

In a perfect television world, a rehearsal is a good idea. The dogs, on the other hand, would rather “wing it.” They usually win the debate.

HAVE FOUR FEET

By Scott Linden

Duke’s thousand-yard stare pierced the kennel door. He gazed through a window of his own making, into another dimension. Eons of genetics, evolution, and his own short life were distilled down to a perspective only he understood. The young shorthair had arrived that day, the minor leaguer called up from afar when the guide’s star pointer had torn his ACL. Nonplussed by the journey or his unfamiliar surroundings, he offered no insights.

Intrigued, I asked that we hunt with him in the morning. All the next day Duke played it cool, steadfast in the face of new faces, places, TV cameras, and wild Montana pheasants. Sheriff Andy Taylor to his bracemate’s Barney Fife, he did his job with quiet dignity and I took notice. Duke’s lesson was added to dozens of others taught by almost 200 dogs I’ve hunted with on my television show.

Like Duke, every dog can teach if we pay attention. Wide-eyed pointers and snuffling spaniels offer their wisdom unconditionally if we watch carefully. A dog’s actions and how we think about them help us better understand the wild, primitive world they inhabit. They are master hunters. We are pitiful apprentices.

I learn as much about dogs in the editing suite as I do in the field. I replay the flashy points and epic retrieves, the comic and the frantic. I slow them down, think about them. Then I write. Here are some of their lessons.

Duke had an open mind to match his indomitable spirit. He observed, reacted, and watched our reactions to him. Tentative in the morning, he figured out his job; by the end of the day, he'd found, pointed, and retrieved birds with panache.

Harry's moniker was a play on words. The boisterous wirehair was a bit on the fluffy side, all beard, bushy coat, and Groucho Marx eyebrows. If a dog can have *joie de vivre*, Harry did. He performed with gusto, unpolished and in for 110 percent. Clown-like demeanor made up for his many shortcomings. Cameras were rolling when Harry careened into the sage for a downed chukar, hit a dip, and executed a perfect somersault. Unruffled, he shook himself off, seeming to take a bow before continuing his retrieve.

Harry was like that kid in school wearing rainbow suspenders and goofy hat, always ready to brighten your day at his expense.

Mike's petite shorthair perfectly understood our dilemma in the Wisconsin grouse woods. Popple thicket, blowing a gale, we'd lose track of her tinkling bell just yards from the trail. Undeterred, she'd point birds, wait patiently, and if we weren't there soon enough, she would stealthily back off the ruffie and come get us. Six of the eight times she did that, the bird was still there when she delivered us to the find. Anymore, I'm careful not to criticize any dog's quirks before I see the end game.

There are some dogs whose gratitude is boundless, and they express it by giving their all. Rescued from a shelter, a runt given away, old guy past his prime... you can easily imagine they've pondered that darker futures may have been their fate. They are eager for the chance to serve an appreciative owner.

Ruger was half-shorthair and half-wirehair, and if not for the soft-hearted guide probably would have endured a short, miserable life. He would have walked on coals for his owner. He limped, bloody, from blackberry thickets with a valley quail in his mouth. Scaling steep volcanic slopes, his footing rolled out from under him so often his chest was scraped raw. He pulled one wounded chukar from its hiding place after manhandling bowling-ball-sized rocks at the expense of a ripped toenail.

Ruger felt the love from his human after every performance, receiving tender, loving care for every scratch and bruise. I bet he'd do it all again the next day, and the next, for a soft word and gentle pat.

Other dogs are good judges of character. At a deluxe Kentucky lodge, the pointers were exemplar, covering ground like a vacuum, standing bobwhites for the guns, and looking like a magazine cover photo. They even retrieved, for gosh sake.

There is an old Hollywood axiom: It's hard to win a scene when your co-stars are kids or dogs. My viewers agree.





Getting one of our stars camera ready often starts with whoa if the dog is good... or we're lucky.

This is when stage fright becomes relevant.



As usual, I was not on my “A” shooting game. I feel badly when dogs are forced to search hard for my wing-clipped birds, and I try to help. Apologizing to all for my lousy shot, I threw my hat on the ground, marking where I last saw the quail. Both cameras were aimed at it when the boss pointer sauntered up and lifted his leg.



