

Steadiness to Wing, Shot and Fall Training

By: Gary Fleming

Before getting into the training methods for steadiness to wing, shot and fall, it's important that the handler has an understanding of why they should follow each step and what dog behaviors and instincts need to be squelched when training for steadiness. Consider what instincts the dog possesses that must be enhanced too. With those two contrasting needs in mind, consider the following three concepts:

Three Important Concepts:

1. We clearly want to enhance the dog's instinct to point feathered game with an emphasis on prolonging the duration of the point.
2. We must overcome the dog's prey drive and instinct to jump in and pounce on game.
3. Finally, we must control the dog's prey driven instinct to chase.

Why must you train to prolong and enhance the dog's instinct to point? The obvious answer is that you want the dog to remain in place until you've time to move in and flush game for the shot. If you're not in control of the flush then your chances of a successful shot are greatly diminished. The dog should remain in place regardless of any reasonable amount of time it takes you to get to the dogs location and flush the bird yourself.

In order to create the desired affect the dog mustn't think that it can catch birds. It must believe that if it moves after sufficiently scenting the game bird, the bird will flush and be gone immediately. Just as importantly, it must learn that to move after sufficiently scenting the bird is to be disobedient.

Why must you train to overcome the dog's instinct to jump in and pounce on the game? If the dog jumps in, the game will flush before you can get in shooting range, or even worse; the dog will catch the game. Neither of those occurrences is the desirable scenario. The dog must learn that it is disobedient to jump in.

Why must you train the dog to stay put at the location of the flush whether a gun is fired or not? So if you miss the bird, the dog stays put when the bird you missed flies away. The dog shouldn't chase or move on until you command it. Any other scenario will mean that you'll spend valuable hunting time trying to follow or collect your dog and reroute it.

Also, the dog must stay put when you shoot a bird and the bird falls to the ground. The dog shouldn't leave the flush location until you give a hunt on command or the command to fetch. Many dogs have been injured or killed because they caught up to a bird at the same time a load of shot did.

The Right Birds:

Yes, I know this is an article about training for steadiness to wing, shot and fall, but it would be negligent on my part if I failed to provide a lecture herein on the foulest of foul; AKA the pen raised quail.

There are numerous reasons not to incorporate pen raised game birds during steadiness training. Though eventually you'll have to introduce some, they should only be used in the very final stages of training and only after you have complete confidence that the dog will be obedient.

I can't stress enough my distain for using pen raised quail while training. Pen raised birds usually tire easily after a flush. After one flight they're worn out and rarely take flight again for some time. Their flight is usually short and they almost always land within the dog's field of view. In fact some barely even get off the ground or won't leave it at all. All of that means they are easily caught by an over zealous, untrained dog.

Even though some are raised in flight conditioning pens, many are raised in over populated confinements which results in birds that aren't healthy or aren't well feathered. During spring and summer months birds may be molting and some quail suppliers are trying to sell off last years breeding stock to un weary buyers. Most breeding stock birds have not ever been caged in anything larger than a 10" x 16" breeding cage much less a flight conditioning pen.

With poor flying quail, a dog can easily see where the bird lands. Seeing the landing, the dog believes it may be able to get to the bird and catch it. That's doubly true if the dog has caught birds before.

It won't take many experiences chasing and catching birds before you have reinforced in your kurzhaar exactly the opposite of the desired behavior. If you put your kurzhaar in a situation where it has the opportunity to catch birds; you have defeated your own intentions.

If you're not in strategic control of every training session, the dog will quickly learn that when it jumps in it can catch a bird before it flushes. Thus the dog's drive to chase will be fueled and enhanced by short flying, easily caught, pen raised birds. The more that the dog catches, the more it will continue to catch, and the more engrained that behavior will become.

If you've already used pen raised birds to train with, it's likely that your kurzhaar has caught some. By now you may know that it doesn't matter if you release pen raised birds into the field, plant them individually or launch them in a launcher; the birds perform poorly. It's likely that you're aware that, check cord or no check cord, you're not always in control of the situation.

That's why I recommend that you begin with pigeons and use them exclusively until the dog's steadiness training is almost completed. Healthy pigeons are much stronger flyers than pen raised game birds and generally fly out of site when released. Unlike pen raised quail often do, pigeons don't usually take off straight up over the launcher like quail may. They are easily placed and flushed manually and when launched in a bird launcher they don't hover and usually take flight in the same direction they are facing in the launcher.

