

## Why do we TRAIN?

How often have you been at a hunt test, and came off the line shaking your head wondering why in the world anyone would do that; that would never happen hunting. I have done it a million times and I know if you have run more than four or five tests you have done it also. Everyone does it, just listen after the test dog any weekend, at any venue you will hear it. Why is the diversion so close? Why is the poison bird there? Why do we care about switching. Why why why. It's just in our nature. There are things we train to pass hunt tests, things we train for real life hunting and then sometimes these things we train for can save our dogs lives, or as in the case of Gyro and I today, almost cost one of us our lives and it is not the one sitting here typing. Before I go much further let me assure you there is a happy ending and a lesson to be learned. I am not sure how I would have ever forgiven myself if things had turned out differently today. Thanks to a quick thinking game keeper, a great boat driver and George who hung off the boat to fish my dog out of the water by her collar, I will not have to find out. But it has given me a better perspective on some of the things we train on and for and how they really do play an important role in the life of a hunting dog.

It has been a long season of hunting and lots of preserve work that has loosened the dogs up a bit. Their sits aren't as crisp as we would like, their delivery getting a bit sloppy and let's face it, sometimes they are breaking. Out hunting we let these things slip a little so we don't flare the birds or annoy our buddies at the preserve we work at. The hunters at the preserve really don't want to hear you working your dogs, blowing lots of whistles, and have a forbidden big loud booming NO. So the dogs get a bit lax on following rules and we get a bit bad about enforcing them. Besides, the hunt test/trial season is still six weeks away; plenty of time to tune them up. We are all having fun and the dogs are getting a ton of work...life is great.

On the way out to the bluff shoot I was talking to Ryan about what was going to happen and what was expected of us. It was Ryan's first time to the bluff and there was a lot of sea ice packed up against the shore, so I was talking with him about making sure to only send for the safe retrieves, watch the ice and to mostly remember his dog's life was not worth any bird. With that we walked on. The drive went well, the dogs had a tough go of it but everyone was safe, picking up lots of birds and if the other handlers were anything like me, proud as could be about the job our dogs were doing under such adverse conditions. After the horn signaled the end of the drive, dog and handler teams continue to pick up the rest of the birds. There were two on the ice not far from me. I sent Gyro for the first one she did a real nice job of the blind, angling the tough terrain and climbing over some pretty big pieces of ice pack. I was so happy to see all the hours of training coming out, and was picturing how good she was going to look at the spring tests. After a quick "good dog" I lined her up for the other bird and sent her off, again she took every cast, sat on every whistle, and with two more steps and she would have the bird. Just then, a cripple stuck its head up. Gyro and I both saw it, I blew a quick whistle thinking surely she would stop and pick up the bird that was now between her front feet. She hesitated for a second, and then the rooster got up and ran. That was the end of it. I blew my whistle, yelled, and screamed, fell off an ice flow, lost my remote, got back up on the ice to see Gyro jumping from flow to flow, after a cripple out over the deep water. Just as she almost reached the bird she fell in, my heart sank. All the training we had done, the HRCH title, the master passes and all the ribbons on the wall had not mattered, she had forgotten the most important thing: STOP, when I tell you. Nothing mattered to her more then that bird. I had not trained her well enough, I had let her down.

With my heart in my throat, I called for her, I yelled for her and a ran after her, tripping and falling, loosing sight of her hoping when I got to my feet again I would still be able to see her. How hard she tried up and over ice flows trying to get back to me. You could see her strength slipping away as the cold icy water tried its hardest not to let her go. Finally she couldn't fight anymore, she had fallen off the

same piece of ice three or four times, you could see it in her eyes she was done, there was nothing left. I pleaded with her to hold on I was coming, but the fact of the matter was there was nothing I could do to get anywhere near her, but I couldn't let her know. Hold on Gyro just a little longer please, I begged.

Then suddenly, the boat was there with the landing ramp lowered and George hanging off the end. I will never forget the relief I felt as he lifted her out of the water and onto that boat. I just glimpsed at her for a second as he put her in the heated boat house and knew she was safe.

Why do we train? We spend hours, days, weeks and months teaching our dogs' tasks, so they can win ribbons, earn titles and bring us the birds we shoot. But how we train and what we train can in just a moment of time be the difference in living and dying. The next time I look at a test set up and shake my head about some crazy diversion, just whisper Gyro's name in my ear.

Train your dogs like their lives depended on it, because if you hunt, it does depend on it. Hug your dogs and mean it.



Almost a dogs eye view of what they were up against.



Dock and Gyro watching intently. The big rock over Gyro's head is almost how far out she ended up.



What was almost one of the last retrieves Gyro would ever make. The ice she is on here is moving but there is only about a foot of water under it. You can see where the ice is floating on the deep water just about 20 yards deep of her.