

Your Pup's First Year

A step-by-step analysis on what to expect from your dog

By Bob West

Now you have the top notch puppy you've always wanted and with it dreams of your first field trial placement together or perfectly handled birds on a frosty fall morning.

Along with these dreams comes a strong commitment for the best care and training, to do it all right and give this pup a real chance to make it.

With that also comes a little uneasiness and lots of questions: "At what age should I do this? How old should my pup be when I begin that? Is he behind the schedule for where he should be at his age?"

I understand your feelings and wish I could hand you a "cookbook" with all the schedules mapped out, but there's no such thing. All of our pups are different just as we're all different. So we may take different routes to get to the goal, but we can all get there.

For years I've fought the idea of any form of training schedule, simply because a mere guide might be misunderstood as absolute requirements, and this can cause undue pressure on both dog and handler.

For example, a while back I developed a monthly progress "check-off report" for dogs in training, and the idea seemed to work until. . . along came three fellows who owned year-old littermates. You can probably guess what happened--at the end of the first month they compared notes and my phone got busy. They couldn't understand such drastic differences in the progress of their three dogs.

Now suppose we turn the situation around and give these same three fellows a cookbook or "schedule to train your pup by." Believe me, it could get ugly.

Even so, and against my better judgment, we're going to give it a try here, if only to provide you with an outline to help you develop your individual training program. But again, be forewarned--some dogs will lag behind, and some may not measure up over the long run.

Let's start with the essentials.

HEALTH CARE

Within a very few days of the new pup's arrival, set up a visit with your veterinarian, not only to begin vaccinations and a health care program, but also for a complete physical to determine your pup's general health and identify any congenital defects for which the breeder may be responsible.

Vaccination Schedule: Distemper and parvovirus--Because of an ongoing concern about these diseases, puppy vaccinations begin earlier than you may have expected.

My vet advises starting DA2PPC as soon as six weeks, but considering most of you won't have your pup before seven weeks you'll fit into the following schedule at some point.

Puppies less than 10 weeks of age should receive vaccinations at two-week intervals until they reach 10 weeks, then at three-week intervals until the age of 16 weeks. Example: Vaccinate at six, eight, 10, 13, and 16 weeks, or seven, nine, 11, 14, and 17 weeks.

Rabies--The recommended age for beginning rabies vaccination is four to six months.

Lyme disease--Many veterinarians recommend beginning Lyme vaccinations at 12 weeks. Lyme vaccines need to be boosted three to four weeks after the initial vaccination, with one booster annually.

Heartworm--Testing is required annually before beginning prevention. In many areas, especially the South where mosquitoes can be a year-round problem, pups begin monthly heartworm preventative treatments at three months and continue it uninterrupted throughout their lives.

FEEDING

Many breeders send pups home with the Purina Puppy Chow or Pro Plan Growth food that they're used to, and you're well advised to keep your pup on one or the other throughout most of his first year. Daily Feeding: Active, growing puppies should be fed three to four times a day. Allow the pup all it wants to consume in about 15 minutes, although at the same time you have a responsibility not to let your pup become overweight. Fresh water should be available at all times.

As the pup develops, two feedings a day and later one a day is plenty. Use the same measure as above, giving him what he will eat in 15 to 20 minutes, and continue monitoring proper body shape and condition.



The author uses a check rope while working with this pointer pup.

TRAINING

Eight to 12 Weeks: Housebreaking; play retrieves with small dowel or ball; "no" as a command; and begin being gentle but firm.

Socialization: From now on spend a lot of time with your pup and expand his territory from the living room to the back yard as he learns new things and becomes accustomed to strange noises.

Introductions: Start familiarizing your pup with training tables, decoys, dummies, etc.

Kennel: Each time your pup is put in the kennel after play or for the night, say, "Kennel, kennel," and you'll be surprised how soon he understands the command.

Collar: introduce a lightweight collar. Your pup will quickly accept it and you gain a handle.

Light Exercise: Go for walks and extend pup's playtime for more exercise.

