

A SECOND "CHANCE"

The high level of competition in field trials these days has created a new dog. Very often their training begins right in the whelping box as opposed to the James Lamb Free philosophy years ago of letting pup be a pup until the age of nine months. Even before eight weeks, puppies are treated to pigeon wings, positive interaction with humans and a wide range of stimuli that is believed to give the little ruffian a leg up on his future competition. If these bluebloods are not raised by their own experienced owners, they are sent off to young dog trainers as early as eight weeks of age. They are exposed to rides on the dog trucks, running around in fields, splashing in nearby ponds, playing with the local children and having an opportunity to be raised in the house until they are ready for more serious work. At times these dogs are sent to multiple trainers for each level as they progress or if sold to another person will find themselves in a new training experience as they progress to the coveted title of being a National dog.

Few ever make it to that level ... to finish a National. It is part of our human nature to have the highest hopes that our new pup or new dog is going to be spectacular at field trials. We agonize over whether the dog will fit in a training program and we are jubilant when the dog

begins to run field trials and be successful. Although we envision success with our field dogs and have these high hopes, sometimes circumstances come along that stop us from continuing to train and run a dog. The decision to take a dog out of training and trials is a difficult one. However, it is far less difficult when the dog goes to a wonderful new home that fully appreciates a trained hunting dog. When a decision is finally made to move a dog on to a more appropriate life, many are treated to duck hunting, family dog status and sometimes even fun competition at local retriever events. Very few dogs get their pictures taken in November on top of the trophy table while sitting next to the sterling silver bowl. I don't think they really care as long as they can retrieve somewhere, somehow, sometime.

"Chance" was one of those. After much consideration, I placed a field trial Lab with someone who wanted a hunting dog. Recently, I heard from the new owner who appears to adore his new hunting buddy. I believe it is a perfect match and am very pleased that the dog has had a second opportunity to do her job while becoming a permanent housedog and family companion.

Her new owner writes: "I do want to let you know that your dog is still phenomenal! She has taken to the hunting life quite well. We started out with the September dove season. Her first lesson was how to sit quietly and wait in a blind and ignore the missed shots! Doves are difficult to hit and I guess she believed that every time a gun sounded, there would be something to retrieve. Unfortunately, not with this shooter. When they did fall,

however, she retrieved them without fail. The boys loved having her along since they no longer had to retrieve the downed birds for Dad.

"Next we tried the early goose season. What fun! Chance really seemed to love to pick up those large birds. She got so good at the goose game that I could give the "down" command and she would lay next to me covered up with a piece of burlap for camouflage. She would not move despite my sitting up and shooting and all the birds falling. Her first goose retrieve was really quite comical. She was steady and released on command, but when she got to the goose she did not seem to know where to grab the bird. After she got a hold, she braced her legs and did the old heave-ho and lifted the goose. As she did this, a large wing flopped over her face preventing her from seeing where she was going. In the process of calling her back to me, she could not see me and promptly plowed into my legs nearly knocking me down. Then she sat at heel, looked up and her eyes seemed to say, "Here it is, boss!" She has since gotten MUCH more stylish with geese. She retrieved about thirty-five for myself and friends during the September season and thinks it's much more fun than field trialing!

"Her best retrieve, by far, came when we were hunting alone. I shot a goose I had picked out from the flock and it glided at least 200 yards to a creek bottom. Marking the spot, I lined her up and said, "Back!" She took off and when she was in the general area I stopped her with the whistle. She immediately stopped and looked for direction. I asked her to go to the left and she did so, straight to the bird. How proud was I watching her carry that goose back? VERY. No witnesses, but I don't care. I know how great she is.

September 30 was a special Youth Waterfowl Hunt here in Maryland. My boys had yet to shoot their first ducks so off we went. Kyle was the first to score as a small flock of Wood Ducks circled and came in. He stood up and deftly dropped a hen. On command, Chance sprung into the shallow creek and delivered the hen to my hand. Kyle was so excited and I swear Chance was smiling, too. After about a half hour some Mallards circled the decoys and Dustin folded a beautiful drake. Chance, once again made a perfect retrieve. Later another flock came in and both boys shot. We thought we saw one bird flutter down, but we were not sure. I walked over with Chance and looked around. We did not see anything so we returned to the blind. As we were picking up the decoys, Chance was just nosing around and the next thing we knew, she is sitting at heel with a broken winged, but very much alive hen mallard in her mouth. What a terrific dog!

It is so great to have a dog involved in the hunt. I never realized what I had been missing until you gave me this wonderful gift. Thanks again for letting me watch your dog for you."

On a similar note but involving the other side of this dog equation, I gave another friend a bench-bred bitch as his hunting companion for the Texas winter months. Camper had her Junior Hunter title although had never been hunted over. There is a continuing great debate about the quality of hunting that is possible from a Junior level dog, but hopefully this will help put that argument to rest. The story goes like this:

"I don't know if Camper was ever on an actual duck hunt before but she took to it like she'd been doing it for some time. Since I wasn't sure how she would react to the shooting right beside her in a blind I tethered her for the first flight of birds. She was actually curled up in the blind sleeping when the first ducks came. When I started calling she sat up and got attentive. At the sound of the shooting she was looking for marks but couldn't see from inside the blind. I took her outside the blind and gave her a line to the ducks. She worked steadily and deliberately, going right through the decoys making a forty yard retrieve. I shot four ducks over a three hour period. After the first bird she sat steady in the blind. After the second bird she wanted to sit outside the blind so she could see. She sat there looking into the sky for about twenty minutes before she came back into the blind and curled up at my feet or sat leaning against me, like Drifter does. She never did get to actually mark a shot duck because of the way the blind was built but she made every retrieve from a "dead bird" command and a "back". I was proud of her and she was an excellent hunting companion. Thanks for allowing me to use her this season since I lost Orange, my previous hunting partner."

We are all responsible for finding the best possible homes for puppies we choose to bring into this world. We are also just as responsible for finding good homes for all that need to be re-homed for whatever the reason. Don't underestimate that "field trial, hunt test or show quality washout". Field trial dogs can be good housedogs and bench bred dogs can hunt. There is a place for all of them.

Ed. Note: Chance was placed with a friend in Maryland who takes her to work occasionally. When she's not hunting geese, duck, grouse or dove she has full housedog privileges with her owner and his two young boys. Camper is coming home soon.

Thanks to several contributors for this story: Elissa Kirkegard, Dick Herr and Barry Winner...and Chance and Camper, too!

Faith Hyndman
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