

The Gunshy Dog.

By Wally "LCK" Hendricks

Most experts agree that gunshyness in dogs is by far a man made condition. There are some dogs that are born shy and are immediately shy to the gun without early mistakes being made but these dogs are few and far between compared to the vast majority that are made gunshy by their owner/handlers. This article is intended to help us avoid the many pitfalls involved in introducing a young prospect to the gun and how to "fix" the dog who is already made gunshy. There are not many things more disheartening than being faced with a dog who is gunshy. Many otherwise nice dogs have been put down or worse yet placed on "traders row" for being shy to the gun. I hope that by reading the following principals and idea's we can #1, avoid making our dogs gunshy and #2, learn a few things about how to recondition the gunshy dog.

Introduction to the gun.

Conventional wisdom tells us that we should introduce puppy's to loud noises at an early age in order to help get them ready for the gunshots that they will be exposed to during hunt training and hunting. I agree. This is a good way to not only prepare the puppy for things to come but it is also a very good way to get some insight into how the dog might respond to the sound of a gunshot. Does the pup startle when we bang the food bowls together? Does it get curious and come forward to investigate? Does it just seem indifferent to the whole deal? When introducing the puppy's to loud sharp and sudden noises at an early age (8 weeks) are we making sure that this is done at a positive time for the dog such as feeding or play time? At this early age the pup is more ready to make the association a positive one if the noise is matched with a positive activity. If we just go up to the kennel and start making sudden and loud foreign noise and the pup does not have anything positive to relate to the noise it could very easily make a negative association and we are then headed down the gunshy road.

There is no guarantee however that by making loud noise early in the dogs life that we are guaranteed a bold dog when it comes to gunshots. The opposite is probably more true. This is generally what happens. We have done a pretty good job in being loud around the pups and shooting cap guns and banging pans etc around our pups. Then we just assume the job is done and we thrust the unsuspecting pup into the many pressures of hunting and BANG we start shooting. Some make it through and some don't, many don't to be honest. Now we are faced with a dog who has not only made a negative association with the gun but more often than not has made a negative association with whatever it was doing when the BANG happened. The dog could make the connection with the lights coming to the tree, the other dogs that it was with, the critter that just fell out of the tree, the sound of the masters voice, the dark, the grass, the tree, the list is without end. Now we are faced with a dog who has been rendered pretty much useless in a few short seconds.

I like to go about it in a more controlled methodical way. I like to first get most of the pre hunt training done with the dog before a gun is even thought about. I like to have the dog used to the trappings of hunting before actually hunting with them. Basic obedience should be well established. The dog should be collar conditioned and handling in the field well. It should already be loading in the box eagerly anticipating

it's next outing. It should of had at least a basic introduction to live game and shown real excitement about it. It should have had all of this done well before introduction to the gun. Once this has been done I will then set up a few long distance introductions to the gun. When I say long distance, I mean long distance. 150 to 250 yards depending on the dogs personality. I like to use a .22 for theses sessions. I like to have the dog well exercised and loosened up before I start. I take the dog out to a big flat area and just let it out to investigate. I have a helper out at a good distance with he gun. On cue he/she fires the gun and waits for another cue before doing it again. My focus is on the dogs immediate reaction. Most dogs will look in the direction of the shot. Some will go to the shooter to investigate, others will just go back to whatever it was doing. If the dog goes to the shooter do not shoot again. Let the dog go and investigate. Have the shooter praise the dog a little or maybe even give it a small treat and then ignore it. If the dog just looks in that direction for a bit and then goes about it's business have the shooter crank another one off. If the dogs reaction is even less this time have the shooter move in by about 50 yards and repeat. Closely watch the dogs reaction after each shot. What we are trying to create is this. We are trying to just kind of fold in another of the many new things the dog has been learning about into it's normal daily routine. We cannot and should not try to do it all in one outing. The goal with this exercise is to get the dog to go to the shooter and get a reward. A little praise and a little treat and nothing more. You don't have to make a big fuss over the dog just a little reassurance that everything is ok. Once the dog has shown interest and has actually gone to the shooter and received a reward it should be put away for the day. Thats it. Nothin complicated or magic about it. We are not done but we have certainly laid a very good solid foundation for following lessons.

