

Total Steadiness, start at the finish

by Jeff Martin



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The goal of the German Testing System is to have a dog that is 100% reliable at remaining stationary from the flight, shot and fall of all game and remain so until commanded to move.

At VGP level with a thoroughly trained versatile hunting dog, this is supposed to be done without the need for a single command. Under practical hunting situations this pays huge dividends where the hunter can have his undivided attention on the shooting rather than what his dog is doing. When hunting Chukars or Huns it's common for the covey to flush as you approach but still a long distance from the pointing dog and it's just as common to see singles or stragglers flush after you've shot at the first flush . A steady dog

allows you to reload and take these singles birds in an efficient manner, rather than watching the unsteady dog dangerously in front of the guns chasing the covey over the rise and out of sight for 10 minutes wasting both time and energy, while you look for downed birds !?!

What I'm going to outline is a step by step approach trained under controlled conditions that will allow the dog to learn what's expected, in small increments that will achieve a totally steady dog with zero commands needed, with the added bonus that the dog will stop to wild flushes of undetected game without a single command. Many people use the " knock'em down , beat'em up , drag'em out " approach but this is totally unnecessary if taught in a step by step approach with the dog clearly understanding what it's expected to do at each step before moving onto the next.

When to start ?? I'm a big believer in avoiding bad habits that then have to be fixed later, its wasting time. For this reason I don't like to see young dogs chasing and possibly catching birds in training and another reason I don't believe in hunting a dog before its thoroughly under control. This is a common mistake with rooky trainers and young dogs eager to see their dog "hunting", one or two experiences like this, then the flush and shot becomes the "go" command , the complete opposite to what you want !! With very young dogs initially it's a great idea to get them out into swamps and fields to build confidence and desire with

exposure to game BUT the big difference is they will rarely catch anything and be rewarded for chasing. Wild birds don't get caught!!

Remember train to the age and progress of your individual dog. If your dog is say 18 months old and is entered in a Derby, steadiness isn't required at this test but at this age your training will likely have progressed to Solms requirements and you will be doing the Solms or fall test in another 4mths where having a dog pointing with some control IS required. Note at Solms level the dog only has to hold point until the handler gets within shotgun range and can flush the bird. The dog can chase a little at the flush but should be easily brought under control with voice commands. I've had dogs at Solms level completely steadiness-trained even at 1 year old in an effort to avoid establishing chasing that will then have to be corrected.

3 dogs in 1, Remember you are training:

- a) the pointer (high headed field searching and scenting, then hesitating when game detected)
- b) the retriever (try to catch or collect without any hesitation when game detected)
- c) the tracker (head down tracking or trailing a scent to retrieve without hesitation).

ALL are opposing instincts and the dog should be taught with cues what is needed and when. Some dogs whether naturally or through training are more retrieving dominant than pointing, this method of teaching the dog steadiness, manners and self-control around live birds actually improves the dogs pointing. You adjust the balance between pointing and retrieving.

Equipment needed, A flat collar with an 10 -15 foot check-cord attached to it , a starter pistol and a source of live pigeons . You can trap pigeons for use but ideally I keep a few pigeons trained to home or return to a loft. That way they can be used over and over when training your dog and hopefully you can use these pigeons and starter pistol in your backyard for daily lessons without wasting time driving to training grounds. Ideally teaching steadiness should start after you have established a rapport or bond with the dog and it's been taught or mastered some basic obedience like sit, come, downstay etc. I will put the steps involved in point form for clarity:

1. Teach the "HALT" command. I use this instead of "whoa" as its stronger sounding shorter and sharper. Have the dog on a check-cord standing beside you then command "halt" with an accompanying flat hand signal at waste level. Your dog may mistake this cue for the sit cue (high flat hand above the shoulder). If he sits just gently pick him up into the standing position as you repeat HALT. Praise the dog for standing motionless for a few seconds then

release the dog with your normal release command (I use “let’s go “some use OK etc). Repeat a couple more times then go feed your dog or crate him to think about it. After three or four repeats of this lesson morning and night over a couple of days your dog will be standing motionless on command. At this stage if your dog so much as moves a foot, reposition that foot (without panicking him, its showing not punishing him), and the goal is to have the dog standing motionless. Once the dog understands this thoroughly, you can walk to the side and then eventually completely around him to extend the lesson. Again if he moves a leg reposition it, if he moves bodily pick him up and reposition him completely back to the exact spot he was standing always with a repeat of the HALT. Another distraction to reinforce standing motionless is to put a slight pressure on the lead and if he mistakes this for moving, reposition him, this will teach the dog to be more reliant on waiting for the release command.

