

ON THE RIGHT TRACK

By Mark Whalen
Poolesville, Maryland

Q: • I have just finished my Natural Ability Test, and I would like to start training for Utility.
• This is my first dog, and I'm not quite sure how to prepare for the next level. What should I be doing to get ready for Utility?

A: • Prior to running the NA test I like to give my dogs lots of birds. As I've stated in many previous articles, don't be cheap with your birds. You can't train a bird dog without birds. I want them to be very confident and comfortable in the presence of game. When they are pointing intensely, and I can at least walk up to flush the bird before the dog breaks, I will shoot every fourth or fifth bird for them. I also want them to be 'fairly' steady. When I say 'fairly,' I mean that I want the dog to be at least steady to flush and, hopefully, steady to wing. I like to do this with a combination of traps and free birds. So, if you have not done this prior to your NA test, that is where I would start. After that will come the most difficult and most important thing you will ever do with your dog: force breaking.

I, along with many others, have written numerous articles on force breaking, so this will not be a "how-to" on force

breaking. When you look at the UT test there are many opportunities for retrieving. Properly force breaking will be crucial to your success in a UT test. If this will be your first time force breaking, I would strongly suggest you solicit help from another member who knows how to do it properly and has trained multiple dogs at higher levels. If this is not an option, or if you believe force breaking is not something you can handle, I would suggest you send the dog out to a professional. Thankfully, NAVHDA has many excellent professional trainers in the ranks that can force break your dog. Quite frankly, force breaking isn't for everyone; newer people sometimes struggle and toil with it, creating a lot of confusion and gray areas for the dog. Knowing when to hold em', when to fold em', when to push, and when to back off only comes with experience. When force breaking is done properly it will pay dividends to you in the future, when done improperly it will be an exercise in

frustration. In my opinion, force breaking separates Prize I UT dogs from all the rest.

After force breaking, I will put my dog back in the field to revisit steadiness. I will let them break on the shot, but anything prior to the shot will not be acceptable. I will demand flawless retrieving and a clean finish on all birds, and I will expect excellent manners and heeling. Duck search training will now begin.

The second most important thing for a UT dog is duck search training. Please remember, if you're after a UT Prize I then you must earn a '4' in duck search. Again, we won't dive in to duck search training in this article, but the same general rules apply: find some help from someone who knows how to do it and consistently gets '4' duck searches. The same rule that applies to birds applies to ducks as well: don't be cheap on your ducks! Give your dog good, lively ducks, and lots of them.

I personally will never throw a duck from the bank, I will never use a dead duck, and I will rarely shoot from the bank. I want my dog getting multiple duck contacts every time he is in the water, with multiple retrieves and multiple ducks chased and shot. I get out there with them in a kayak, and then wean them off the boat after I build a duck-searching machine. I want to imprint on the dog that any piece of water I take him to is full of ducks... "Go get 'em, and don't come back here until you do."

It's much better to do duck search training once a month with six ducks, than it is to do it every week with one. Once or twice a week with four or five ducks is optimal. Yep... training a bird dog is expensive!

So, what's next?

I will then put the dog back in field to clean up the entire steadiness sequence. The dog is already steady to flush and wing, getting him steady to shot and fall will not be difficult.



