

Third Dog's Charm

PART 1

By Jason Rice
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Over the last nine years, I have been fortunate to have two wonderful and talented Wirehaired Pointing Griffons. Unfortunately, they went home with a rookie versatile dog trainer, and we all learned a lot together! In early 2022, I brought home my third Griffon puppy, and I was determined to apply what I learned with the first two dogs to streamline this pup's training and testing path.

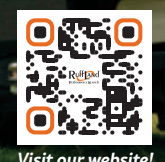
My First Dog - Whelped 1/7/2014, JX's Fiona Piper (NA 98 III, UT 185 III). We started going to training days with the Big Sky Chapter in the Spring of 2014. Piper showed very high prey drive and was a bit too much to handle for me as a new handler. The Chapter helped me work through many of those challenges. At her Natural Ability test, we got a Prize III due to swimming, but she was amazing in the Field and Track portions. Because I did not do much duck hunting, my early intentions were not to train her toward the Utility test. I did want a well-trained dog though, so I participated with the other chapter members, and focused mostly on field training. Looking back, Piper struggled with the duck search due to my lack of early training in that area and perhaps her lower drive for water, but nevertheless, she ended up being a great hunting dog.

Piper unexpectedly passed away one year ago at the young age of 8 after a great weekend doing what she loved to do most, hunting with me. We had many great hunting seasons together. Although I would have wanted more, she did die in peace.

My Second Dog - Whelped 6/20/2017, Pipestar's Knut Keh-Ute (NA 108 II, UT 191 II). We were convinced to breed Piper, and Knut was one of the 14 puppies that yielded a Breeder's Award. He is a very eager hunter and struggles with the balance of his desire to hunt and lower cooperation. Yes, there was a bit of playing "keep away" with birds during his NA test! I attempted to do a better job introducing the task of duck search, but, unfortunately, my lack of discipline put Knut in the field for steadiness prior to truly getting him to understand the independence needed for duck search. He also struggled with his retrieve as a

result of me trying a different method and not having the wisdom to go back and put a proper force break on him. He still did great in the end and is every bit of the hunter that I need, which is the most important thing to me anyway.

My Third Dog - Whelped 1/12/2022, De Jac's Ziggy Sigg (NA 84 III, UT 199 I). Sigg is the subject of this story. At the passing of Piper, I realized that, although time for grieving would be good, I also would want a puppy that was born at the right time of the year to get her first hunting season. I was fortunate to know of a stud dog that had a direct sibling to Piper in his progeny as well as being a Prize I Utility Dog, Rocky Mountain Griffon's Absaroka (call name - Monty). I



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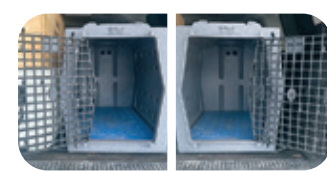
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contacted Monty's owner, Pete Aplikowski, to see if there had been any recent breeding and was put in contact with Julie Carlstrom of De Jac Pines Kennels.

In picking out our puppy, I wanted to get one that would have the independence and boldness to do a great duck search. I researched some temperament testing things you can do and gave it a try.

The following schedule is the progression I took for Siggy. Whereas this is similar to what many dogs may go through, not all dogs are the same and you should read the dog's progression and work with your chapter or other local resources if this is your first time. Siggy is an exceptionally cooperative dog and I now know what not to let them get away with, so this timeline may be aggressive for your pup.

March 2022 (2 Months) – I picked Siggy up in Wisconsin on March 1, 2022. She traveled well in our pet carry-on bag. We had two male dogs in the house and the introduction took some time for them to get used to little Siggy. I started playing fetch in the house with a treat for reward and lots of excitement. I always make my dogs wait for their food to bring out their cooperation. I was nervous that this bolder dog would not take to it. I was pleasantly surprised when I started to set the food down, she charged in, I picked it up, and the next thing you know, she was waiting there looking at me until I set it down. She was showing good signs of intelligence and cooperation early! We were also working on socialization. We took her to the Pheasants Forever

Banquet where she stole the show! By the end of the month, she had also chased a homer or two and waded in shallow water.