2. Once your dog has lesson #1 mastered command HALT, step away in front of the dog while holding or being ready to grab the check-cord , then fire your starter pistol. Your dog will likely break and it’s important to reposition him immediately, you can even growl your disapproval as you reposition him. Repeat this over a few lessons until he remains standing and the gunfire does not mean the “go” command. Extend this over time by firing a second or third shot increasing the distraction.
3. Next progression is to have a live pigeon in the vest of your training jacket and your dog on lead. Command Halt and step away in front of the dog as per usual, while watching the dog intently pull the pigeon out and let it fly away. Your dog will likely chase, STOP HIM IMEDIATELY, growl your disapproval and gruffly reposition back to the exact place he was. The lead can have a few knots in it so it’s easier to step on or hold. If your dog is big and you’re not, stay close to him so you’re not trying to stop a big dog in full flight. This lesson is probably going to be the most difficult for most people. It is going to depend on does the dog have rapor with you from previous obedience lessons and from those lessons does he respect your authority at all. Most dogs will figure out what’s required , with a hard headed dog with little respect established you may have to flail him with a riding crop as you reposition him , this is the exception rather than the norm.

Extend this once your dog understands and is remaining steady to one bird by throwing a second or third pigeon. Your dog will think of you as all great things coming from you and will watch you intently once you command halt. The dog will also get birdy and almost stiff as if pointing in anticipation of you tossing a bird, we are now using the dog’s instincts in your favor!!

You will note I haven't talked about using the E-collar and I don't. I want to establish, under controlled conditions, that I am the authority and the dog better respect it. You can't test with an E-collar so why become dependent on it, plus my hand or voice commands never go flat or run out of battery.

4. At about this stage I tape a pigeon or contain it in a Velcro strap so it can't flap its wings or walk and place it in my vest. Command halt as per usual, then bring out the bird, the dog will be pointing waiting for it to fly. Instead holding it with both hands move it closer to the dogs head, gently repeating "no". Your dog will be in pointing mode, if he flips to "retrieve" mode quickly slip the bird back into your vest and gruffly reposition him and repeating halt. Try again and over a number of lessons you can even push the bird near the dogs head and if he tries to grab it crack him on the nose with your knuckles. Do this gently enough that he learns he can enjoy the bird this close only if he doesn't try to grab it. A few repeats of this will have the dog watching the bird intently but moving his muzzle away as you push it towards him softly repeating NO. Pat yourself on the back you are making real progress!!! You can extend this by placing the unmoving pigeon on the ground in front of the dog even extend the lesson to placing it under the dogs legs or on its back. The goal is teaching super-hündin to remain motionless and it gets to enjoy that bird at close quarters.
5. Your dog has now mastered standing to gunfire plus staying motionless to watch a pigeon fly away at close range. It's time to combine them. Halt the dog and throw the pigeon as per usual allow a couple of seconds then fire a shot with the starter pistol all the time being ready to correct the dog immediately. Throughout this training method, the dog is never allowed to move a single foot once commanded to HALT, this level of obedience is demanded and expected from the very beginning. You can extend this lesson to firing multiple shots.
6. At about this time you can start practising this daily in the yard as you normally feed the dog. Command HALT say 50 meters from his kennel and then take his dinner bowl to the kennel or where you normally feed him. Walk back to the stationary dog and stroke him slowly from head to tail a few times, and then tap him on the head as you give him his release command to go eat. Do this over a few days and your dog will now expect and start waiting for you to return to him and the tap on his head to go. Never let him anticipate the tap on the head and correct any mistakes immediately as per usual.
7. The next extension of this feeding routine is to place the dog on a check-cord, take him out of sight (I assume this has been trained as an extension of the sit command??) and command SIT. Walk to his kennel to place his food bowl,

walk back closer to the corner your dog will be coming around then command COME. As your dog runs into view enroute to his food command HALT and correct him grabbing the check-cord to place him exactly back where you commanded HALT as you repeat the command. It's a good idea to be exactly between the dog and his food so that you can get hold of him and reposition him if he does stop immediately. Stand him up and go through the stroke and tap routine. A couple of repeats over a couple of meals will have the dog understanding. Your dog will now be thinking this guy can always get me every time, so I better comply so I can get to my food ASAP.

