



VC SMOOTHBORE'S WILD BILL HICKOCK, MALE VIZSLA, OWNED BY MATTHEW TEPP, HANDLED BY SHERYLE TEPP AT THE 2019 INVITATIONAL. (DENISE HEATH © 2020)

What's In A Dog Trainer's Voice?

By Bob Farris
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Football, and many of our other sports, see some of the strongest bursts of emotion from coaches; accompanied by harsh, gruff words from our little league games to that of the professionals. Never would we hear a coach use his softer.... sweet voice to instill additional prowess in his players' game. If we had, maybe Woody Hayes and Bobby Knight would be remembered by sports fans in a different professional light. However, their win/loss success would most likely not be as profound. Their emotional outbreaks and tougher-than-life attitude was the common denominator for their success in coaching; but when your only tool is a hammer, all problems begin to look like nails—and this may have been both coaches' downside.

Watching the drills and maneuvers during the Marine Corps basic training exemplifies the same verbal harshness seen by many of our most successful coaches. There is no 'candy-coating' of words when strict attention is the focus. A sincere voice is the universal language of kindness, but with military conditioning the stakes are too high to lose focus of the expected end results. You cannot change your destination overnight in

boot camp, but you can change the direction overnight.

Today's coaches (especially at the youth levels) are finding praise often has more value when attempting to promote excellence as the final outcome. Making someone feel good about themselves and their accomplishments is often key to raising this bar of excellence and sports is an excellent example of how the balance between a harsh voice and a soft voice can be the difference in how one plays the game. Not sure this could apply the same in our military drills, however; there is a lot more at stake here in the win/loss column.

Some years back, I sold a pup that ended up being trained by Clyde Vetter at his Sharp Shooter Kennel in Wisconsin for the dog's NAVHDA Utility test. As is the case with so many of the dogs that Clyde trains, the male, Cedarwoods Essence of Tukr (aka Rugr), earned a Utility Prize I. Due to a new family situation with the dog's owner, I bought Rugr back from his original owner and he now resides here in Idaho, living the dream with various hon-

eymoons and a wide variety of hunting. I complimented Clyde on how well the dog was trained by phone one evening, as Rugr's response to field and retrieving commands was so instant and crisp, and was always with a high tail and a joyous prancing attitude. He is now my best 'go-to' dog for a serious hunt. A year or so later I received a phone text from Clyde with a short video attached. He had been cleaning out his phone's memory and had found a video of Rugr during field steadiness training and thought I might enjoy it. From this video births the theme of this article.

I have shared this video many times with others training their dogs toward Utility or the NAVHDA Invitational with the intention of demonstrating how important praise is in our training drills. The tone and softness of Clyde's voice was so specific, telling Rugr he had performed perfectly in this steadiness sequence on the video. He praised Rugr for nearly 60 seconds with a tone of voice I had never witnessed to this extent during training exercises.



CEDARWOODS ESSENCE OF TUKR
(AKA RUGR), MALE PUDELPOINTER.

Most trainers merely walk off with their heads held high and chest out following a perfect training performance, with some acting as though it would be an embarrassment to praise their dog in a “snuggle fest” of words. This now rang totally clear to me as the importance of praise when done correctly, and to save the harsh words for times of failure. Also, extending the length of that praise is just as important as the praise itself.

I vividly remember watching Clyde handle a dog at a NAVHDA Invitational, and at the walking at heel sequence, his dog was nearly prancing at his side with a high stick tail demonstrating how sincerely happy he was. Most all other dogs that day (including mine) sulked their way through the course, heeling perfectly but with no purpose of pride being observed from the dog. As I think back, it was this “happy voice” Clyde has learned to use. He was most likely born with it as part of his personality; many trainers just cannot muster up that required softness needed to finish a dog that will demonstrate that sincere fondness for their work, following the strict training our Utility and Invitational tests demand.

I witnessed this same positive attitude in several dogs back when I competed in AKC Retriever Field Trials. Linda Harger has always had her Chesapeakes working with a high tail and demonstrated the retrieving drive that made the entire gallery stretch a little taller when watching her dogs perform. This was the same when Val Walker came to the line with one of her Golden Retrievers. I have witnessed Linda using that soft,

loving praise, and also give one of her Chessies a total ass-chewing when needed. Today, as I pay more attention to our NAVHDA women as trainers and handlers applying that soft/sincere voice, I am reminded of Linda Harger and Val Walker and their success in AKC trials. Also, having judged Marilyn Vetter, Cheryl Aguiar, Bridget Nielsen, and Sheryl Tepp during my past judging career, I have seen the same female training ability as these retriever women of my past. That soft, caring voice when performance is correct, and a sharp, harsh command when performance is not correct. It seems to come more natural for women. Maybe this is why most remember a female as their favorite teacher. Maybe finding our feminine inner side isn’t such a bad thing after all.

Dog training and coaching seem to have many similarities for finding success. My high school football coach, Red Victor, is 93 years old now and I never go back home to my roots without looking him up and requesting a round of golf with him. When my Dad was killed in a wood cutting accident, Red was the first person to check on me with concerns of how I was accepting the tragedy; he also was the coach that kicked me off the basketball team my junior year for drinking beer and breaking his team rules. Way back then there was this soft and harsh approach to teaching and coaching; it has certainly taken me a bundle of years to understand the benefits, however.

Good luck acquiring that sincere, soft praise and “Keep your powder dry”...Bob 🐾



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