

by Roger Sigler of Antlerdogs.com



Training a puppy for any hunting sport is very much the same. The most important task is to select the puppy or dog that is best suited for the hunting sport in which you wish to participate.

Naturally, if you are a bird hunter, a German Shorthair, English Pointer or maybe a Brittany, would be the breeds you should be considering. Since we train our dogs to hunt antler sheds, we have found that the Labrador retriever is the breed of choice.

We have worked with several different breeds and after great time and effort we have found that the Labs have the qualities that are best for shed hunting. We select pups that are from hunting blood lines. We really like the new style lab that is somewhat smaller then the 100 pound fur friends of a few years ago.

The labs that we select are for the most part, black or yellow. That may just a personal preference, but the chocolates that we tried at first, seemed to be a little more difficult to work with. We do not find much difference in the trainability of the pup from the male to the female. Once again, most people have had dogs before and have a personal preference in that regard.

In selecting your prospect you will look for a number of qualities before you fall in love with one of those beautiful little fur balls. They are all so cute that it is easy to over look the reason that you want the dog and what his or her job will be as an adult.

We test our puppies for play drive and prey drive first and foremost. The puppy must be crazy about playing with a ball or squeak toy and willing to chase it as much as you would expect an eight to nine week old puppy to be able to. Naturally, a puppy that is so young will probably not be retrieving the toy or ball to you, but you will be able to tell if he is really interested in the game.

We have developed our own training program, which is a reward based training technique, which we call "The science of participative training." It is extremely important to use positive reinforcement in training puppies. It is very easy to ruin a perfectly good dog, if you try to push them to hard and fast at the beginning of their training experience.

We have studied with some world class animal behaviorists and animal trainers and formed our own system. The science of participative training, SPT, is the safest and easiest way to get results in training your puppy. We have had great success with adult problem animals as well. The possessive reinforcement builds a confident animal by developing a mutual language. Dogs do not understand English any more then they understand German or any other language, until they are taught the meaning of the words that are being used to ask for a behavior. Remember a treat is only used as the reward as the dog begins to understand your commands.

No matter what type of puppy you are training, obedience is the first step in making your pup a welcome member of your family. Puppies can be very difficult to handle if they are not shown the rules of their new home. If your puppy is going to be a house dog, it is necessary to make sure he understands what you expect of him. Our puppies are started with simple commands such as sit. This begins are nine weeks. As the pup grasps the command, he will begin to offer the behavior for the reward. Your pup will pick up the sit usually in one session.

Find a treat the he will likes; we find good old hot dogs work well. We cut them into small pieces and introduce them to our puppies with a signal word or sound to indicate a correct behavior. A sound for an incorrect behavior is also necessary, as no harass treatment is ever used in training our pups. Everything in their early life should be just as safe and encouraging as it was with his mom.

From the puppy's introductive obedience training, we progress at the pace of our student. Just like children, puppies all learn differently. Some will catch on quickly and others will take a little longer. The main concern in puppy training is consistence. Shorter more frequent sessions are always referred to one long session.

After your pup has the basic obedience behaviors in full understanding, you can move on to the retrieve. We use a ball that has been cut in half and an antler tine passed through the middle for the fetch toy. The movement of the ball gets the attention of the pup and he will quickly be drawn to the action and look forward to playing the game of fetch and retrieve.

Scent discrimination is an entire book and can not be covered in the words allotted. However, it is the all important next step in the progress of your pup. It is impossible for any dog to know what it is that you want him to look for without this step. Your pup is capable of smelling a single drop of blood in a fifty-five gallon barrel of water. Just like a drug or bomb sniffing dog, they will have to be taught which scent he will be searching for.

Our next step in training our pups is the search. We have a series of games that we have for our pups, once they understand the scent they will be sniffing out. We work our pups almost every day. It is like play time for them. They look forward to the games. With the old fear based training techniques, the dog that may have been a great retriever or hunter may be lost because of harass treatment, ie.(choke chains, electricity, etc.)

By the time our pups are between five to nine months of age, they are ready for controlled antler hunts. We may start them in our indoor facility, under a pile of hay or other similar covers at first. It is incredible how much they enjoy the hunt. From this stage, they move very quickly to the hunts outdoors. It is important to remember that a dog can smell you on any object that you have handled and may hunt your scent. We take great care to eliminate human scent from controlled hunts. These controlled hunts will go on for several months.

The next step is the actual natural hunt. Remember this all important fact. A dog, even a seasoned dog can not find antlers where there are none. It is for this very reason that we like to take our dogs to the Canadian prairie in the spring. If there is any place you can find antlers, big antlers, its there.

It is a thrill to set those young dogs out for the hunt for the first time and watch them cover the terrain, nose down, quartering in front of you like an old pro. With each season, the dogs just get better and better.

We have puppies for sale of all ages at different times of the year. If you are interested in more information, you can visit our web site, www.antlerdogs.com . Feel free to contact us at 1-816-289-1154. We have DVD's available that can give more detail about antler dogs at Antler Ridge. Remember, if you are hunting sheds without a dog, it's just a walk in the woods.