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## ***Your Gun Dog Pup's First Year***

*A step-by-step analysis on what to expect from your dog*

Now you have the top notch puppy you've always wanted and with it dreams of your first field trial placement together or perfectly handled birds on a frosty fall morning.

Along with these dreams comes a strong commitment for the best care and training, to do it all right and give this pup a real chance to make it.

With that also comes a little uneasiness and lots of questions: "At what age should I do this? How old should my pup be when I begin that? Is he behind the schedule for where he should be at his age?"

I understand your feelings and wish I could hand you a "cookbook" with all the schedules mapped out, but there's no such thing. All of our pups are different just as we're all different. So we may take different routes to get to the goal, but we can all get there.

For years I've fought the idea of any form of training schedule, simply because a mere guide might be misunderstood as absolute requirements, and this can cause undue pressure on both dog and handler.

For example, a while back I developed a monthly progress "check-off report" for dogs in training, and the idea seemed to work until. . . along came three fellows who owned year-old littermates. You can probably guess what happened--at the end of the first month they compared notes and my phone got busy. They couldn't understand such drastic differences in the progress of their three dogs.

Now suppose we turn the situation around and give these same three fellows a cookbook or "schedule to train your pup by." Believe me, it could get ugly.

Even so, and against my better judgment, we're going to give it a try here, if only to provide you with an outline to help you develop your individual training program. But again, be forewarned--some dogs will lag behind, and some may not measure up over the long run.

Let's start with the essentials.

### **HEALTH CARE**

**Vaccination Schedule: Distemper and parvovirus**--Because of an ongoing concern about these diseases, puppy vaccinations begin earlier than you may have expected.

My vet advises starting DA2PPC as soon as six weeks, but considering most of you won't have your pup before seven weeks you'll fit into the following schedule at some point.

Puppies less than 10 weeks of age should receive vaccinations at four-week intervals until they reach 16 weeks. Example: Vaccinate at six, 12 and 16 weeks, or seven, 11 and 17 weeks.

**Rabies**--The recommended age for beginning rabies vaccination is four to six months.

**Lyme disease**--Many veterinarians recommend beginning Lyme vaccinations at 12 weeks. Lyme vaccines need to be boosted three to four weeks after the initial vaccination, with one booster annually.

**Heartworm**--Testing is required annually before beginning prevention. In many areas, especially the South where mosquitoes can be a year-round problem, pups begin monthly heartworm preventative treatments at three months and continue it uninterrupted throughout their lives.

## FEEDING

**Daily Feeding:** Active, growing puppies should be fed three to four times a day. Allow the pup all it wants to consume in about 15 minutes, although at the same time you have a responsibility not to let your pup become overweight. Fresh water should be available at all times.

As the pup develops, two feedings a day and later one a day is plenty. Use the same measure as above, giving him what he will eat in 15 to 20 minutes, and continue monitoring proper body shape and condition.

## TRAINING

**Eight to 12 Weeks:** Housebreaking; play retrieves with small dowel or ball; "no" as a command; and begin being gentle but firm.

**Socialization:** From now on spend a lot of time with your pup and expand his territory from the living room to the back yard as he learns new things and becomes accustomed to strange noises.

**Introductions:** Start familiarizing your pup with training tables, decoys, dummies, etc.

**Kennel:** Each time your pup is put in the kennel after play or for the night, say, "Kennel, kennel," and you'll be surprised how soon he understands the command.

**Collar:** introduce a lightweight collar. Your pup will quickly accept it and you gain a handle.

**Light Exercise:** Go for walks and extend pup's playtime for more exercise.

**Housebreaking Tips:** Take the pup out after play, eating or awakening from a nap. Go out the same door to the same spot each time, and praise lavishly when he does the job. Never leave a pup unsupervised, but confine him to a small area when left alone. Never punish pup for earlier accidents, only when you catch him in the act.

### Three To Four Months:

**Yield To A Lead:** Attach a short lead when you go for walks so the pup learns not to fight the lead. It's safer and sets the groundwork for later training.

