

# **JAPANESE TEA BOWLS AND BIRD DOGS**

**By  
Martha H. Greenlee**

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Shoji Hamada was a gifted Japanese potter who was named a living National Treasure in 1955. Most of Hamada's life was dedicated to creating simple utilitarian objects, such as tea bowls that were unassuming and beautiful. He believed that the objects he created were born, not made. By reacting to the material rather than imposing his will on the form, his pieces had a natural appearance, a closeness to nature that looked neither mechanical nor man-made. He once explained that it had taken him thirty years to learn how to make pottery, thirty years to unlearn, and now he was ready to begin learning.

A pro-trainer I know describes training a bird dog in a similar fashion, only he uses the face of a clock. He says people begin their training at the top, at 12 o'clock. As they learn, they descend. They think they are getting better, but, actually, they are getting worse. About the time they think they know everything, they are at 6 o'clock. Once they realize that dog training isn't as simple as they thought it was, and that maybe they don't know everything, they begin to ascend and eventually get back to 12 o'clock where they began. This analogy may explain why a person's first dog is often the best dog and why it is so hard to have a great second dog. The problem doesn't lie so much with the dogs as with the trainers, their expectations, and the fact that they take credit for their first dog's success.

How well I know this scenario. My first field trial dog was a big winning dog. A couple of dogs followed, each a little more broken in spirit, until I found myself with a one-year old pup I had corrected for just about everything her predecessors had done wrong. I started to turn upwards on the face of the clock when I realized that each dog is an individual and that sound bird dog training has to be a reaction to an individual dog's actions. It is not imposing my will to create something mechanical or man-made. I had to learn to think like a beginner again. I had to unlearn everything.

As I unlearn, I begin to see that each dog is unique. I begin to understand when to build independence and when to take some of it away. I understand the difference between dogs that are tough in the kennel and dogs that are tough around their game. I learn to let the dog tell me when he is ready to be "broke" rather than breaking him the summer of his second year. I learn

to correct a dog on deer only if he chases them.

Most importantly, I learn how much uncertainty there is in bird dog training. The more I learn the less I know. In the words of the pro-trainer, “It’s a guess. You never really know.” But it takes someone who has learned to train bird dogs and then unlearned it; who has gone from 12 o’clock to 6 o’clock and back to 12 o’clock to admit this. Maybe like the potter, the job of the trainer is not to impose his will but to be humble and unassuming so that the beauty of the bird dog shines through. Perhaps, like the Japanese tea bowl, a bird dog is born—not made.