8. The next step is the **ultimate training** where the dog is now expected to stop to flush. You will need a shed or somewhere the dog can be placed out of sight. Have the dog on lead as per usual and walk around the corner of the building or out of sight inside the building but the dog must be out of sight. You then walk out maybe 15 yards from where the dog will come into view and command COME. As he comes at full speed around the corner command HALT as you throw the pigeon to fly away. Correct the dog as per usual as he will likely make a mistake on this first lesson. After a few repeats and maybe over a couple of days your dog will start creeping around the corner anticipating the pigeon being thrown , EXCELLENT we are now using the dogs instincts in our favor. If at any time your dog walks around the corner , cheating the sitting out of sight , correct this immediately by taking him back and this time making him wait longer before calling him.

After a few days your dog will be coming into view as you throw the pigeon and stopping of his own accord. You can stop or start minimizing using any command as your dog understands this step and only using a command as a reminder. For the harder dog you can use a slap across the front with the riding crop if necessary.

You can extend this once mastered by throwing the bird and firing the pistol. You can extend this by throwing a pigeon and firing multiple shots, and then throw another pigeon with more multiple shots the whole time your dog is not moving a single muscle, pretty sweet to have completed these steps and reach this level of training with a young dog!!! I don't understand how people think this level of cooperation can ever be achieved shooting birds over an untrained dog??

9. Up to this point all pigeons have flown away specifically so the dog cannot catch them ie the training has been set up to succeed . This next step involves taping with electrical tape the main outer 5 flight feathers one wing and tying 15ft of light cord to one foot. I like using light, stiff orange poly cord as it

doesn't tangle. Have the pigeon in your vest and sit the dog out of sight, call it and throw the bird as per usual. Your dog should stop without command as normal but this time the pigeon will flap down awkwardly 30 feet away. This may trigger the dog into retrieve mode and he will forget his manners and break. Forget what the pigeon is doing, intercept and correct the dog while replacing him back in the exact spot he broke from. Go collect the pigeon which is walking away with a string attached and collect it, bring it back to do the NO drill with the dog standing motionless. This time you can command sit and tell the dog to HOLD the live bird, then the GIVE or release command if this has been trained previously. A few repeats of this and the dog will be remaining totally steady waiting for you to get the bird and bring it back to him for his reward of holding it in his mouth with your praise and patting . Next do this but start firing the pistol as well and expect the same good manners.

10. Once this is mastered instead of collecting it you can give the dog the usual release command and he should stalk after the bird and you can command HALT and expect him to stop. Don't ever let him take out the bird so be ready to physically get in front or be holding the check-cord. You can do this roading or moving after the bird stalking like a cat and then extend it by calling him off the bird using the come command in conjunction with the check-cord to then repoint the pigeon further away to where you've called him . Don't overdo this but it establishes the ultimate control of the dog on point. Most dogs are so focused on their reward in front of them i.e. the bird that they forget about the handler behind them. This establishes better control and manners around birds. This really isn't tested in versatile tests but does come in handy during practical hunting to reposition a pointing dog closer to the covey which has run, while you walked or climbed to the dog on point.

This step by step approach may seem complicated but it really isn't as difficult as it may seem. I've written a lot of detail about what to do at each step so the readers understanding. It results in a bird dog where an ounce of his desire has not been taken out of him and in fact strengthened because he understands clearly what you're expecting so he can get to his goal, the bird.

During all manner of pointing dog tests, you will see birds planted in the most unnatural ways , dizzied until they expire , wet, covered it crap and too weak to even fly . The training I've outlined is to a high level and your dog will be under total control in the field and in the test situation no matter what bad situation happens.

Waidmansheil and good training
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