

Training With A Group A Privilege, Not a Right

By: Dan Wegner

Training groups are essential to amateur trainers. Training grounds, birds, and equipment are expensive and sometimes difficult to acquire on a regular basis as an individual trainer. The knowledge and skills that can be gained from training group members is also vital to “newbies” as well as some old timers.

Most amateur trainers will agree that one of the biggest obstacles to training is time. If you do not make a living training dogs or are retired, you must take from your busy schedule of work and other life obligations to train dogs. Most groups welcome new members if time and space allow. If you are invited to train with a group please be considerate and be on your best behavior. Training groups are not like clubs where you pay your dues and to some point expect something in return, they are just people like you who have a common interest in training dogs. A person who goes out of his/her way to be helpful and considerate will shortly find themselves a regular member of a group. Those who do not will be back to training in the local park by themselves or out of the game completely in no time.

The following is a general list of guidelines to adhere to when training with a group:

- Verify how many dogs are acceptable for you to run. It is not fair for you to bring 3 dogs if everyone else only has one or two. The group may be willing to allow you to run more dogs, but you must get the OK first.
- Do not bring extra dogs to run “for fun” or exercise. Most group members have limited time to train and are not interested in spending 15 minutes watching a dog that has no experience/hope/goals run around training to find a 75 yard single. Take these dogs to the park on your own time.
- If you are allowed by the group to bring multiple dogs, always ask for a running order. Do not run your dogs as fast as you can while others load launchers, throw birds and wait to run their dogs. Unless it has been discussed up front, run a dog and offer to help or wait until everyone has run a dog before you get your next dog out. Sometimes it is more practical for a handler to run all of their dogs first, but this should be agreed upon by the group.
- Birds, primers, poppers, launcher loads, bumpers, equipment and maintenance are not cheap. If you train with a group regularly offer to supply the above or help with the cost. Not everyone has the needed equipment when they first start. When you can afford it, purchase equipment that will benefit the group. This will make you a more valuable member. Until you have some equipment, offering to bring snacks or lunch for the other members may endear you to the group.

- HELP. Always try your best to help with set-up, take down, throwing, or anything else. If you do not know how to operate a launcher or other equipment, ask and someone will gladly teach you. NEVER get caught airing your dog while the rest of the group is setting up and don't avoid clean up so you can get your dogs put away.
- Always abide by the rules of the property you are training on. At a minimum close any gate that you (or the person you are training with) has opened, drive only where driving is acceptable, fix any ruts you make and clean up after yourself (don't leave trash).
- Show up on time! Do not make others wait for you. This is rude and disruptive to the other group members.
- If you have some experience, be careful about providing unsolicited advice unless it is to save a dog from harm or abuse. It is difficult to watch someone making fundamental training errors, but there's a fine line between helping someone out and coming across as an arrogant know-it-all. Suggestions are usually welcome, but make sure others want to hear your take on things before you offer it.
- Do not let socializing or phone calls interrupt everyone else's training session. Put your cell phone in the truck (if you are in the truck where nobody has to be disturbed by your conversation that is fine as long as you should not be doing something else).
- Don't make excuses for a poor performance and tell everyone how Bingo has done this set-up successfully a hundred times. They don't really care.
- Don't waste everyone's time bragging about your dog. Everyone already realizes that you have the cutest, toughest, smartest, most talented and lovable dog there... now get over it and get back to work!
- Take care of yourself. Have proper clothing for the conditions. Have a chair for the field, bug spray and sun block, water, shade and a snack for your dogs and yourself.
- Don't drive through the test. If you need to drive past the line, stop and wait for the go-ahead.
- Try to remain still or at least move slowly while someone else is working their dog. This applies whether you're in the field or behind the line and is especially important if you're wearing light-colored clothing.
- Wear light-colored clothing. We are training, not testing. When you are out in the field, we want the dogs to be able to see you. When you are handling, you want your dog to see you. If you want to work on handling in camo, bring a camo jacket.

- If you have a dog that barks or whines while in the vehicle or staked out, park your vehicle or stake the dog as far away from the line as possible. Sometimes it helps if they can't see the set-up. It only takes a few minutes of listening to incessant barking for people to want to strangle your dog and only a few more before they want to strangle you.
- Keep your dog under control! Do not allow your dog to run loose unless you KNOW that you can keep him from disturbing the test or bothering other people and dogs. Your best bet is to air your dog far from the test and keep him on lead until you are headed from the holding blind to the line.
- Don't blow whistles, duck calls or throw bumpers near the test. That's self-explanatory.
- We all come to train our dogs. Not just to throw birds for YOUR dog. Get in the rotation to work your dog as well as throw birds. If you don't know how to help, look for someone who seems to be doing a lot and ask him how you can help.
- Bring equipment if you have any. We may not need it, but you never know. Mark your equipment so that at the end of the day it can be returned to you. When we break down at the end of the day, equipment is scattered everywhere. Do your part to help get the gear back to its rightful owner. It's very frustrating to leave training days lighter than you arrived.
- If you arrive too late to have input into the setup, you have several choices: you can run your dog the way it is, you can ask for minor changes in the setup, or you can choose not to run your dog at all. Somebody showed up on time and took the initiative to get the ball rolling. If you show up late, your best bet is to air your dog, put him back in the crate and go relieve someone in the field. Throw some birds, watch some dogs work, and then get into the rotation. If you think that the setup is really terrible, then show up early next time and provide some constructive suggestions. Your help will be welcome.
- Gun safety. If you are unfamiliar with the firearms being used or what constitutes safe operation, please ask someone. If you would like to have a "designated gunner" while you run your dog, just ask. If you prefer no gunfire at the line, that's OK, too. Just say so.
- Don't wait to be told what to do.
- Don't take your time. While you are getting your dog ready to run, others are standing in the field waiting for you... Show them that you appreciate their time by not wasting it unnecessarily.