April 2022 (3 Months) – I spent a lot of time walking her alone, as well as with our pack to build her confidence. We tried to visit places where there would be bird scent and dark “scary” corners so that she could learn to control her emotions and have fun. I recall encountering a covey of Hungarian Partridge. She started hunting and followed scent to a roost. In catching some training pigeons, we got a younger squeaker, which I gave to her as a wing clipped bird. We have normally used this as a way to build bird drive, and she may not have needed this (as discussed below in May). By the end of the month, the water warmed up enough that we could include wading through water with her following me and swimming some.

We started working on fun obedience tasks in the basement. The first activities included “place” and recall. We continued to work on all of this throughout her development discussed below.

May 2022 (4 Months) - After introducing a squeaker or two in April, we introduced launchers and started working Homing Pigeons. However, I now believe that I inadvertently taught her that catching pigeons was the name of the game. We popped LOTS of pigeons that flew away with little Siggy on their tail feathers. We would shoot in the background while she chased, and she showed no signs of gun shyness.

By the end of the month, I was getting a bit impatient. Based on other signs, I felt that showing her the picture would help put it all together. At our chapter's test at the end of May, I had a couple of kill pigeons and we worked her into the area on a LOOSE check cord. As she encountered scent, I nudged her into a point. We flushed the pigeons and shot them and allowed her to get them in her mouth. She did try to run away with them, but with her check cord on, we could catch her. We returned home, and she decided she was a pointer after all! The trick worked. Funny story is that she had a play activity where she would lie down to “hide” from the other dogs and then ambush them. On her first point, she hit the ground in the scent cone and slowly raised to her feet. It was fun to see her point develop as it was different than so many other puppies that I help in our chapter at training days.

June 2022 (5 Months) - On a tip from a friend, I then ran her with the older dog since he ran much bigger. On his first point, when she saw him, I immediately popped the Homing Pigeon. She backed him and other dogs from that moment on. I would use Homing Pigeons to work on her steady to flush. There was no pressure other than the loss of a bird. When I walked up to and in front of her, if she moved, the pigeon was released. She figured that out quickly.

We now had her pointing, but I wanted to keep developing her search and desire to search. We were killing pigeons for her at training days. However, she was a bit greedy with those birds in the early days. It was probably a result of my mistake with the squeaker as her intro bird. I suspect she got a taste of the blood. We did our best to mitigate that and I slowed up on killing birds, but she really thought that bird was her lunch!

I had prior issues with Knut catching chukar after the flush in his NA test, so Siggy's greediness had me nervous since I was running her so young. I decided to try to teach her not to full chase birds and use her cooperation in my favor. When working Homing Pigeons, I would carry a dead bird or two. When I flushed it, she would chase and I would say “no bird.” When she finally got done chasing and returned and looked at me, I would hand her a dead bird. She thought this was amazing! Next thing you know, she was steady to wing! She would stand and watch the Homing Pigeon fly away and then look at me without any commands. I then would hand her the dead bird. We didn't put a ton of pressure on this, but it seemed that she was steady to wing with little effort.

I was in the Apprentice Judge Program as well in 2022. I had planned to run Knut one last time in Utility, so to make sure I could make as many Apprenticeship days as possible, I decided to run Siggy in our June test at 5 months old on the same day I was running Knut. I started introducing track, but her search work was making it tough for this young pup to concentrate. She started

to get it, but I knew it would be a weak spot for her. She ended up getting 1 in track and therefore, a Prize III.

July 2022 (6 Months) - I had no intention of re-running Siggy's NA since I planned to run her through Utility eventually. Since tracking is important to me as a hunter, we continued doing drags. After 2 weeks, she was nailing it. I had purchased a couple leftover ducks from our June test for intro to Siggy. I had heard of a method to train track with a duck. We taped the bill making sure to leave the airways open and wing clipped it. I held her collar and threw the duck out into a field. Once the duck ran off a bit, I released her and she ran to where it landed and tracked it down and tackled it. Duck introduction on land was complete! It was suggested that perhaps I should introduce e-collar to her sooner than normal if I wanted to keep working shot birds based on her greedy nature, which meant we needed to spend some time back in “the yard.” I started by using my away and stay commands. I used “kennel,” where she went away to the kennel and “place.” I had also named whoa as “stay where you are” and reinforced that with light e-collar stimulation. Once she had all that, I introduced “here” with the e-collar as well to establish a more reliable recall.

