

The First Season Comes Only Once

By Richard R. Palmer

I BELIEVE most people have an expectation of what they want a hunting dog to develop into when they purchase the pup. These expectations may range from an obedient companion to a field trial champion. In my case, the expectation is for the pup to develop into a highly productive rough-shooting dog — often to eventually replace the waning physical capabilities of my older spaniels. The individual vision of the owner often is reflected in the selection of the breeder, as well as the sire and dam of the litter. The research usually includes health, temperament, pedigree, titles, accomplishments or demonstrated hunting ability of the sire and dam, etc.

Many hunting dog owners believe strongly in the theory that training should begin as soon as possible. A few of us take that to the extreme by introducing the litter of pups to bird scent soon after their eyes open, by taking them out of the whelping box and placing them outside in the grass a few times where their natural curiosity for new smells and textures can be developed. A little later, the pups are taken out into the grass again, where several wild bird wings and tails have been scattered about, and their response is amazing. The increase in animation, even with their limited coordination, is evident. As they inhale the scent of the wings their whole fat little bodies wiggle with excitement. Eventually they mouth the wings for a while, getting a taste of the feathers as well as experiencing the texture.

The purpose of this “drill” is to imprint the pups at an early age to the scent and texture of birds. The key is to let the pups be exposed to the wings and tails for no more than maybe 10 to 15 minutes, so they don't get bored with them. The goal is to have them get very excited every time they are exposed to them. In addition, while the pups are experiencing the wings and tails, I am continually talking to them and praising them in an excited voice and touching them with praise and encouragement.

As the litter gets a little older and more agile, dogs are taken out individually and encouraged to play fetch with wings. I particularly like woodcock wings because of their small size. At this stage the pup is imprinted to chase and retrieve the wings. Getting the pup to deliver the wings to hand is almost effortless at this young age. Again the drill is limited to just a few minutes due to the pup's short attention span. If the pup shows any lack of interest, immediately pick up the wings and stop. Preferably this drill is ended with the pup still wanting more.

By eight weeks of age, when the pups are ready to go to their respective homes, they should all be enthusiastically retrieving woodcock and small ruffed grouse wings to hand. At this point the pups are introduced to the other dogs and new surroundings, and the basic training regimens begin, from housebreaking to obedience. Wing drills continue and are even expanded, by hiding wings around the yard and teaching the pup to course back and forth across the yard in search of them. At this point the pups are also taken on at least three or four walks a week in woods and fields. Besides basic bonding, the pups learn to stay with me and watch me for turns or other changes of direction. This teaches them from an early age to focus on you at all times by checking back and looking for you even when they are excited and “hunting.” Courses should be varied and include different cover types based on the pup's physical abilities.

On the first early walks I prefer to take the pup by itself, to increase the bonding experience and have its full attention. Later, other dogs can be included in the walks that the pups emulate in coursing and hunting. However, the pup should still be taken out individually at times, so it doesn't become used to simply following an older dog. Eventually water, swamps, clearcuts and heavy grass are added to the walks, and some light retrieve and basic whistle work (turn and come) is started during the walks.

This early experience serves as the initial building block for standard training routines and is conducted earlier than the pup would normally be introduced to quartering, 3-man drills, introduction to wing and shot, and other basic spaniel training protocols.

Just when a pup can be taken afield to actually hunt depends on when it was born. Even pups born in late spring may not be ready for full duty the first season, so their first season may actually be the following year. My last pup, for example, was born on September 11, 2007, and her first season was in 2008. All the usual training had been completed, with bi-monthly training days in which many of her littermates also attended, at shooting preserves and training areas, and she had completed her Junior

Pennsylvania Game News – Volume 82 No.2 February 2012

hunt test title a few days after turning a year old, having started at about seven months. She was retrieving readily to hand on land and water, quartering well and, most importantly, simply loved to hunt.

It was now time to “finish” her imprinting with her first hunting season. Many hunters believe there is no substitute for wild birds in relation to a dog gaining experience and hunting prowess, and I agree that wild birds behave distinctly different than pen-raised birds. While pheasants that have been out for several days on some preserves can become more like wild pheasants, the innate wariness of the ruffed grouse or the light scent of a moving woodcock trying to elude a dog is difficult to replicate with pen raised birds. The benefit of hunting a pup hard its first season, however, goes beyond just the experience on wild birds. It's also the opportunity to provide multiple repetitions on birds in wild situations that serves to dramatically increase the pup's learning curve and provide a quantum leap in the depth of the indelible imprint that serve the dog its entire hunting life.

