

# Raising successful gun dogs

Before the dog learns a single command, its trainer needs to be trained to communicate

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Bob Donaldson / Post-Gazette

Donny Zarra's champion Deutch Drahthaar, Duke vom Buffeltaler, goes on point as he sniffs out a rooster pheasant in the brush at the Alpine Club in South Fayette. Zarra's dog was champion in 2006.



By John Hayes Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The ringneck flushed from the woods and was descending over an adjacent field of waist-high weeds. I threw a 12-gauge blast of 6 shot at him through a stand of dead timber but it was unclear if he'd been hit.

A clipped pheasant will surely run and could easily be lost in the thick growth.

"You take the lower end," I shouted to my host, Donny Zarra, as I ran to the top of the field to find the bird.

"Whoa," he said, casually throwing his shotgun over his shoulder. "Wait a minute."

"Duke," he commanded to his champion German wirehair. "Hunt."

We watched as Duke vom Buffeltaler, 2 1/2-year-old winner of the 2006 International Armbruster trophy, trotted into the thicket. In less than two minutes, he emerged with the pheasant gently cradled in his mouth, sat obediently at his master's side and offered up the bird.

Hunting with a good dog changes everything. Breed matters -- Deutch Drahthaars such as Duke were originally bred in Germany to be versatile hunting dogs adept at pointing, tracking and retrieving.

But Zarra, 35, of Carrick, said the dog-rearing skills of the trainer often matter more. Huntmaster at Bridgeville's Alpine Club and a private hunting guide, Zarra was awarded the Armbruster last year for Duke's demonstration of innate abilities, training and searching skills.

It's only partly coincidental that the previous winner of the international trophy is also from the Pittsburgh area. Gary Stephens, 51, of New Castle, and his 15-month-old Deutch Drahthaar Lena, won the Armbruster in 2007.

"Gary's helped me," said Zarra. "I'd say he's had a big impact on my raising style."

Both trainers insist that the success of a hunting dog -- regardless of breed or intended hunting style -- begins when its brought into the home, normally at about eight weeks old.

"Probably the most important thing starts when you get the puppy," said Stephens. "Some people wait too long to start training. You start guiding that puppy with obedience and some light training even at that age. Start guiding him to where he understands that you are the boss and he must comply to what you want him to do."

Neither Zarra nor Stephens kennel their dogs outdoors. Duke and Lena live indoors and are part of the family.

"People think they have to have their dogs out in kennels and use harsh tactics," said Zarra. "These dogs are very intelligent. They like affection. If you allow the dog to be a part of your family, it helps the dog to develop mentally and emotionally, and you'll have a stronger dog."

By bringing the dog into the family unit, he said, "I think he understands communication better, and that shows when we're out in the field."

Obedience, said Stephens, can not be taught if the trainer loses his temper.

"My dogs learn real quick what's bad," he said. "I correct them, but no temper. I'm firm, they can hear that in my voice and I make them listen, but I never let them see me angry. Then I show them the good times where we lay around on the floor and have fun and pet each other. They get to know the good side of me and the bad side, and they want to get on that good side. It makes it a lot easier later in training.

"A man who's got a bad temper is not going to make a good trainer."

Among a gun dog's first lessons is "crate training."

"He's got to be quiet in his crate, even as a puppy," said Stephens. "He's got to be quiet in the back of the truck. He's got to come when called. You need to get that underneath him at a very young age."

Stephens starts with the command, "kennel." After a young dog equates the word with its sleeping space, it might back away or even run into another room at the sound of the word.

"I'll give him another chance and say 'kennel,' " said Stephens. "If he doesn't respond I gently go to him, and sometimes he'll go the other way because he knows he's in trouble. When I catch him, I just pick him up by the scruff of the neck, not hard, and give him a little shake. That's usually enough to get his attention. If you do this a few times, he'll understand that when you say 'kennel,' there's no choice."

Creating a training environment without options teaches the dog the inevitability of following commands. The release command is crucial. Without it, the dog has an option and learns to initiate its own actions, said Stephens.

"This is where a lot of people fail. 'Sit' is a common one. They'll say 'sit' and never follow it up. They'll walk off and leave the dog to release himself."

In the field, Zarra runs Duke collared with a bell and an electronic stimulation device. The bell identifies his location when he's running; absence of the bell sound means he's on point.

Some trainers frown upon use of electronic collars, which can emit jolts of electricity in response to bad behavior. But Zarra says he wouldn't hunt Duke without it.

"You first need to train yourself on how to use the collar, in what situations you would use it," he said. "You don't use the power of the collar against the dog. You never use it in anger."

Zarra says the electronic collar has saved Duke's life twice.

"I was running my dog at a local cemetery. I don't know what made me do it, but I put the collar on him," he said. "I heard him in the distance on the heels of these whitetail deer and about to follow them across a busy intersection. I laid on the hot button. He felt pain and stopped."

This year, Duke picked up a scent and was heading toward a country road when Zarra heard a dump truck speeding toward him.

"[Duke] was hot on a scent and concerned about completing his task and wasn't listening, so I hit the collar," he said. "You don't have to use heavy stimulation levels, but in situations when the dog is excited, it's good to have it."

Stephens says he likes to keep Lena close by and away from other hunters as he trains her for field hunting. Zarra carries a backpack containing a First-Aid kit, leatherman tool and lots of water to keep Duke cool and well hydrated.

"You see some people kicking their dog, beating the dog with the leash, using the collar for little things," said Zarra. "They'll keep a dog penned up all year and get mad when he's running around, going up to other hunters, getting lost. And the guy says, 'Your dog's doing a good job for you, but this dog's an idiot.' I'm thinking, the dog's fine -- you look like an idiot. You didn't spend time conditioning him and preparing him. If you want to have a gun dog, you have to make the time."