August 2022 (7 Months) - As I worked through my apprenticeship, we worked on duck intro. We would find shallow, smaller ponds and throw a duck out that she could mark and let her chase. She learned that diving ducks eventually came up and that if she used the wind and her nose, she could find them. I would eventually make sure that I shot the duck to associate the shot with duck and that she catches it when I shoot it. I also started doing duck drags just to keep reinforcing her track and work on her confidence to work independently at long distances from me. I recall while training after a test in North Dakota that she actually tracked a long duck drag really well, but then lost it. She then went into a nice search on land and found the duck. By now, she had figured out that bringing birds back was pretty cool. I continued to work on building confidence in working away from me.

September - October 2022 (8-9 Months) - Hunting Season! Part 1. We headed to SW Montana for Sage Grouse. Siggy mostly hunted with Knut. She searched well and we were fortunate to harvest a couple. One was a boomer and she got the retrieve. It was winged and running through the sage brush. The bird was as tall as she was! She brought it back to hand.

We headed to eastern Montana for opening of Pheasants and targeted Sharptail and Hungarian Partridge. We had a very successful hunt, and Siggy did great. I ran her on opening day of Pheasant season, and we had a limit within 3 hours with some really nicely worked birds. We had many days afield the rest of the season, including a second trip to eastern Montana where she did a solo hunt with my brother-in-law. She handled great for him and was well on her way to becoming a great bird dog. 🐾

Third Dog's A Charm **PART 2**

By Jason Rice
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November - Dec 2022 (10-11 Months) - Hunting Season - Part 2. As the season progressed, I had missed out on some duck hunting with Siggy and it got cold. We still found some opportunities to do some jump shooting. On one trip, we struck out on ducks, but were able to bump a rooster. She then went on point and out came two roosters. I knocked them both down across the marsh through the woods. She was able to retrieve one, but had not been force fetched yet so we went on a search and located the second. No ducks, but a day to remember for sure.

We had other days where we were able to find some ducks. Nearly all of them were not visual marks, so I was able to use my “dead bird” command as she searched. Overlaying this command was part of getting her going on duck search, and I always use this when I knock down a bird when she is searching.

We started working on hold and carry during hunting season as I wanted to extend this timeline and was waiting to do the full pressure portion until our chapter held their force fetch seminar with Mark Whalen. I would also hide toys in the house and send her on “dead bird” searches to keep her brain working when not hunting.

There is a public golf course near our house that allows us to walk dogs in the off season. I had some frozen birds and started to do some “duck searches” in the cattails to get her to associate that habitat with the task. She was too fast for the small potholes, so we transitioned away from this fairly quickly.

January - April 2023 (12-15 Months) - I started doing really long duck drags in frozen reed/cattail areas to build her desire for the task and independence to work away from me. We worked up to 400 yard drags by the end of April in frozen sloughs.

Our chapter had Mark Whalen in for a force fetch clinic mid-February. I started with the program imme-

diately after and due to her natural retrieve, we progressed quickly. We included live and fresh killed birds into the mix in the garage. Since I had never done that, I of course had holes in my training. We worked up to 50-yard pile drills, including wagon wheels, by the end of April.

At this point, she was retrieving well. I suspected her duck search was good and she was steady to the shot with very little pressure. I had entered our chapter's August Utility test thinking I would run her in the Utility Preparatory test to get her testing experience. I did not want to work too much pressure into her steadiness until we had a good duck search, and I was also being conscious of her young age.

May 2023 (16 Months) - I really believe in the “Go before Whoa” concept of training a versatile dog toward a Utility Test and being a “finished” dog. In short, the theory is to ensure the dog has proven its independence in working away from the handler (duck search) before “putting the brakes on” with the heavy levels of obedience required for full steadiness. This is more important for dogs that have high levels of cooperation and like to work close to the handler. We were working on our duck searches as we headed into May. I would plant 3 to 4 ducks hard in known places and row out in the kayak, shoot the water, and give my “dead bird” command. She did very well with this early on. Before too long, I was able to shoot in the air and she would go. We got to where she would resend after her first find, but seemed to get sticky after a bit without a shot. I would encourage her and get her to find a second bird, which helped some.

I decided that I should start some steadiness work, but did not want to apply too much pressure. I worked on two tasks. One was to bring the place board out to the field and throw birds with a shot in the air. This task seemed to be too easy and a bit boring. I decided



to use my “no bird” on homing pigeons for the shot. I would launch a pigeon, shoot, she would break, I said no bird, and you could see the switch turn on... she stopped! I handed her a bird. Before long, she was steady through the shot, but I was not killing birds yet. I had overlaid a stop at “whoa” so that I could verbally stop her while running in the field. I used this to overlay whoa with a gun shot while running in the field with no other distractions. I also overlaid a stop to flush with homing pigeons launched without the presence of scent.