If you want to avoid some of the problems associated with pen raised birds, pigeons are a must. I strongly suggest that you buy yourself some homing pigeons, trap some barn pigeons, steal some pigeons or make friends with someone that steals them or even raises them. I would use them exclusively during steadiness training until you're positive the dog won't jump in on birds and or chase them.

If you must, you can put a few pigeons in a small cage with a few quail overnight. That way the pigeons will get some quail scent on them. You could also put your pigeons in a game bag along with a quail or two before heading to the training site.

The Training:

Steadiness to Shot and Fall:

Assumptions: The Deutsch kurzhaar is completely force broken.
 The Deutsch kurzhaar is comfortable with close gunfire.

- A. You'll absolutely need a helper for this first step and if you have electronic bird launchers or a dummy launcher those will be helpful, but not absolutely necessary. You can accomplish the same thing with your helper and no electronics.
You'll also need a gun. A blank gun or small gauge shot gun. Those two are the most economical with respect to ammo. The kurzhaar should be on a check cord and wearing a pinch collar.
- B. If you have access to some type of launcher, have your assistant operate it from a hidden position. If you're doing it all manually by having your helper hide and throw dummies, be sure your helper is doing that from a location where the dog can't see them. You are trying to simulate a real hunting situation. A ditch, gully or even a big bush are all good hiding spots.
- C. Stand with the dog about 20-30 yards from the point where the dummies will be launched/tossed so the dog will easily spot the airborne dummy in flight and falling. Bumpers with flags are good for this since they more closely simulate live birds thus more excitement for the dog.

Make sure you give the dog enough slack on the cord to give it a good jerk but not enough so that it can build up enough speed that the pinch collar will cause injury to the dog.

- D. Have your assistant launch a dummy and at the peak height of its flight, fire the gun. You should be focusing all of your attention on the dog. If the dog bolts or steps forward give it a good jerk on the check cord and give the dog a firm “Whoa”, then pick the dog up literally and put it back exactly where it was before it moved. If the dog stays in place praise it and begin the drill again.

Repeat the drill 10-20 times each training session until the dog catches on. You’re striving for **CONSISTANT PERFECTION**. That means the dog stays put when the dummy is launched, the shot is fired and the dummy hits the ground. When the dog does it perfectly you should occasionally reward the dog by giving it praise at first. Eventually you can reward the dog by letting it fetch and retrieve the dummy but **ONLY** after the dog performs **PERFECTLY**. After letting the dog fetch the dummy several times in a row for correct performances the dog will most likely begin to anticipate the fetch command and take off before it’s given.

You can use that bad behavior to your training advantage by correcting and scolding the dog heavily for it, then alternating the reward with no reward at all. Mix it up a little by just giving a pat on the back or a “good dog” instead of letting the dog fetch.

Try not to get into a steady rhythm allowing the time intervals between each step of training to be identical. In other words change the amount of time between the fall of the bird and giving the fetch command. Dog’s are quick to pick up on the timing between your commands and will begin to anticipate the command. In some instances that would be good such as anticipating a “whoa” command while pointing. That’s not the case for this step.

You could also incorporate a dummy launcher into this step by having your assistant shoot flagged bumpers from a hidden position behind you or off to one side. Flagged bumpers look more life like then regular bumpers.

- E. If the dog has continued success you can slowly wean it off the pinch collar. If the dog reverts back to bad behavior go back to the pinch collar. When you’re comfortable that your Deutsch kurzhaar is performing perfectly and understands that it must not to leave until the fetch command is given, then you can start using frozen or dead game instead of bumpers
- F. After your Deutsch kurzhaar is performing all of the above, including excellence after switching to frozen game, you can begin to introduce live game. You can introduce quail now, but I don’t recommend poor flying pen raised quail because they usually drop short and you’ll only end up peppering the training area with birds that are easy to catch. If you have access to some very good flying birds then by all means use them now. If not, try and obtain some barn pigeons that you don’t mind shooting.

You don't want to let the dog catch live birds on the ground unless you've given it a command to fetch. Other than that, you must avoid it at all costs. If you let the dog catch birds you are defeating your intentions since it will serve to fuel and enhance its instinct to jump in, pounce and chase.

At this point you can begin to occasionally shoot a released bird and if the dog performs perfectly and consistently, give it the fetch command. If not go back a step or two. Don't shoot every bird you release or the dog may begin anticipating the fall and jump the gun.