The first season does come only once, so a commitment has to be made to provide the dog as much hunting time as possible. I have the luxury of being able to dedicate a significant amount of time to the pup's first season.

When my spaniel, Ranger, (my current young dog, Amber's, sire) was in his first real season I took him to hunt ducks, sharptail grouse and pheasants in North Dakota for 13 days straight. During the course of that hunt with another friend who owned Ranger's littermate, we killed more than 100 birds in wild settings and the dogs gained more experience than could ever be replicated in training drills.

They learned how to handle groups of running pheasants, multiple ducks down on the water and to retrieve the ones still swimming first, and that sharptail grouse could flush as wild as ruffed grouse if they made too much racket running the scent, and hundreds of other intangible lessons about wild bird behavior. They learned to pace themselves for long hours of hunting day after day, and how to conserve their energy and focus on recovering for the next day by eating their food and going directly to sleep at night to get as much rest as possible. In other words, it provides them several years' worth of learning and experience in one extended session that they never forget.

When Amber's first season finally came, all the groundwork had been done. I made the commitment to a 2-week hunting trip: a week of grouse and woodcock hunting in Maine; four days in Vermont; then in Massachusetts for stocked pheasants. The learning curve was the same as I have seen in the first season of other dogs several times before.

Amber learned how a running grouse will put a tree between itself and the gun and flush on the opposite side of the tree, and she eventually countered the tactic by making scent and working around the tree quickly to cut the bird off and force it to flush close to the gun, not a skill easily trained with pen-raised birds. She learned that woodcock often were found in multiples and that after flushing a bird to continue to hunt the area for possible companions. Even after retrieving a woodcock I shot she would immediately begin working a pattern out from where she had flushed the first bird, looking for another.

One shining moment stands out in my memory, though, when I was hunting an alder swamp along a river in Maine and a large number of “flight” or the migratory birds had landed in a storm the night before. I was working her in a brace with her father, and they put a woodcock up that I downed about 25 yards out after it cleared the thick alder. Ranger was sent for the retrieve and Amber was released and continued to hunt the area and flushed a second bird within just a few feet of where the first one had gone up. It flew low, and because I had to wait for it to clear the dog, I couldn't shoot until the bird cut right out over the river. The bird was almost across when I shot and it fell about 10 yards onto the opposite bank. Amber had not marked the bird down, due to the thick cover obscuring her vision, but had more faith in my shooting ability than probably warranted, and was eagerly looking at me for direction.

I had not trained her in water blind retrieves yet, but decided to give her a shot. I heeled her and gave her a line and a back command and she swam into the river with her nose flaring, searching for the bird. She hesitated momentarily at the far bank, wanting to swim the edge, but took another back command from me and went up the steep bank and back into the thick alder cover on the other side. Then it was my turn to trust her, as I could no longer see her. In the meantime, Ranger heeled patiently at my side, seeming to enjoy hanging onto his bird longer than usual. I couldn't have been prouder of Amber when she reappeared from the opposite side of the river with the woodcock in her mouth and swam delightedly back to me equally as proud of herself.

That moment was burned into my memory as much as hers, and I never had to do any more formal training to get her to do water blind retrieves, that one positive experience on a wild bird was all she needed to understand what was required. All the imprinting work, environmental conditioning walks, yard work, frequent sessions of standard training drills, and participating in hunt tests had culminated in this 2-

Pennsylvania Game News – Volume 82 No.2 February 2012

week excursion, and Amber's first season was a resounding success, resulting in ruffed grouse, woodcock, snipe and some incidental stocked pheasants in Massachusetts. The learning curve was obvious, and as we continued to hunt many more days after returning to Pennsylvania, I saw the impact the first season had already had on her prowess. She hunted like a pro and produced birds equal to her 8-year-old father. The final tally of woodcock taken over her at the end of the season was 61 birds in 4 states.

A dog's first season happens only once, and is an investment in time and resources that needs to be made only once, but at that critical time. In our own lifetimes we will be lucky enough to have only a limited number of pups to hunt with in their first season, so we should prioritize making the time to plan for it when considering getting a new puppy. The successes of a first season pup can be as rewarding to a rough shooter as winning a Field Trial Champion title, and the experience gained will pay dividends for the rest of the dog's lifetime.