I strongly believe that the hit bird and falling bird is hard to take for these hunting dogs when on point. I broke down that portion by giving a whoa command to stop her in the field, hooking a lead just in case, and then a helper would walk in front and kick some cover. They then released a kill bird and shot it. Of course, she tried to break, but I would give a “whoa” on the shot and she started to get it. Since I had a good foundation of whoa and teamwork, we progressed through pigeons and moved on to allowing her to point prior to the kill. By the end of May, I decided to move on to Chukar. I started the same where we did not allow a point. Rather, I walked in front of a verbally whoa’d Siggy, kicked the grass, and released the bird. I started by not shooting to make sure she was steady to wing on a chukar, which she was. We then went to shooting them without pointing. Within a couple days, we were able to officially work birds and shoot off of a point. I still had to give a couple of commands, but we were making progress!

June 2023 (17 Months) - Through June and July, we continued to work birds and refine her obedience for our Field Work. We decreased the amount of duck searches but tried to keep them in the routine. We started working on the heel and steadiness at blind work. We had a good foundation of healing as part of our ongoing home obedience. Her field steadiness foundation was also solid, so that part was pretty easy for her. However, she did not mark the retrieve very well early on. On my next round, we did a much closer



toss of the duck and used a real dead duck. Once she saw it and retrieved the duck, she had no issue keeping an eye out moving forward. At one point, we used a Dokken duck, as we just didn’t have a real dead duck. When she got to the decoys, she turned and lifted her head and started back out. I suspected it was to look for a real duck! This gave me a good chance to reinforce her water retrieve work.

She was also old enough to start running longer distances. We started mountain biking to get her and Knut in better condition. It was also good motivation for my conditioning!

Her duck searches were still going well, but sometimes she would get a bit sticky after about 2 to 3 minutes when resent after her first find. I would use a “NO!” and “Dead Bird.” This worked and she would start finding the second or third ducks, which then gave her the belief that when I sent her, there was always something out there. Occasionally, I would go out in the boat to help her, not if she was in quit mode, but only if she was out there and I wanted to end the session but she had not found a duck yet. I always wanted to end in success.

July 2023 (18 Months) - July was spent basically trying to run test day scenarios with large groups and shooters. We also tried to take some time off so that it would not get boring and continued our conditioning.

August 11, 2023 (19 Months) - Test day! I knew heading in that Siggy was doing great duck searches. However, I also knew that on any given day, there was a 5-10% chance she could lose confidence on duck search, but I felt very good about all other tasks. In the field, she had a retrieve of shot bird where it was squawking and kicking. She set it down! I could not believe it. She also paused on one retrieve prior to pick up. We ended up with a 3 on retrieve of shot bird. I realized that I had made an error in training. I usually made sure birds were dead and should have set up some partially shot birds. The duck drag went well. Her heeling had been really good forever. However, I took a bad route in the last 10 feet and she dropped behind me. Although the leash did not go tight, it was enough for a deduction and she got a 3. At the steady sequence, she seemed to get distracted by the winger as it was more in her line of sight than in the past, and on her return with the duck, the blind seemed to be catching her eye. When she turned with the duck in mouth, she looked distracted again, but did complete the retrieve well enough to still receive a 4. Heading into the Duck Search, I felt that, unless I had really missed something, we were in contention for a Prize I. I stepped up for the longest 10 minutes in NAVHDA, shot, and sent her. She took off and tore it up! She went to the far reaches of our marsh and was moving wild ducks. When I heard the judges say at 8 minutes that it would take her 5 minutes just to get back and to call the dog, I knew we had a 4 in duck search. Siggy and I earned a 199 and Prize I.

After so many years of trying to get to this level, I have to thank so many people who have given me guidance, Siggy for her non-stop desire to please, and Piper and Knut for allowing me to figure this all out! I look forward to continuing my work with Siggy toward the Invitational. My promise to her will be to keep having fun and not pushing too hard. We will continue working on our training goals and tasks, but, more importantly, is that I do not tarnish our relationship for hunting! 🐾

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