

Q. We're hunting this afternoon at a Preserve. This will be his 3rd time hunting there and he has always done well. I'm having our birds put into a larger field today to make it more difficult. I believe he understands we are a hunting team and what our roles are, as evidenced by him holding point well while I flush. He sees or hears the gun and he gets really amped up. I'd really like to get a plan on how to proceed with him after today. I know formal training for his NA Test should start soon. Should we still hunt the Preserve? Or should I focus on something else to prepare for his Test?

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A. Right now, you should be hunting him as much as possible where he'll find birds, so the Preserve is your only option. That, and taking him for his regular off-lead adventure runs, is all he needs until approximately 2 months prior to Test day. As soon as the weather and water warms enough, which is generally around the 1st week of April, you need to find out how he feels about swimming by taking him to ponds and throwing sticks, etc. into the water to encourage him in. Many dogs will swim to retrieve thrown objects without any "training." Much of this has more to do with our breed's inherent chase instinct than a love/dislike of water. If he takes right to it, then the biggest challenge you might face for the Test is already met. You need only play with him at the water with treats and praise upon occasion and introduce him to the joy of fetching bumpers. Otherwise, it could take significantly more work to get him swimming and fetching bumpers.

A dog as far along with hunting as yours probably won't need much work for the field search portion of the Test, so you don't need to start that until about 4 weeks prior to Test day. Once a week you should plant 3-4 good-flying birds in approximately 40 acres (a 20/30-minute hunt) and hunt it with him, but don't shoot the birds. It's very important to have a last bird planted on the way back to the start/finish line, very near to the end, to encourage him to hunt the entire time. It works best if you plant your birds in a big circle. Else the dog figures out the birds are planted in a straight line going away from the truck and if it's hot and they're tired they'll quit hunting on the way back. Other dogs won't want to go back toward the truck - they know they're aren't any birds - and will continue hunting in a forward line, which only serves to "teach" them to be uncooperative.

During these field training sessions you'll determine if it's necessary to teach him not to excessively chase a flushed bird. The judges want to see a puppy chase a little - it shows desire and prey drive. But excessive chasing wastes valuable Search time and can cause a lowered score. You need to be able to keep him hunting/searching for 76% of the 20-minute hunt. (Time spent pointing, retrieving and getting drinks of water don't count.)

Your dog will definitely need some work for the pheasant track portion of the Test, no matter how good he is at tracking while you're hunting. You would a first track 2 months before the Test to gauge where he's at. You won't setup a track for him more than once every 2 weeks and have his last track no closer than about a week prior to the Test, unless you are experiencing serious problems. You should have him track in tough conditions, specifically wind, heat and dryness. It's important he have at least one successful track where he gets his bird. You MUST use live birds, but just

about anything other than quail will work in a pinch. Ideally you should have him track a rooster pheasant at least once.

He's already tracked during hunting, so I don't think you need to start with a drag, but for beginners the first track I lay is a live bird in a bag (use a small, zippered laundry bag used for washing bras in the washing machine - a couple of bucks at Walmart - usually stocked near the laundry baskets, irons, ironing boards etc. They are white.) that I drag behind me using a leash. It's best to take the bird out of the bag, dizzy and plant it at the end of the track. But if you need to use the bird again you can leave it in the bag. Just make sure to have a person very near the end of the track to get a hold of your dog before he kills the bird. (Sometimes it's a good idea to let your dog drag a light leash while he's tracking to make it easier to grab him.) A drag is an extremely easy track - a virtual highway of scent left by the bird and you as you pull the bird behind you. It's an OK way to start a puppy on tracking birds, but once is enough. A running bird leaves far less scent and will be zig-zagging all over the place, even occasionally jumping/flying.