Continue to be mindful that the dog doesn't get the idea that it will be sent to fetch every time a bird flies or it may anticipate that and bolt when it sees the bird fly or after the shot is fired. Just as described in previous steps, don't send the dog to fetch on every fall. Over time you can move the dog increasingly closer to the toss/launch location.

Steady to Wing/Flush:

Assumptions: You have access to homing pigeons.
 The dog has not accidentally caught birds???

- A. You'll absolutely need a helper for this step. You'll also need the check cord and pinch collar. Initially this step can and should be conducted in your back yard where there are no distractions then moved to the field.

The idea here is for your dog to stop and stay still when it hears the sound of flapping wings, i.e., the flush so the quieter the training location the better. You want the dog to hear the bird go to flight. You'll not be giving any commands so zip it! The dog will simply hear the birds wings flap and watch it fly away. The flush will eventually become the dogs signal to stop.

The beauty of using pigeons for this is that they usually make a loud flutter when they take off and they also usually fly out of sight. The dog won't get the idea that the bird went down close enough to chase and catch. Out of sight out of mind!

- B. Have your helper load 6-10 of your homing pigeons into a large bird bag. If you don't have a bird bag try to pull them from a cage or a box hidden in a location that the dog can't see so that it's not distracted by a cage full of fluttering birds during the training session.
- C. With your Deutsch kurzhaar on a check cord and wearing a pinch collar, bring the dog into an open area of the yard.

Step back a few paces from your kurzhaar and with **NO** command or noise have your helper throw a pigeon toward your kurzhaar but out in front of it. When the dog lunges for the flying bird jerk it back with the check collar and put the dog

back in exactly the spot it was before it lunged. Make sure that you plan strategically so that your kurzhaar won't catch a bird. Repeat this step until you're out of birds.

Be sure to take a few minutes or so between birds to give the dog a chance to think about what's going on and to calm down a little. You should stroke the dog a little to help calm it. It's a good idea to fly the birds at the dog from several different directions just to break up the rhythm a little. 5-10 birds a session is plenty.

Be **PREPARED** and **ANTICIPATE** so that you **DON'T** let your kurzhaar catch a bird. Remember you want the dog to stop at the sound of the flush so the sound of the flush in essence means "Whoa". Do not give a command at this point.

- D. When you're sure the dog is performing with **consistent perfection**, you should move to the field with this drill. Initially conducting the drill exactly as you were doing it in the yard. The dog should still be on a check cord and a pinch collar.

If the dog continues to performing with **consistent perfection**, you can begin to introduce planted pigeons or launched pigeons. No quail yet!

Since the dog has been thru steady to shot and fall training already; with a little help it should be able to connect the dots. When you're comfortable that the dog understands the process then you can take the pinch collar off and go to a regular collar.

- E. Now you should begin introducing the dog to multiple birds. You can do this by placing two or three birds under a kick cage or you can use how ever many your launcher/s or assistant can put in the air. The launching of several birds may unravel your kurzhaar a little but you'll just follow the same process you have until the dog stays put when the birds flush.
- F. When you're comfortable that the dog is performing as desired you can begin to go to the more traditional method of steadiness training in order to proof what you have completed to this point.

With the Deutsch kurzhaar on a check cord let it work a field where you have planted birds or bird launchers. Be sure you know the location/s that the birds/launchers have been planted. Also make sure that you don't bring your kurzhaar up on the birds or the launcher from a direction where it will scent or cross your foot track. If you are using manual launchers that have a pull string, make sure the dog addresses the birds from a direction that will not allow it to scent the pull string and follow it to the launcher.

If your strategy for placing birds is weak, the dog will quickly learn to follow your foot track to the bird instead of searching for the bird on its own. In any case,

you should leave the birds sit for a while in the field which will help dilute your foot track scent.

Depending on where you're training, you may be able to use a vehicle and set out launchers without stepping onto the ground. That seems to help!

After planting of the birds/launchers is complete, work the dog into the birds. When the dog points have your assistant hold the check cord then you walk in and flush the bird yourself and fire off a round.

You may need some correction here but if the previous steps have been correctly completed the dog should stay put when the bird flushes. If the dog isn't performing perfectly you can correct it. It's likely that it won't take many more training sessions and some minor correction to achieve the desired affect.