After about three or four sessions of this we should have a pretty good idea of how our dog reacts to long distance gunshots. The dog should by this time start looking for the shooter in the field and will probably run out to him for a treat before the gun is even fired. If this happens you are well on your way to having a bold and confident dog when it comes to gunshots. If the dog just goes about it's business of exploring the area slowly but surely have the shooter work ever closer to the dog while occasionally shooting. Your job is to watch for any signs of alarm or fear from the dog. If any signs of startle are seen from the dog have the shooter back off until the dog seems indifferent to the shots. This is where the dogs comfort zone is and it should not be pushed closer for the time being. The most important thing is to NOT coddle the dog for showing signs of being startled or a touch upset by the shots. This is a HUGE mistake many people make. They try to comfort the dog and reassure it that everything is ok. In reality all you are doing is reinforcing and rewarding the shyness. Completely ignore the dog who acts a bit skittish and have the shooter back out to the last place the dog seemed indifferent to the shots.

Once the dog has exhibited through several sessions over the course of a couple of weeks that it has accepted the gunshots as just another part of the deal you are ready for phase two of it's gun training. Get yourself a caged critter. Take it out and hide it in the brush. Let the dog out and "hunt" it into the area where the dog will find the critter by using it's nose. If the dog has been properly introduced to game prior to this step it will be fired up and ready for action. The dogs focus is now totally on the critter. All you should do is slowly walk up stopping every few feet and shooting the gun once on each stop. Watch the dog for any startle reaction, if there is one do not go any closer while shooting. If the dog is oblivious to you and the shots, keep working slowly closer. Most decent young hounds could care less about you and that little noise maker at this point. They should be all out baying the caged

critter. Now here is the deal. This is not the time to get greedy. If the dog has not shown any signs of being startled or even if it was a little and you stopped at it's comfort zone we talked about in phase 1 DO NOT shoot the critter for the dog! Leash the dog up and pull it off wanting more. Put the dog up for a couple of days and relax. This is a training session and not a chance for a little entertainment watching the dog wool the critter. You might be asking why at this point and that is fine. Trust me, it is always better to pull a dog off wanting more. Our goal here is to train a dog to the gun and this should remain to be our focus. This is kind of hard to explain but it goes something like this. The dog is always put up wanting more. The dog is processing what it has just done. The dog is having thoughts something like this..... went to field, found enemy, heard popping noise, almost got enemy, got pulled off, next time will try harder to get enemy, I really want to finish this business with the enemy, I must try harder, I must try harder!

After a couple of days of being laid up do it again. This time tie the dog off and let it watch the critter run off. Give it a bit to get away and let the dog try to find it. The only time you should need to shoot is a couple of quick ones just as the dog is RACING to where he last saw the critter go. If the dog does manage to tree the critter tie it back and shoot the critter out graveyard dead. Let the dog wool it for a few seconds and put it up for a couple of days to think about it.

We have now given this young prospect a proper and well thought out introduction to the gun. It has been able to take it at it's own pace and has had nothing but positive things to associate to the gun. I like doing it this way rather than just trusting to chance. I don't know about you all but my money does not grow on tree's around here so I prefer to protect my investment whenever I can. This exercise has never failed to work for me over the years. I hope it will work for you as well.

Breaking the gunshy dog.

Like mentioned earlier the gunshy dog is more often than not a man made problem. If the problem is man made it can generally be man fixed. There are cases of Sevier gunshyness that I have not had any success with but these cases are extremely rare.

