

Pointing Dogs

In this day and age of dogs as family pets, one can easily forget that man created purebred dogs to service our own working needs. Long before man actually began selectively breeding dogs to fit into any working category, dogs were being used to help us find food, protect our property, and help manage our livestock. The synergy between man and dog goes back to the beginning of time. Selective breeding for individual tasks came much later in the relationship between man and his best friend. Initially, dogs were bred based on their work ethic and while doing so encouraged the dogs form to compliment the dogs intended work. Anyone looking at a large, black and tan, 95 pound growling dog will be impressed and clear as to the dog's intentions. It is not an accident that we bred guard dogs to be big and dark as science evolved, we learned to understand genetics, and used the knowledge to better predict the form and function of the offspring.

Prior to scientific analysis of breeding dogs, any dog that tended sheep was called a sheepdog. Today, when the word sheepdog is mentioned we instantly get a mental image of a large, hairy, gray and white dog. Before all the dog breeds were developed, one could care less what the dog looked like, if it worked the cows, it was a cow dog, if it worked the sheep it was a sheepdog. The truth is that the vast majority of working sheepdogs today might more closely resemble the Border collie yet in reality on working farms; the best dogs are those that perform the job regardless of what the dogs heritage is. This is true across the board for all types of dogs. Although the Beagle is seen as the rabbit hound extraordinaire, a rabbit hunter couldn't care less if the dog is 13" or 15" tall, he wants a relentless hunter who will howl for a week straight if that's how long it takes for a man to come and help him catch this bunny. Bird dogs are no different; man saw clearly that while some dogs had the propensity to chase and flush their game, others had an affinity toward indicating the presence of the game. Still other dogs seemed best suited to just go and find the already killed fowl and return it to their owner. As the dogs instinctual behaviors became recognized, we learned how to maximize the dogs form to compliment the vocation and here we are with producing a form that helps the function of the work. This is a bit confusing but a prime example of this might be the white tip of the Beagles tail. This white tip helps the rabbit hunter to see just where his dog is in the high grass.

Man breeding dogs has allowed us to hone in on that which already existed in dogs to begin with. We encouraged certain instincts to be pronounced while discouraging other instincts at the same time. While strong prey instinct encourages a chase, catch and carry response, predation encourages kill and consume. I am pressed to think of any hunter wanting their dog to consume the trophy; therefore high predatory instinct would be contraindicated in the breeding goals of Golden Retrievers. While retrieving instinct is active in many breeds even outside of the sporting group of dogs, another hunting related behavior is not so common to others and that behavior is pointing.

Sporting dogs with pointing power would include; the Pointer, the Brittany, the German Short Haired Pointer, The Italian Spinoni, The German Wirehaired Pointing Griffon, the

German Wirehaired Pointer, the Vizsla, the Weimaraner, the three Setters (English, Irish and Gordon) and the non-AKC Pudelpointer which is a European breed said to be not too good looking but very great working. The instinct to point lives within every fiber of these working miracles.

Pointing dogs have the most amazing sense of smell in that this is how they track their birds, by scenting the actual body of the bird hiding in the field. Once a pointer has located its prey, it indicates by pointing. While the term pointing suggests a tail set, the whole body of the pointer is rigid, sometimes crouched or even sitting with the motionless head pointing in the direction of the concealed bird. According to Dave Duffy in his book *Dave Duffy Trains Gun Dogs*, most hunters are happy if their dog seeks and finds game, point birds when he locates them, remain stanch and not break his point until the birds are flushed and be willing to go pick up or "dead point" to down birds. The dogs should be responsive to verbal suggestions or whistles and be willing to work a large area and change directions from owner cues. Pointing is instinctual but there are aspects of this behavior that needs training. Most hunters encourage their dogs to keep their tails up while on point, my research suggests that Irish Setters are a bit weak in the tail up department and need a bit of help with learning that piece of the pie. Also Irish Setters are said to be sensitive in their character and that field training should not take place until a stellar relationship between dog and handler is established. Harsh training techniques would only cause a sensitive dog to watch the handler all the time and not allow the "freedom" to hunt, as the dog will be too concerned with not making mistakes that would anger its handler. All pointing breeds need to learn to stand stanch (steady) and wait. Often more than one dog is used or there might be several hunters with Pointers working together. The dogs must learn to "honor" any dog that points first, allowing the handler to flush out the game. Imagine how confusing it would become if one dog got out in front of another dog that is already in point, so the dogs are taught not to interfere with an already pointing dog. There are life sized cardboard models of Pointers available to set-up in the field just to teach the dogs to honor the pointing dog. Many hunter/breeders of working pointers allow pups to run out in the fields with the adult dogs to help imprint the pups for future fieldwork. As the dogs run out into the field, many hunters will blow two short blasts on a whistle eventually using the sounds to indicate a go out signal. When the dogs are returning one long whistle sound is heard to condition the recall. The equipment for field training generally consists of a variety of different scents which can be purchased in the backs of hunting or sport magazines, long leads for control of the dog from a distance, a whistle or two, various bird parts to teach indication, field dummies (resemble boat floats), dummy launchers that send the dummies flying out 100 yards, starter pistols to begin conditioning the dogs to gun fire and sometimes live birds. Pointers indicate game and that could mean almost any creature until trained to the birds one is actually hunting. Instinct to hunt choice fowl is part of any hunters breeding program and is based on hundreds of years of selection. While the Brittany is most suited to hunt Ruffed Grouse and Woodcock due to its size and coat type, it is not that well suited to hunt Quail although I am certain that someone is successful with quail hunting a Brittany.

If there is a bottom line here somewhere it is that instinct is what motivates the dog to behave in a specific manner but not all dogs of any given breed have strong instincts to

behave as they were originally bred. If the long or wired haired pointing breeds had hair that extended to the ground, how tangled and matted would the dog become? How many hunters are looking forward to coming home after a long hard hunt and groom their dogs? My guess is not too many. Most of the working bloodline Setters seen is of a medium-short coat, enough to keep them warm and not enough to get in the way of the work. On the other hand, show dogs of the Setter variety may have long luxurious coats, seen by millions every year on television as they watch one of the more popular conformation dog shows. While breeders of dogs have a responsibility to keep a working ethic in their bloodlines, one must keep in mind that working bloodline dogs are far more energetic than their show line counterparts and when a family is considering a pet, high hunting drive just might drive the owner to drink. In a perfect world all purebred dogs would behave as they have been functionally bred to behave but in today's society this seems to have produced many misunderstood and ultimately homeless dogs. Lord bless the dogs.