JAY HOTH © 2018

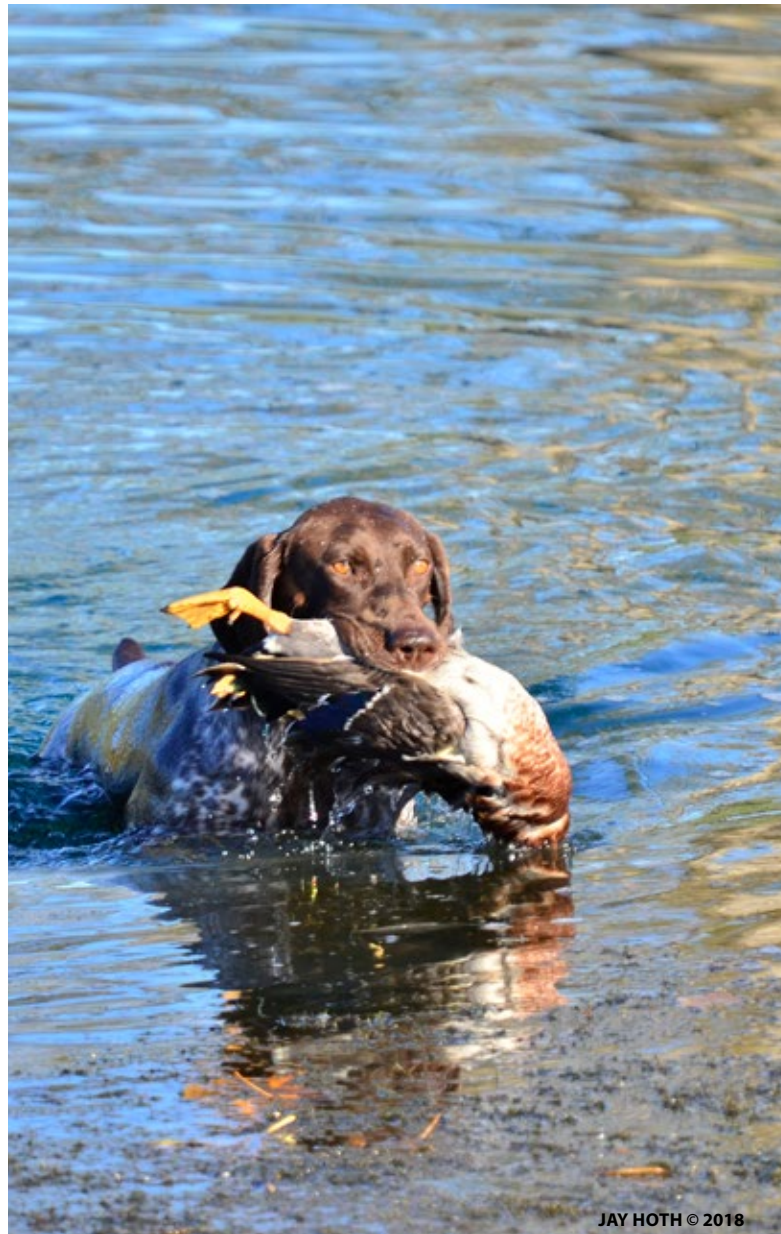
At the same time I will work in some drags, not too many, just a few. Drags are no problem for a dog that has been properly force broken. I will, of course, continue to demand flawless retrieving and excellent heeling.

So, now you have a dog that retrieves any type of bird, tears up his duck search, and is steady to flush, wing, shot and fall.

Now I will work on my blind sequence. Heeling is not a problem because you have set the expectation for excellent heeling during the force breaking process and continued to demand excellence. I will then work on the remaining by the blind sequence with the dog and the retrieve of duck. For this, and everything else, I try to train above the test. Sometimes I fire multiple shots at remaining by the blind six, eight, or even ten. I also add distractions at remaining by the blind—like birds coming out of traps, wingers going off, etc. The same is true for the duck retrieve sequence... multiple birds, multiple shots, multiple distractions. I try very hard to keep it fresh and keep it different in an effort to avoid boredom for the dog.

