

# ON THE RIGHT TRACK

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## Addressing Flagging

In a previous article I explored flagging and whether it's created or inherent. This article will focus on how it may have been created, some possible avenues to address the problem, and, more importantly, how to avoid it altogether. I think it's prudent to review what our Aims, Programs, Test Rules book states regarding pointing: "The pointing stance must be intense, convincing, and unmistakable as a point and, in the end, the point must be productive."

Will your dog be penalized for flagging in a NAVHDA test? It really depends on how bad the flagging is. If the dog is very intense and flags slightly, then it probably will not be penalized. If the dog is flagging so much the back of the dog is moving around, then, yes, it absolutely will be penalized. That would be another example of why we score from 0 to 4 in every aspect of testing—it all depends on the severity and will be scored appropriately.

To fix any problem, the problem must first be diagnosed. This may take a bit of self-identification and soul searching to really try and understand what created the flagging issue. For some people this is a difficult task, and one must take a very good look at their training practices. Someone, who was probably famous, once said, "Repeating the same behavior, and hoping for a different outcome, is the definition of insanity." The same goes true for dog training. If you are not getting a desired outcome, and repeating the same behavior, it might be time to change your approach to training. All dogs are different and require different approaches. Give them what they need, and don't give them what they don't need. If your dog is exhibiting unwanted behavior of any kind, it's because you are allowing that behavior to happen. I know this seems elementary, but in

fact it is. Unwanted behavior needs to be corrected; positive behavior needs to be rewarded in the form of praise—lavish praise. Dogs live in a very black and white world, so keep it very black and white for them. Uncertainty from you and your training methods create grey areas in dogs; it really muddies the water for them, and manifests confusion and a lack of confidence in the dog. A confused dog makes mistakes, and dogs that have not fully been taught the expectation, and are disciplined for mistakes, further adds to the confusion and also creates a lack of confidence.

In my opinion, flagging is created mostly by poor bird management. Some people will say their dog flags because they have given them too many pen-raised birds. I don't really think it's the amount of pen-raised birds used, I think it's the way the birds are being used. Some flaggers that I've seen are doing so out of boredom—same old thing in the same old field...point, kick, shoot, retrieve...point, kick, shoot, retrieve, etc. The dog is completely bored and his intelligence has been insulted—there is nothing in it for him. Other dog's flag because they have been allowed to cat-walk and creep on their birds. These dogs will often tighten if they can see the bird, or are allowed to get very close in the scent cone. Other dogs flag because of poor check-cord use; constantly tugging and checking the dog into birds may create dancing and flagging. Still others will flag in anticipation of the retrieve, because they have been allowed to get every retrieve in the field, and most likely have been allowed to get away with poor steadiness.

People will say things like, "My dog never flagged as a puppy, but now flags on every bird." ...poor bird management. I can't tell you how many people I've seen show up every Saturday



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with two or three birds. They will do the same thing and expect a different outcome. These same people will allow the dog to creep on point, take steps or break on steadiness, and allow the retrieve, while all the time yelling at their dog to whoa. They have created confusion and a lack of confidence in the dog, sometimes resulting in myriad issues, including flagging. I would rather see those same people show up once a month with a dozen birds and teach the dog something. Some dogs will flag only when they are aware of the presence of the handler. In our rules, pointing ends when the dog is aware of the presence

of the handler, but this is still something I would want to fix. Sometimes issues left unaddressed become bigger issues.

Let's explore some possible fixes. It should be noted that there are many reasons why dogs flag, so a handler may have to try many different ways to fix that problem. Again, take a hard look at your training and try very hard to diagnose the issue before trying 10 different things, which may backfire and create further confusion and a lack of confidence in the dog. One thing is a sure cure for flagging: wild birds and lots of them. I can't remember, if ever, that I've seen a flagger

exhibit the same behavior on wild birds. The beauty of lots of wild birds is that they tend to fix a lot of dog problems, including flagging, cat walking and creeping, to name a few. Never allow dogs to creep on point, once the point is established any forward movement from the dog should result in the bird being released with no shot and no retrieve. This may take a lot of birds...don't be cheap on your birds—you can't train a bird dog without lots of birds. Separate your training, meaning please don't try to fix flagging, steadiness and retrieving all at the same time in the field with three birds. Fix the bigger issue first and build confidence, then move on to correct other issues.

I always try to keep my personal involvement in the presence of game to a very minimal level. I want the birds to dictate what happens to the dog, or at least I want them to think that. When my dog is on point I generally say nothing, if I say anything at all I may say "good boy" in a very soft tone. Some people, as soon as their dog goes on point, will start whoaing the dog immediately and repeatedly, because they are so afraid the dog will break. Let the dog break and make your correction. These same people, after screaming whoa repeatedly, letting the dog take steps or break, and letting the dog leave early before being released, will, 100% of the time, let that dog have the retrieve. They have, in essence, given them the green light to be disobedient, creating confusion and a lack of confidence. Sometimes this results in flagging. If your dog only flags when he is aware of your presence, then try popping birds prior to you getting to the dog. Set up multiple traps, and pop multiple birds. If your dog flags all the time you may want to try and throw a few birds as you're walking up to the dog, maybe fire a shot or two, maybe kill more than one bird...build their intensity, so they never

know how many birds are there and what is going to happen. I personally will rarely give my dog every retrieve in a field run, even if they are perfect on every bird. I never want them to anticipate when they will be sent for the retrieve. I will walk out, pick up the bird, put it in my bag, say nothing and move on. I also never release my dog remotely; I always, always, go back to the dog and pause for varying amounts of time before I release the dog. This may fix the flagger who is anticipating the retrieve.

The best advice I can give you is to keep your training fresh and different. Dogs get bored with the same old same old, which often will result in unwanted behavior, like flagging. Think about what you're doing and develop a game plan. Find people in your chapter or training group who are more experienced than you and stick with them. Demand excellence and reward good behavior with lavish praise. Make your corrections immediately and get on with it. Try very hard not to nag and insult their intelligence. Remember...keep it simple, black and white, and avoid grey areas. Dogs are pack animals, not people—each dog will learn at a different pace.

Good luck and good hunting. 🐾

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*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 the NAVHDA Office at [navoffice@navhda.org](mailto:navoffice@navhda.org) with "On the Right Track" in the subject line.*

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Mark Whalen has been a member of the Potomac Chapter in Maryland since 1986. He has held various positions within the Potomac Chapter over the years, including Test Secretary, Membership Secretary, Vice President, and President. Mark became a NAVHDA Judge in 2003 and a Senior Judge in 2008. He is also a Clinic Leader and has judged at the Invitational level since 2009. In addition, Mark is currently the Program Manager for the NAVHDA Apprentice Judge Program. Mark resides in Poolesville, Maryland with his wife, Jennifer, his two daughters, Erin and Kelly, and their two German Shorthaired Pointers. For the last 16 years, Mark has worked for Sodexo USA, which is a global food and facilities management company. He is a District Manager for Sodexo, and his territory encompasses the entire state of Pennsylvania. Mark is an avid hunter and can often be found in the salt marshes of Maryland's Eastern Shore, pursuing waterfowl and Maryland's elusive Sika Deer throughout the fall and winter months. He also loves to bird hunt and has made annual trips to North Dakota and Kansas for over 20 years.