

# **THE FALCONER AND THE HIGGINS REMOTE RELEASER**

## **An Interview with Brad Higgins**

**By**

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Brad Higgins is a falconer. He is also a professional dog trainer who resides in Newcastle, CA. He trapped his first hawk at sixteen years old and acquired his first pointing dog shortly after. Somewhere along the way he became interested in training pointing dogs, and his approach to pointing dog training was influenced by what he learned from falconry. For twenty-two years, he has worked dogs and hunted wild birds in the Sierra Nevada foothills near Sacramento, but as wild bird populations declined, he was challenged to look for a way to make pen-raised birds act like wild birds. His solution was the Higgins remote releaser.

The Higgins remote releaser allows the bird to do the training. It is a metal cage made of laser cut steel with a lid that opens slowly and silently so it does not scare the bird or get the dog's attention. The bird is free to go when it feels pressure from the dog.

This past spring Brad was invited to help put on a dog training seminar at my kennel in Virginia and talk about his releasers. I had purchased three of them and wanted to understand how to use them. Following the seminar, we sat down at the kitchen table and discussed how he came up with the idea for them. Brad explained that the best training he had ever done was when he trained on wild birds. He said, "Wild birds teach a dog how to point naturally. The dog runs the birds up. The birds fly away, so the dog can't catch them. The dog starts to pause before he pounces, and finally he starts to point."

Brad said that he was looking for a device to use with pen-raised birds that would give him a natural release. He needed some kind of container that was open enough to allow the bird's scent to flow naturally. The lid had to open slowly, so the bird was not flushed, and it had to be quiet, so the dog did not hear it. There was a lot of experimenting with three years spent making prototypes before he finally came up with the Higgins remote releaser.

"The releaser is so simple," Brad explained. "I put one in the field and open it when I get the dog in the area. If the bird leaves early, I get a stop-to-flush. If the bird holds, I get a point. Anytime the dog pressures the bird, the bird flushes. The releaser allows the dog to relate to the bird just like it was a wild bird."

Brad explained that his background in falconry and those experiences as a falconer helped him understand the nature of dogs. "Hawks and dogs are both predators. They think alike," Brad said. "If I hunt a hawk with a dog, they learn to hunt together very quickly. The hawk does a lot to train the dog because the dog watches the hawk, and when they get successful, they do it again. Predators don't have a lot of time to learn things. They only have a few opportunities, so they need to be successful or they die. That's why dogs have the ability to put things together so quickly. They are predators, so it's in their nature to do that."

Brad gave an example of how quickly dogs learn from their prey. "You take an experienced dog that's been hunted on a preserve where they plant and shoot. He's learned he can get relatively close to those pen-raised birds, and he knows at what distance he's going to work them. You take him late season hunting on wild pheasants. What does he know? He knows pen-raised pheasant, and he knows how close he can

get. So he gets half-way to where he wants to be and boom the birds are gone. Dog says, 'Man that's not going to work.' The second time he finds a pheasant, he points it from way back. That's how quick he learns. He doesn't continue to go in and flush those birds. He learned from the bird. That bird said, 'No, not me. I'm not going to hold.' From that moment on, that dog pointed those birds way back."

Brad wanted to train dogs the same way, so the dog learned from the bird and not the trainer. He wanted the dog focused on the bird not focused on him. "Birds are valuable things to dogs, and the releaser allows dogs to relate to them. The releaser is open, and the bird can leave anytime. The bird is aware of the dog, and the dog is paying attention to the bird. He knows the bird is loose. He's going to be very careful what he does."

Brad went on to explain how to use releasers and gave me some tips. I told him that I had figured out how to control the bird's behavior to some degree by using different types of cover to plant the releasers. For instance, birds seemed to flush earlier when the cover was more open. "Think wild birds," Brad said. "In light cover, the bird won't let the dog get as close. In heavy cover, the bird lets the dog get closer." He said releasers worked the same way, and how fast birds flushed could be manipulated by the type of cover in which the releasers were placed. "You really do have some control, but it's still all about the bird. The bird leaves when it feels pressured."

I was curious about timing and how long Brad waited to open the lid. He explained that the cover and type of training he was doing determined when he opened the lid. He gave an example. "If I want to work a dog on stop-to-flush, I bring the dog into the area of the releaser and open it. I continue working the dog. Now, the bird is

free, and he's out there like a wild bird in the field, and the dog hasn't scented it. When the dog gets close enough, the bird is going to feel pressure, and he's going to leave."

Brad gave another example. "If I want the dog to point, I'll take him across the scent cone. I try to open the lid just before he first shows interest. I don't wait until the dog is roading in and then open it. I always want the releaser open when the bird decides it is time to go. The bird is teaching the dog how close he can get. The bird is awake. He has not been spun, and he is not dizzy. He is ready to go, and he knows the dog is there."

I mentioned to Brad that my dogs ignored releasers when they were empty, and I really liked that. If a dog was brought in on a check-cord to point a releaser and he started to creep or wanted to move up, I could let him. The bird flushed, and the releaser did not have enough scent to attract the dog's interest. Brad explained that he designed Higgins remote releasers so there was nothing to hold scent once the bird was gone. "I've had situations where I take a young dog to the field, open the releaser, and the bird gets up. The dog runs in where the bird came from, and the releaser is right there, and he's sniffing the ground all around it, and then he goes on. He doesn't relate the bird to the releaser."

Brad talked about the size of the releaser and said that he made it big enough to hold a couple of pigeons or chukar, a hen pheasant, or four quail, and he described how he planted coveys by putting four quail in the releaser. "I'll leave them in the releaser for a few minutes before I remotely open it. Then it may be fifteen minutes before I get back with a dog. When I get there, the birds have become a covey. They have left the releaser, and they're in the weeds somewhere. It's a very natural way to get a covey."

Brad had to catch a plane and return to California—our time was up. After he left, I found myself sitting at the kitchen table again going over my notes. Releasers were so different from launchers. Was my previous experience with launchers necessary to truly appreciate releasers? My first experience with releasers was still clear in my mind. I closed my eyes and replayed it.

*A white and orange dog turned into the wind, her tail drawing circles in the air, nose expanding and contracting, feet touching the ground in light ballerina steps. Her pace slowed and then stopped. She stood frozen except for her tail which now moved in short rapid beats. Right then a pigeon took flight maybe twenty feet in front of her. My first reaction was the bird got up too soon. Her tail was still flagging. I would have waited a moment to give her a chance to become more confident before launching the bird, but I was using a releaser not a launcher. Once the releaser opened, the training was between the dog and the bird. It had nothing to do with me or my timing. The releaser was all natural. Predator and prey—the dog and the bird already knew what to do.*