celebrating the first 50 years of NAVHDA. If you have been involved in NAVHDA for many years and have memories and/or photos you would like to share, we would love to hear from you. Please contact us at [vhd@navhda.org](mailto:vhd@navhda.org).*

*A group of knowledgeable judges and trainers has been assembled and are available to answer your questions about training and testing. The topic will vary each month based on the questions we receive from our VHD readers. Please send your questions to [vhd@navhda.org](mailto:vhd@navhda.org) with On the Right Track in the subject line.*



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