Dogs learn through a process known as association. They either make a positive association or a negative association about something. Dogs who are gunshy have made a negative association to the shot and this results in shy, panicked and other unsavory behaviors from the dog. These unpleasant and completely unproductive behaviors usually get worse with time.

I have studied this issue for many years and have tried just about every "cure" known to man. I have found one that works very well but it is time and labor intensive and to be honest is hard to stick with. I do not recommend that you attempt this project unless you are 100% committed to seeing it through completely without the slightest thought of giving in. If you do get half way and back out you will have compounded the problem ten fold. If your not able to follow through with this program I recommend you seek out the help of a competent trainer who does not have an emotional connection to the dog. You will be better off if you did. If your willing to commit, I suspect you will see positive results in a relatively short time and can re train the dog out of it's shyness. Lets face it a gunshy dog is sentenced to a

life of fear and turmoil if not outright killed or traded every few months. So what do we have to lose?

Step one: Keep the dog in a confined and safe place. Do not interact with the dog at all except to keep it's water fresh. Do not let the dog out to exercise or play or anything for three days. Do not look into the dogs eyes, do not speak to the dog at all, do not let the dog be around any other dogs at all. This dog is in absolute solitary confinement for three full days. This place should not be it's normal kennel place. It should be another place. You might just have to build something. Make sure it is safe and well ventilated and just big enough for it to sleep, poop and get a drink but isolated from everything else. Do not vary from this, not even one little bit.

Step two: While this dog is in solitary confinement it does not get one single bite to eat. Not one. It is in solitary confinement and it will not eat one bite of food for this 72 hour period. Keep the water bowl fresh but absolutely no food!

Step three: After 72 hours have passed take the dog to a place where you won't get into trouble for shooting a blank pistol or .22. It is best if it is done in your yard but it won't hurt to take the dog to somewhere appropriate. DO NOT love on this dog or interact with it in any way other than leash and load and go. No words, no nothin. Have an assistant standing off about 50 yards with the gun. Open a can of dog food and place it in a bowl. Put the bowl down and bring the dog up to the bowl on lead. The very instant the dog gets a mouthful of food have the assistant crank off a couple of shots. If this dog shows the slightest startle response pull it off of the food and put it up. Back to solitary confinement. No food for 24 hours. Repeat the following day. I have never had a dog go more than three times before it became completely oblivious to the gunshots. If the dog does not show any startle reaction to the gun let it eat all the food and then put it back in isolation.

Step four: Once the dog is not showing a startle response to the shots while eating you are well on your way to retraining this dog. Now you have the food bowl down and loaded with that good ole canned food. The dog should be pulling you to the bowl for it's daily feeding. Have the assistant shoot while the dog is pulling you to the food. Don't let the dog get to the food bowl if the dog startles. Pull it off and put it up for another 24 hours. It usually only takes one dose of this and the dog will not shy the next time. Remember to always have your assistant about 50 yards away during these first few phases.

Step five: Once the dog is not shying while trying to get to the food bowl let it eat the food and put it up. No fussing, no praising, nothing but food and back to isolation. While the dog is eating have the assistant slowly move closer to the dog while shooting. Watch closely for any signs of startling. If the dog startles or shows any negative behavior as a result of the gunshots pull it away from the food and put it back up until the next day. The goal here is to get to where you can stand directly over the dog and shoot the .22 or blank gun while the dog eats without any negative response from the dog. You want to be able to completely empty the gun while the dog is gobbling down it's meal.

Step six: Once you can empty the gun while standing over the dog while it is eating you are now ready to properly introduce the dog to the gun as explained in the first portion of this article. Most dogs will come around with this program. It is the owner who usually gives in. If you give in and start feeling sorry for the dog you are rewarding the negative behavior and doing damage. Like I said earlier, this

program is not for the weak at heart but if broken down to it's simplest of forms all we are doing is re programming the dogs association with the shot from negative to positive. We are taking full advantage of the dogs need to survive by using food. It works and works well if done right. I hope this helps.

Good luck!