

# My Dog Is Teaching Me How To Hunt

By *Oksana Moshynska, Ph.D*  
Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

**O**ur house felt empty once our son moved out-of-province to study at a university. Time that had been devoted to taking him to his early morning, late evening, and weekend practices, and long-distance travels to his competitions, was freed. Our sixteen-year-old rescue cat passed away after a short battle with cancer, and we were left with lots of space in our hearts, ready to be filled with love. I had always wanted to have a dog, but our lifestyles were not able to accommodate a dog until now.

My extensive online research began soon after. I knew I wanted a smart, highly trainable, versatile dog, one that would be able to challenge me and keep me busy—and an active dog that would compete in various sports. The Vizsla breed seemed to be a great fit, and, after extensive search, my new puppy Vizslavilla's Dragon Copper (bred by Irene Balla)—called Marcus Aurelius in everyday life—was sleeping on my lap on the flight back home.

I knew Vizslas were a hunting breed, but I thought I could do other activities with him. I am a city girl who, about seventeen years ago, moved from the Ukrainian capital city of more than three million people and could not imagine myself hunting or doing anything related to field work! But our little puppy obviously had a different agenda. We could not help but notice that, at just two months old, he already loved to use his nose to track small birds, gophers, and mice. Then, at one of the local gun dog club's training days, the experienced hunters told me about hunting dogs and what they were bred to do. A bird was hidden in the tall grass, and I watched in disbelief as my puppy started making wide runs back and forth in front of me, and suddenly freezing in front of a bush where the bird was hidden. I asked what was happening and the reply was, "He pointed!" From that day, it looked like my puppy was busy practicing his points and improving quickly. One day, my husband came home late from his walk with our puppy. Apparently our boy found a duck and froze in a point. One runner made a long run around the lake, and when he was back a half hour later and our boy was still pointing the same duck, he said, "This is one good pointing dog!" My husband told me he did not know what to do as he did not want to discourage the dog, so they both just stood there. We knew we needed to move fast in our learning. I think for a while, our house was filled with every book about hunting dogs and training of hunting dogs that was available in the provincial public library collection.

Thanks to all the hunters and breeders who kept answering my questions, I learned about tracking. Once again, I was

amazed when I saw him tracking a bird in the tall grass. I saw everybody getting ready for their dogs to test, and I wanted to try as well. Someone asked, "Does your dog swim?" I did not know, but was afraid to just let my boy to go into the deep water. What if he did not know how to swim and became scared of water? After the whole family drove around for hours trying to find a decent pool of water, all we were able to find was a pond, in which leeches were more than happy to attach themselves to our puppy's belly. So we found an indoor dog pool instead. Our boy did not seem to mind water, so I threw a toy into the water and watched him swim after it and then retrieve it for me! Then, he got out of the water, came to me and froze beside me. And he would do it over and over again—jump into the water, retrieve, and freeze beside me. We videotaped this and posted it on one of the online forums, hoping to find out what my puppy was doing. The answer was that our boy was "pseudo-pointing!"

Remembering the advice from the late Lord Joicey to a novice handler, "Take your whistle out of your mouth, put your hands into your pockets, and let the dog get on with his work," we stepped on the road of various field tests and trials.

After my puppy's HAE (Hunting Aptitude Evaluation) VHDF (Versatile Hunting Dog Federation) test, one of the judges, who was also a former NAVHDA judge, told me if it had been a NAVHDA test that day, it would be a Prize I performance. His words stuck in my head. I had to find a NAVHDA testing site to see with my own eyes whether this would be true. How could this be true? We were not hunters, and we knew nothing of hunting or hunting dogs. Yes, we read a lot of books and tried to use any opportunity to talk to experienced hunters and hunting dog lovers. However, we trained our boy with positive reinforcement techniques—this makes our training of a high energy hunting dog even more challenging, especially in the field.

My search for a NAVHDA Natural Ability testing site had begun. I obviously wanted to avoid driving too long, but eventually ended up casting quite a wide net. I finally found a test site in Montana, for which the dates could fit into our full-time busy work schedules. To my disappointment, after all the bookings of vacation time and hotel were completed, this test was canceled. Another online search and we were finally on the fourteen-hour road trip to Whitefish, Montana. I don't recall the drive very well, but I remember taking the wheel and not letting my husband, who was sharing the back seat of our sedan with our boy, take over.

Upon arrival to the test site, Marcus sniffed the air and immediately knew what was going on in the field and started shaking in anticipation. Then it was our turn to run the field.



The handler's judge told me he was to watch me to ensure I was **not** helping my boy find birds. As soon as my boy was released, **he** immediately took off to the right. I saw the judge wanted to **go** in the opposite direction so I tried to explain that recently **my** boy pointed the bird eighty yards away, and he knew it was **there** from the farther distance. As the wind was coming from **that** direction, it was very likely he already knew the bird was **there**. But the judge replied, "Call your dog!" And then, immediately, "Do not call your dog!" as my boy froze in a steady, **nice**, arrow-like point. Instead, we all walked over there to flush **a** bird. Marcus took off after a bird for what seemed like a very **long** time. Then he came back with the bird in his mouth, his **heart** pounding and looking very happy. Since my boy refuses to **eat** or drink when he is in the field, the senior judge then showed **me** how to force water on Marcus, as some dogs will not drink **on** their own while they hunt, and this can become extremely **dangerous** for the dogs. Then, we all went the other way. At one **point** during the test, the handler's judge told me to slowly walk **around** a bush, and, as we were walking, he showed me a bird **in** there. I kept walking as instructed. Marcus came to check **in** front of me and then immediately turned and stopped; he **was** pointing the bird I just passed. After another chase, we **continued** our walk and Marcus pointed once again. This time

around, one of the judge's amazingly quick reactions led to him catching the flushed bird and saving us from another bird chase. I found Marcus' reaction to a blank gunshot interesting. He first looked up in the air, then at the gunner, and I bet he did it with a grin on his face, like he was asking, "Seriously, did you really miss again?"