Housebreaking Tips: Take the pup out after play, eating or awakening from a nap. Go out the same door to the same spot each time, and praise lavishly when he does the job. Never leave a pup unsupervised, but confine him to a small area when left alone. Never punish pup for earlier accidents, only when you catch him in the act.

Three To Four Months:

Yield To A Lead: Attach a short lead when you go for walks so the pup learns not to fight the lead. It's safer and sets the groundwork for later training.

Sit: If your pup is a flushing or retrieving breed, start to teach the sit command.

No: Reinforce the "no" command. By this age there are no options--it means stop what you're doing right now.

Moderate Exercise: As the pup develops, take longer walks and let him work a little.

Introduction To Water: Don't force pup, and above all, don't throw him in. Pick a nice warm pond, wade out and encourage your pup to follow; throw dummies or let older dogs show him the way.

Kennel: Reinforce the kennel command.

Come When Called: With the short lead on, crouch down, call the pup and pull him to you. Lavish him with praise when he arrives.

Travel: This includes pup's introduction to boats, cars, truck crates or dog trailers. Keep in mind that comfort helps lessen stress as advanced training or hunting begins.

Four to Six Months:

You're the boss: Not a mean old ogre, but you must be well established as leader.

No, Sit, Come and Kennel: Each day we reinforce learned commands and allow less options while continuing to strive for higher levels of understanding and expected obedience.

Whistle: Begin overlaying whistle signals for the Sit, Come and Whoa commands. Whoa is introduced as a stationary command for pointing breeds. As with other commands, go easy at first to help the dog understand what's expected.

Continued Exercise: Use common sense as you increase the amount of work during exercise periods, and be especially careful during hot weather.

Check Rope: Let pup drag a longer check rope during field exercise. This gives you an extended handle if problems arise.

Marks: These are simple, easy retrieves. At this point we hold the dog while dummies are thrown. Here we begin to nurture marking ability, prey drive and cooperation, which are all components of the natural retrieve. **Seven To Nine Months: Introduction To Birds:** Use cold, dead pigeons. Select a quiet place, have the pup on lead so he's calm and under control. Some pups need encouragement while others have to be restrained or corrected for mishandling the bird.

Introduction To Gunfire: Once the pup is handling game properly, we have the advantage of introducing gunfire while he is in prey drive so the noise becomes a signal of fun or pleasure, rather than a frightening or even painful experience.

No, Sit, Come, Kennel and Whoa: Drill, drill, and drill! Set up controlled scenarios to continually check and reinforce learned commands. It's one thing for our pup to sit, come, or whoa in the back yard, but bringing him to a level of quick and complete obedience with a nose full of bird scent is quite another thing.

Remote Training: If you choose, now is a fine time to begin the "three action introduction" to remote training. This method is the absolute best way to begin, not only for the dog but also to assure your own comfort with the concept.

Moderate To Heavy Exercise: This is not hard roading, but short periods to become accustomed to the roading harness mixed with periods of free running or extended swims.

Check Rope Becomes Official: As you move to field areas and bring training to a higher level, the check rope becomes a valuable tool. As the dog moves past, pick up the trailing end to enforce commands, or to help guide the dog during collar introduction.

Field work: At this age our dog should begin to understand why the commands are important. As the pup develops, work wild bird areas or plant birds in natural cover so pup learns to pattern or search likely cover.

Nine to 12 Months:

Heel: Being primarily a pointing dog trainer, I don't get too literal with the Heel command until well into check-rope work and after the Whoa command is understood and obeyed in the presence of birds.

Steadiness On Game: Most trainers agree that no problems arise by forcing a dog of this age to remain steady to flush, or even steady to wing once they've pointed birds. Non-slip retrievers should be steady through the shot, at least.

Retrieving: I wouldn't say a dog of this age should be completely "force trained" to retrieve, but it's not too much to expect proper handling of game and retrieving birds to within a reasonable distance of the gun.

Pattern: Increase fieldwork to enhance your gun dog's mentality. By now our young adult should aggressively seek out objectives and search field areas with purpose.