- G. When you're satisfied that the dog is performing with consistent perfection you can begin rewarding it again by occasionally shooting a bird and giving the fetch command. Remember DON'T shoot every bird that flies off into the sunset or your kurzhaar will anticipate a retrieve after every shot and may fly off into the sunset too.
- H. At this point can begin to mix in birds other than pigeons but I would do it gradually. Chukar, pheasants and quail are usually the most available. If you have access to wild birds that's even better. Make sure the dog has been introduced to each different species of bird during the force breaking process so that you're sure of a complete retrieve during your steadiness work
- I. When you're **ABSOLUTELY POSITIVE** that your kurzhaar is performing with **CONSISTANT PERFECTION** you can shorten the length of the check cord and eventually do away with it all together.
Some folks leave a small piece hanging from the dog's collar so that the dog believes that it is under control.

The beauty of the training methods I've described above is they can be performed in reverse. That means if your kurzhaar is already steady to flush you can simply move to the steadiness to shot and fall drills.

The advantage of going in the order that I've presented here is that the dog has already learned not to chase which will likely make getting the dog steady to wing/flush a little easier.

At this point you may be asking yourself, "How can I incorporate an e-collar into the mix?"

First off, NEVER use an e-collar on a puppy or a dog that's near a bird or you can end up making your kurzhaar a blinker, ruining your kurzhaar's desire to find birds, point them, retrieve them etc.

I've predominantly given up on the Unidentified Flying Discipline (UFD) because like it or not, the dog quickly becomes collar smart and you'll become an E-collar Slave (ES).

The dog will have to wear the collar every time you go into the field; you'll have to make sure the equipment is charged. A collar smart dog eventually learns that you have no control over it when the collar is off. That dog will most definitely learn to take advantage of that. In addition, you'll probably become lazy and use the collar for discipline when a more hands on approach should be used. It's human nature! The dog should always be sure of who is applying correction so it understands who's running the show.

If you correctly follow the methods outlined above you shouldn't need to introduce an e-collar into your training regime. There is one exception when I use it during steadiness training. If your kurzhaar is already familiar with the e-collar you should forget I mentioned this since it's likely the dog is already collar wise.

If the dog isn't collar wise; during the steady to flush work in the field you could set up the following training scenario:

Release a pigeon in plain view of the dog but not so close that it can catch it. If the dog begins to chase the bird intermittently press the transmitter button on and off multiple times giving the dog just enough stimulation each tap to make the chase uncomfortable for it. When the dog stops the chase instantly stop the stimulation. The discomfort will serve as reinforcement that chasing isn't good and can be uncomfortable.

If not used carefully an e-collar and many of the other electronic training devices can have a detrimental affect on a dog. One device that comes to my mind immediately is the bird launcher. Bird launchers are very useful but can do harm to a dog if you're careless.

For example you should never use a bird launcher around a young puppy. Bird launchers have a fairly powerful spring action and have injured young puppies. In addition bird launchers make enough noise when the bird is launched to scare a young puppy when it sees the bird spring to flight. You definitely don't want to make your pup afraid of flushing birds and/or turn it into a blinker and you certainly don't want it to be injured.

Even with older dogs it's not advisable to let them get closer than 3-4 feet from a launcher when launching a bird. If the dog has a well developed nose that shouldn't be a problem since it will likely scent the bird at a greater distance. It's also best to wait until they have already flushed birds and have developed a strong interest in them before putting a bird launcher in your bag of tricks.

Conclusion:

At the beginning I listed three concepts that need to be understood and focused on during the steadiness training process. They're listed below again for your consideration:

1. We clearly want to enhance the dog's instinct to point feathered game with an emphasis on prolonging the duration of the point.
2. We must overcome the dog's prey drive and instinct to jump in and pounce on game.
3. Finally, we must control the dog's prey driven instinct to chase.

Hopefully you'll keep those three concepts in mind when training for steadiness to wing, shot and fall. I also hope you have found at least some of what's written here useful. I believe if you follow each step to completion you'll be pleased with the final result.

Hunting Applications:

Steadiness to wing, shot and fall is critical since a dog that chases, and believes it can catch birds, is disruptive to the hunt at a minimum. If there are numerous birds that flush in the same direction the chasing may continue for some time.

The dog will likely have to be gathered up and restarted continually during the hunt and will probably bump birds during each chasing episode. It's also likely to continue to repeat what you've let it learn, i.e. "I can catch birds".

Most importantly, the dog's safety is in jeopardy if it chases birds. Over the years many dogs have been accidentally wounded or killed by gunners because the dog arrived at a bird in flight at the same time the hunter sent a load of bird shot in the that direction.