**Sit:** If your pup is a flushing or retrieving breed, start to teach the sit command.

**No:** Reinforce the "no" command. By this age there are no options--it means stop what you're doing right now.

**Moderate Exercise:** As the pup develops, take longer walks and let him work a little.

**Introduction To Water:** Don't force pup, and above all, don't throw him in. Pick a nice warm pond, wade out and encourage your pup to follow; throw dummies or let older dogs show him the way.

**Kennel:** Reinforce the kennel command.

**Come When Called:** With the short lead on, crouch down, call the pup and pull him to you. Lavish him with praise when he arrives.

**Travel:** This includes pup's introduction to boats, cars, truck crates or dog trailers. Keep in mind that comfort helps lessen stress as advanced training or hunting begins.

**Four to Six Months:**

**You're the boss:** Not a mean old ogre, but you must be well established as leader.

**No, Sit, Come and Kennel:** Each day we reinforce learned commands and allow less options while continuing to strive for higher levels of understanding and expected obedience.

**Whistle:** Begin overlaying whistle signals for the Sit, Come and Whoa commands. Whoa is introduced as a stationary command for pointing breeds. As with other commands, go easy at first to help the dog understand what's expected.

**Continued Exercise:** Use common sense as you increase the amount of work during exercise periods, and be especially careful during hot weather.

**Check Rope:** Let pup drag a longer check rope during field exercise. This gives you an extended handle if problems arise.

**Marks:** These are simple, easy retrieves. At this point we hold the dog while dummies are thrown. Here we begin to nurture marking ability, prey drive and cooperation, which are all components of the natural retrieve. **Seven To Nine Months: Introduction To Birds:** Use cold, dead pigeons. Select a quiet place, have the pup on lead so he's calm and under control. Some pups need encouragement while others have to be restrained or corrected for mishandling the bird.

**Introduction To Gunfire:** Once the pup is handling game properly, we have the advantage of introducing gunfire while he is in prey drive so the noise becomes a signal of fun or pleasure, rather than a frightening or even painful experience.

**No, Sit, Come, Kennel and Whoa:** Drill, drill, and drill! Set up controlled scenarios to continually check and reinforce learned commands. It's one thing for our pup to sit, come, or whoa in the back yard, but bringing him to a level of quick and complete obedience with a nose full of bird scent is quite another thing.

**Remote Training:** If you choose, now is a fine time to begin the "three action introduction" to remote training. This method is the absolute best way to begin, not only for the dog but also to assure your own comfort with the concept.

**Moderate To Heavy Exercise:** This is not hard roading, but short periods to become accustomed to the roading harness mixed with periods of free running or extended swims.

**Check Rope Becomes Official:** As you move to field areas and bring training to a higher level, the check rope becomes a valuable tool. As the dog moves past, pick up the trailing end to enforce commands, or to help guide the dog during collar introduction.

**Field work:** At this age our dog should begin to understand why the commands are important. As the pup develops, work wild bird areas or plant birds in natural cover so pup learns to pattern or search likely cover.

**Nine to 12 Months:**

**Heel:** Being primarily a pointing dog trainer, I don't get too literal with the Heel command until well into check-rope work and after the Whoa command is understood and obeyed in the presence of birds.

**Steadiness On Game:** Most trainers agree that no problems arise by forcing a dog of this age to remain steady to flush, or even steady to wing once they've pointed birds. Non-slip retrievers should be steady through the shot, at least.

**Retrieving:** I wouldn't say a dog of this age should be completely "force trained" to retrieve, but it's not too much to expect proper handling of game and retrieving birds to within a reasonable distance of the gun.

**Pattern:** Increase fieldwork to enhance your gun dog's mentality. By now our young adult should aggressively seek out objectives and search field areas with purpose.

**Marking Drills:** Non-slip retrievers, flushing dogs and versatile breeds should be steady enough on line to spend a lot of time on marking drills. A key to conservation is a dependable retriever.

**Brace Work:** Once you're comfortable and in control you may want to try a little work with other dogs. Bird dog trainers have to set up backing situations and train on that while retrievers must honor other dogs and so on, but remember at this point in training all work is still on the check rope.

## CONCLUSION

I hope you will find this summary a helpful guide in planning your dog's training schedule, but please remember, it's not cast in stone, so remain flexible!