Good luck with your UT training!! 🐾

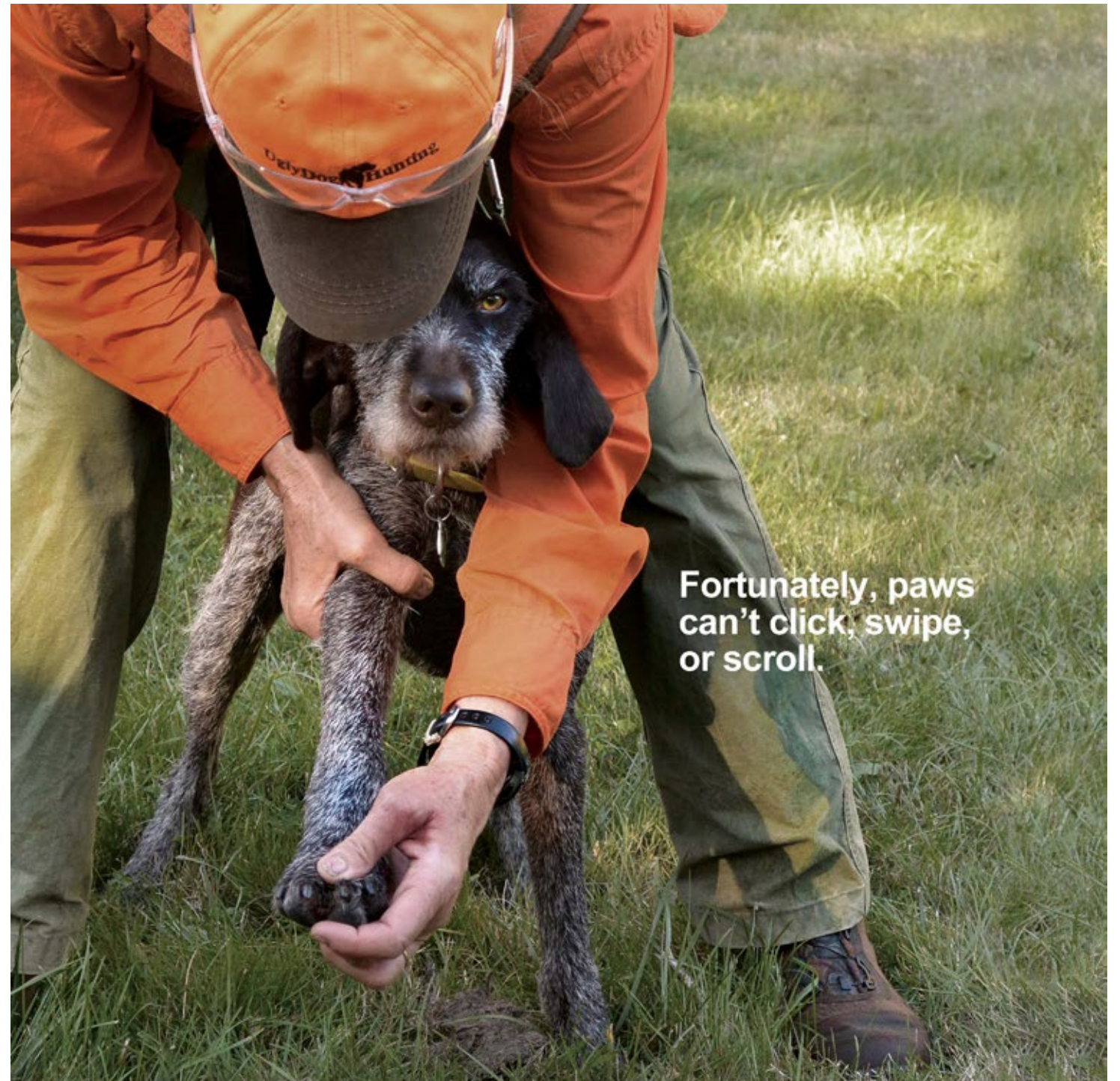
A group of knowledgeable judges and trainers has been assembled and are available to answer your questions about training and testing. The topic will vary each month based on the questions we receive from our VHD readers. Please send your questions to vhd@navhda.org with "On the Right Track" in the subject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



JAY HOTH © 2018



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 20 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.



Fortunately, paws can't click, swipe, or scroll.

If so, you might find your four-legged hunting partner maxing out your credit cards shopping at Ugly Dog. We carry an impressively large inventory of field-tested, dog-approved hunting gear, clothes and equipment. Order online 24/7 or by phone Monday - Friday 9 to 4 eastern.

uglydoghunting.com 877-982-7054