Marking Drills: Non-slip retrievers, flushing dogs and versatile breeds should be steady enough on line to spend a lot of time on marking drills. A key to conservation is a dependable retriever.

Brace Work: Once you're comfortable and in control you may want to try a little work with other dogs. Bird dog trainers have to set up backing situations and train on that while retrievers must honor other dogs and so on, but remember at this point in training all work is still on the check rope.

CONCLUSION

I hope you will find this summary a helpful guide in planning your dog's training schedule, but please remember, it's not cast in stone, so remain flexible!

Training Your Dog for Birdwork by Stephen C. Rafe.

His use of the Four D's for progression when teaching a dog a skill works great for me. I have copied his idea of the 4 D's found on page 34. For a new trainer who does not quite know where to start and what the next step is, the 4 d's are great. They help you teach the dog through repetition and reinforcement as you build his skills.

Here they are:

Duration-How long the dog is expected to hold the command before released or given another command. Start with zero duration and then move the dog up in increments to ten seconds, then thirty seconds, then minutes. Eventually the dog learns to hold a sit, down, or whoa for up to twenty minutes.

Distance-How far you can move from the dog without having the dog break the command. Start by standing right next to the dog. Gradually increase the distance by one foot per session until ultimately the dog will hold a sit, down, or whoa no matter how far away you walk.

Distractions-The System uses five levels of distractions, the first three of which are used while teaching sit, down, and whoa. The other two are reserved for advanced training. Here are the levels:

1. General - Animals or people at a distance.
2. Non-directive - someone "playing" about fifteen feet or so from the dog, a ball rolling about fifteen feet away, or an animal at about the same distance. The dog should hold the sit, down,

or stand regardless of this distraction before moving to the next one.

3. Investigative - The trainer picks up something from the ground, kicks up leaves, etc. The dog must hold before moving on to the next level.

The two advanced distractions levels are:

4. Stimulative - The dog must hold the command while the trainer tosses a ball or other tempting object in front of him.

5. Elicitive - A distraction that causes an instinctive response. For example: flushing a bird for a pointing dog. The dog must hold "whoa," disregarding his inborn desire to chase.

Degrees of Difficulty-Degrees of difficulty useful in training include: Those that involve the direction in which you move from or toward the dog, and those that involve giving a command while the dog is carrying out another command. A change in location can also vary the degree of difficulty.

1. The lowest degree of difficulty would be to put the dog on a stationary command (sit/down/whoa) and then take one step to the dog's right side.

2. The next level would be to step off on a diagonal to the dog's right side/front.

3. The next would be to step to the dog's front.

4. An even higher level would be to walk to the dog's front, make a left pivot, walk to the dog's left, and then stop. (See Illustration.)

5. A higher level than that would be to walk to the dog's front, pivot, walk to the dog's left, pivot, walk down along the dog's left side to his rear, pivot, walk back along the dog's right side toward his head, then stop at his shoulder.

6. Still another level is to put the dog on a stationary command, then walk immediately and directly behind him.

7. Yet another level is to put the dog on a stationary command, then go out of sight.

8. Another type of difficulty is to have the dog perform one stationary command from another.

- For example, teach "down" from "sit" first.

- Then teach "sit" from "down."

- Next teach the dog to "whoa" from a "sit."

- Then teach "whoa" from "down."

- Never have the dog do a sit or a down from a whoa. This avoids conditioning the dog to sit or lie down while on a whoa command.

9. Still another difficulty level is to have him obey the same commands while he is moving. For example, command him to heel and as he starts walking with you, tell him to sit.

- Then teach the down command the same way.

- Next, teach the whoa command. At first you stop with the dog when you say "whoa." Later, you keep walking. After the dog has learned these well, teach him to whoa while coming to you on command. Start with the dog near you and gradually increase the distance. Extend the duration (the first "D") as your dog progresses and start adding distractions to his performance at this level of difficulty once you have him in motion for fifty feet or more.