

TEACHING YOUR DOG TO BACK

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By

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Backing occurs when a dog stops and stands at the sight of another dog on rigid point. A dog that demonstrates a willingness to back and does so with style is a pleasure to behold. Some Brittanys have more backing instinct than others, but for a dog to be reliable, he needs to be taught to back.

Many professionals have numerous broke dogs that they use to teach backing. For the single dog owner, Jim Basham recommends introducing backing as a stop-to-flush command. In order to use this method, your dog should be well on his way to being steady-to-wing, and he should understand stop-to-flush. Instead of using a live dog to teach backing, Jim recommends using a silhouette—a wood or metal cutout of a dog on point. You can buy one from a pointing dog supply catalog, or you can make one from 3/8-inch plywood, cutting the board into a shape of a dog on point. Paint both sides realistically and attach one or two metal stakes at the base of the form that, when driven into the ground, will hold the silhouette upright. Jim also uses a release trap with a pigeon or quail. An automatic release trap works best, but you can use a string tied to the lever of a manual release trap and lay the string on the ground where you plan to stop the dog.

To begin, Jim positions the silhouette behind a bush or at the end of a mowed strip—some place that the dog can't see it until he is very close. He puts the release trap near the silhouette, and, if the dog can see the trap, covers it with a light layer of leaves or grass. Jim puts the e-collar and check-cord on the dog and walks him around. He doesn't walk the dog directly to the silhouette but lets him hunt at the end of the check-cord. Once the dog is hunting, he walks the dog toward the silhouette, being careful to bring him in on the upwind side. He doesn't want the dog to smell the bird. If he smells the bird, he is not backing. When the dog sees the silhouette, it surprises him, and he hesitates. Jim lets him stand there for a few seconds before releasing the bird. Jim does not say, "Whoa." He releases the bird and does not fire a blank gun. He lets the dog stand there and mark the bird. Jim turns and walks the dog back the way he came, being careful not to walk him past the silhouette.

Jim continues to work the dog every day but changes the location of the set-up and keeps the sessions short. When the dog sees the silhouette, he begins to anticipate the bird flying and starts to stop on his own. Jim's goal is to get out in front of the dog. At first, when the dog stops, Jim holds the check-cord as he walks in front of

the dog. Eventually, Jim is able to drop the check-cord. The dog begins to stand while Jim walks past the silhouette and kicks his feet as if he is flushing. Jim may even stroke the silhouette before he releases the bird. He begins to fire the blank gun once he can get in front of the dog. Jim varies the number of release traps, flying one bird and then another. Sometimes he carries birds in his pocket and throws them as he flushes behind the silhouette. Jim still hasn't said, "Whoa."

Jim begins to use the e-collar once the dog understands that he must stop when he sees the silhouette. If Jim is in front of him, and he picks up a foot, Jim can touch him with low stimulation. But if Jim needs to use a higher level of stimulation to stop him, Jim goes back and reviews stop-to-flush before using the e-collar again.

Once Jim teaches the dog to back the silhouette, he has to teach him to back a live dog. (Ask a buddy with a broke dog to help you.) The steps are similar, except that the live dog may make the backing dog more competitive, so the backing dog may be less willing to honor him. Jim has an assistant handle the broke dog and work him on a bird so that he can establish point. Next, Jim brings in the other dog on a check-cord. As he did with the silhouette, he brings the dog in so that he doesn't see the pointing dog until he is close, and he makes sure that he can't smell the bird. This takes careful planning. Jim gives the backing dog a chance to back on his own. If he doesn't stop, Jim carefully picks him up, sets him back, and says, "Whoa." Once he stops, Jim stands next to him with a loose check-cord as the assistant flushes the bird and fires in front of the pointing dog. Jim lets the dog mark the bird. The reward for backing is getting to see the bird fly. Jim walks him away from the area and pets him for a job well done.

As Jim progresses, he changes the angle of approach. He brings the backing dog into the pointing dog from the front and from the side. Occasionally, he allows the backing dog to come in from behind where he can smell the bird. He also works in different locations. Jim says the key to teaching a dog to back is not saying, "Whoa" too soon. By not saying "Whoa" early in the training, the dog learns to make the decision to stop on his own.

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