Then, there was the tracking part of the test, and my boy was to run first. He ended up with the largest pheasant, which was the size of a turkey. I let my boy sniff a few feathers on the ground and he took off, but then stopped at a distance, sniffing. I thought my heart stopped for a second. The handler's judge instructed me to stay and face the identified direction. Marcus came all the way back, took another good sniff of the feathers in front of me, then put his nose down to the ground, and disappeared in the forest. After some time, another judge declared, "He pointed!" and I realized I had been holding my breath. Then, the pheasant took off, running towards me and I saw that my boy, while running after the bird around the same tree over and over again, kept opening and closing his jaws, trying to figure out the best way to fit that large bird into his mouth. All this time, the bird was making very loud squeaky sounds. I tried hard not to laugh during this scene. As the tracking was in the deep forest, the spectators could hear these sounds, but

could not see much, so they were asking later on if my boy had a squeaky toy with him in the forest.

The water test was after lunch. When it was our turn, I threw a bumper and, to my disappointment, Marcus did not immediately jump into the water. I quickly realized that he had never seen deep water from a bank in his life. All water sites he was exposed to had a shallow entrance. One of the judges instructed me to make it more exciting and throw another bumper. I did and it landed too close, so the judges told me they wanted to see my boy swim a longer distance. My hands were failing me as the next bumper I threw went too far. But then my boy jumped into the water and swam! As soon as I saw him coming from the water and freezing beside me in a pseudo-point, I knew the game was on! So when the judges wanted Marcus to swim two more times, I knew we could do it many more times, as my boy loves our retrieving game. He shows me his love of the game by freezing in a pseudo-point.

The conformation check was immediately after the water test. The most memorable moment from this part of the test was the testing judge's description of Marcus teeth, "pearl white."

Although to me Marcus looked good in his field search, and he found and pointed all planted birds, it was hard to know how judges would evaluate his performance. I could not believe my ears when the judges were reading the scores. I had a buzzing sound in my ears, and then I heard something. But did I hear it right? Did the senior judge read all fours? Was it a maximum 112

points and a Prize I? I had to see it on paper to believe it. Only later did I realize that we had two cameras with us and did not take a single picture with Marcus and the judges.

I don't remember much about driving back—I felt like I had suddenly grown wings and was flying. Only when we were about two hours away from home did I agree to pass the wheel to my husband and joined my boy who was sleeping loudly all the way back home.

I must admit to myself and others that I am hooked. I want to see what else our boy can do in the field. As the only thing stopping us to explore the field was the fact we were not hunters, both my husband and I have now completed the hunting safety education course and passed the federal, provincial, and practical firearm handling exams. As soon as we have received our licenses, we will be ready to take the next field training challenge on! I was sure to sign up and work as a field marshal at hunting tests; it was an eye-opening experience to watch some great dogs' fantastic UT performances. We have a lot of training to do on our boy's steadiness during the flush and shot, heeling, and recall under distraction, retrieving to hand, blind duck search, and the list goes on. I will also need to learn a lot from my dog. But it looks like my dog enjoys teaching me how to hunt, so we should be able to have a great time ahead of us.

My thanks to all the Montana Sharptail Chapter volunteers and the judges: Phil Swain (Oregon), Tom Swezey (Colorado), and Dan Pforr (North Dakota). 🐾

## NAVHDA HAT/LAPEL TEST QUALIFICATION PINS

NAVHDA's Executive Council has introduced a new option to celebrate you and your dog's success in NAVHDA Tests. We have secured a supply of hat/lapel pins that may be ordered through the NAVHDA Store. There is a unique pin for each of the four levels of NAVHDA tests (NA, UPT, UT & INVT). The intent is to make the pins available to all owners/handlers who have passed a NAVHDA Test to celebrate the accomplishment.

Chapters are encouraged to order a supply of these pins to be awarded to qualifying participants after each day of testing. This is not a requirement, rather a suggestion to enhance the experience of qualifying a dog in a NAVHDA Test. Note that the pricing for these pins is graduated, so, if a chapter decides to provide the pins, they will get a bulk order discount.



**\$8.00** each for orders of 1 to 9  
**\$6.50** each for orders of 10 or more  
*Cost of shipping included*

### Ways to order:

Pins may be purchased from the NAVHDA Store.

An order form will be included with your official test results. Complete and submit the form along with payment per the instructions on the form.

Chapters may order pins in bulk from the NAVHDA Store.

If you would like a pin to commemorate a past qualification, please go to the NAVHDA Store to order.