Lights! Cameras! Action! Hunt 'em up!

Street smarts aren't often condoned in the dog world. Many owners demand robot-like obedience, rote performance. But Mother Nature is not perfect, nor are the challenges she poses for our dogs.

Pheasants in standing corn seldom play by the rules, even when pinned by a disciplined Brittany. A perfect dog would remain staunch, pointing where the ditch parrot used to be as it skulks down the row. In this episode, the Britt crept and pointed as birds snuck away, head-down in first gear. For high-tailers we'd find him on the far end of their escape route, having circled out and around. Field-trial bluster is one thing... getting the job done, another.

Fiocchi may not have liked water retrieves anyway, so when a headlong dash around the pond's perimeter got him to birds faster than a swim across, that's what he would do. His owner told me after a couple wing-clipped mallards dove and dunked their way to freedom, his Spinone Italiano put two and two together.

Wind, pressure, light cover, and nervous Huns can all conspire to make a South Dakota pointer's life living hell. The Drahthaars at one lodge simply opened a new playbook. They'd learned that their job is to produce birds for the guns, even hinky birds that didn't get the memo. I don't know if their handlers sent the message via mental telepathy or Twitter, but the dogs knew when it was time to work close and imitate a spaniel. They stopped to flush, retrieved unerringly. They did what needed to be done and guests were happy. When the wind laid down, they pointed again.

I remember a griffon of nondescript demeanor, mousy brown and a little tubby. He worked the cover, um, let's just say, methodically. But when we came out of a field,

we knew he'd found every pheasant in it. If he were a human, he'd carry a lunchbox to work and his furry sleeves would always be rolled up. The muted pride he held for his workmanlike abilities only showed on retrieves. He'd take a victory lap in front of the cameras as if to say, *Flash doesn't produce birds; persistence does.*

A lot of dogs mug for our cameras, but I don't think it's vanity. Camera operator Lynn Berland is often the first human they see on a retrieve because he's out front, capturing the action at their level. They'll often try to “share” their bird with the bright, shiny lens. At least once per shoot, bird bumps camera and Lynn ends up head-over-teakettle.

Sometimes, it's not just the dog but the owner who makes a hunt special. Clearly a clerical error, I was assigned to Team One at the South Dakota Governor's Invitational Pheasant Hunt awhile back. On one drive my teammate – a certain cable television news mogul – and I were the designated

blockers during a day that was light on birds.

Clearly, Blackie hadn't seen his owner for a while, being kenneled in another state on one of his owner's many ranches he owns. At the safety talk, both reveled in the reunion, dog imitating a pogo stick and owner making happy noises.

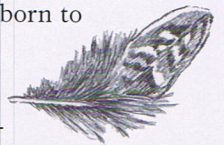
The happy-go-lucky Lab bounded ahead of us as we headed for the far corner of a swale. The TV exec was 100 yards back when I saw a rooster sneak into the grass. When my fellow blocker arrived, we spent considerable time and effort trying to keep the boisterous Lab close as the pair renewed their friendship, all ear scratches and chest rubs. Their enthusiasm for each other was not only uncontainable, it was contagious.

Shadows were lengthening. It might be the only pheasant of the day for them. I pointed to the thick stuff. *Crash. Slash. Trip. Rip. Slip. Cackle-flap-bang!* Soon dog and owner emerged, scratched and bloody from the swale, bird in hand. That team was doing what they were meant to do, without chauffeur, minion, or entourage to witness.

A little setter in California, just 35 pounds of over-caffeinated elegance, would slam into the scent cone as if it were a brick wall, quivering until a shot was loosed. She would never be a trial dog, streaking away at the flush.

Those dogs were doing what they were born to do, the way it is supposed to be done.

If we pay attention, maybe we can, too.



Scott Linden created “Wingshooting USA” eight years ago. It is the longest-running, most-watched upland bird hunting TV show in the U.S., airing on 10 networks including NBC Sports and Pursuit Channel.