- Don't extend invitations to others without first running it by the group.
- If you aren't a good thrower (you know who you are), make an effort to improve by practicing on your own time without a dog. The occasional bad throw happens, but consistently bad throws show a lack of effort to correct the problem. With practice, even the worst throwers will improve!
- Have concrete goals for you and your dog, both long term (Finished or Master Hunter or Qualified All-Age) and short term (improve memory bird concept). Goals not only help you to stay focused, but let others know that you are serious and want to learn.
- Try to secure new training grounds for your group. Once you have an idea of what type of grounds are acceptable, do your part and talk to landowners about the possibility of using or leasing the property.
- Offer to contribute to a "kitty" so the group can purchase birds and other expendable supplies.
- Close your mouth and open your eyes and ears. Watch and listen to more experienced handlers as they run their dogs. You just might learn something.
- Attempt to expand your knowledge by reading books, magazine articles & watching videos. Your training partners may be a good resource for these items, but be sure to read or watch them in an expedient manner. It's quite frustrating to loan something out only to hear that the borrower hasn't had time to look at it yet over and over again. Put in the effort to educate yourself instead of waiting for someone to lay it all out for you.
- Save extended performance analysis discussions until after the training session. It's a good idea to carry a pad and pencil to jot down notes or questions to discuss later.
- Don't use the radios to B.S. - Pay attention for instructions from the upcoming handler so you KNOW the set up and order they want for THIS dog. Singles, doubles or a triple? Bumpers or birds? Order of throws? When to help? How to help. If you have any questions, ask before they get to the line or when radio chatter won't interfere with the handler or the dog.
- Watch the line more than the dog. Gunners are an integral part of the training process. You can look at the dog but don't fix all your attention on the dog. If the handler needs help, you need to be watching for the signal. Be ready to help when the signal arrives for a "hey, hey" or taking a step towards the bumper, or throwing a second. Be ready. No handler wants you shuffling in a bucket when the dog is heading into trouble. Keep a bumper in your hand behind your back and watch the line.

- Guard your birds/bumpers. There will be times when a dog is right in your face asking for one of your birds/bumpers. Be still, try not to interact with the dog, but don't let the dog "steal" a bumper from you. If asked by the handler take a couple steps toward the bird/bumper you threw.
- Consistent throws. Do your very best to put your bird/bumper where whoever did the setup asked for it to land. This is important so the dog can see the fall and so it does not interfere with another throw. Bird placement is the most important factor in marking tests.
- Make sure you understand the set-up before you go to the line. Watch the marks and watch some other dogs run. Ask someone with a really good dog about the factors that may affect the dogs. If that person suggests that you run the marks as singles, that you should shorten up, or that one of the marks may be too much for your dog, take the advice into consideration. If you get your dog into trouble, don't get into a lengthy battle with the dog. Just pick him up and rotate out into the field. Later you can try to figure out why the dog got into trouble and what you need to do to train for that situation.
- Look at each set-up and be honest with yourself and fair to your dog. Don't attempt to do something that is clearly over your dogs head. If you haven't trained for it in the yard, don't "try" the concept in the field.
- Remember training is not a competition. You are here to train your dog as well as help the others. You don't need to do that triple just because the dog before you did. Three singles or a double and a single may do just fine. If you need to shorten up, do so. If you need an attention-getter in the field, ask for it. When in doubt, simplify.
- Train your dog on the task at hand. Don't spend 15 minutes working on obedience at the line with 4 people in the field ready to throw. Get a handle on that BEFORE you go to the holding blind. Yes, you can work on line manners, but don't overdo it or the folks in the field will grow weary of inviting you back. If your dog refuses to get right when on the line, putting him back in the truck without a retrieve might be the best training you could do.
- Emotion. We all get caught up in our dog's performance or lack thereof. Try not to loose your temper or cry while at the line. It will distract your dog and make the rest of us very uncomfortable.
- Don't be afraid to say "NO BIRD" and heel off line when you get a bad throw. You need to train smart, and no birds happen at tests, so use them as a training tool when they happen.
- Thank the folks involved as you leave the line

- All dogs have off days. Anyone whose trained dogs understands what it is like when your dog gets retarded or when you have a handler brain fart. We've all had those days. Shake it off, throw some birds, and try it again. Or choose to chalk it up to an off day and just enjoy the camaraderie. Where else do you get the opportunity to spend a day in the sweltering heat or bone-chilling cold, get wet and muddy, lose expensive equipment, have your dog make you look like a buffoon, and damage your rotator cuff throwing smelly birds?
- And finally: remember that we are all here to have fun and enjoy time with our dogs and our friends. If it stops being fun, we might as well take up golf.