

# The GOOD SENSE Club

Learning to pace ourselves  
is never easy, but...

BY BARBARA HAUPT

**R**eality sometimes stinks, doesn't it? This can't be denied but it's often ignored. We're not only talking the dilemma of aging sportsmen here, but also aging gun dogs.



As the years go by it gets a lot tougher for both species to break through the brush, ford the streams, climb the hills, crawl over the stone walls and travel through the slash. Along with the aches and pains, the trips to the doctor's and vet's offices become more frequent. Yes, reality sometimes stinks.

Does this mean it's time to hang it up, give the favorite shotguns away and relegate the dog to the couch? I don't think so. It's just time to get smart about what we can and can't do or, better still, what we should and shouldn't do for ourselves and our dogs.

**DOG TALES** Those beloved dogs of ours age much too quickly and we'll never get used to that sad fact. The problem confronting us is their exceptional drive to hunt; they fool us with their enthusiasm because their drive doesn't age with their bodies.

When it comes to bird hunting, their canine hearts and heads don't acknowledge body restrictions; their drive remains forever young. It's up to us to watch them closely and know where to draw the "good sense" line for them.

The sad stories are out there and hopefully you haven't experienced any of them. From our perspective, I recall the overheated spaniel that had to be carried and plunged into the waters of a nearby beaver pond. And then there was the day our aging shorthair, while quartering through the beech for woodcock, had an encounter with a hidden jumble of long forgotten barbwire.

Fortunately for him and for us, he had a lot of white hair on him and it wasn't long before we saw the bright red on his coat. He hadn't slowed down a bit with a slashed belly and we were lucky we didn't lose him that day.

Another time while duck hunting a nearby saltwater cove, the downed black duck landed on a platform of floating ice. Our field-bred English cocker swam for the retrieve, then tried and tried to climb up on the ice flow to no avail.

The ice kept tipping with that en-

tering duck stuck just out of reach. Fortunately a strong "LEAVE IT!" brought the dog back to shore or that could have spelled disaster.

The story doesn't end there, however; it proceeds to PHASE TWO. Dad hustled home and put on his waders trying to beat the incoming tide. Mom (yours truly) got in on the adventure and we all returned to the scene. Mom put a rope around Dad's waist. Then Dad, with a walking stick for balance and with the lifeline rope around his middle, waded out toward the ice.

The cocker got the picture and swam alongside; she was a veteran on waterfowl but this was a new one. When they reached the ice, the water was waist high on Dad and

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Mom was nervously gripping her end of the lifeline. Dad lifted the spaniel out of the water and put her on the ice. Without hesitation she quickly took possession of the duck.

Dad and dog returned to shore with Mom's added assistance on the end of the rope. It was a good day



Sunny at 11.



for the three of us but, to tell the truth, the rest of our family doesn't think much of that tale. We overstepped good sense boundaries that day. It could have been a disaster, but that black duck sure ate good.

Back to better sense and sanity: Let's talk about the second day afield when hunting the older dog. They look longingly at you that second morning but can barely get up and walk. Their old muscles are letting them know they overdid it the day before.

Our dogs can't tell us the extent of their infirmities but it is up to us to look for them and be aware. They have such good noses, sometimes we are misled regarding their failing eyesight and deafness.

A good gun dog that has been ac-

tively hunted is bound to have impaired hearing after being shot over again and again. We don't realize just how bad it is because their noses dictate so much of their behavior

youngsters. It pays off handsomely years later when they can't hear. Hopefully we never have to experience the frustration and heartbreak of losing our canine friend to make

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and we, who don't have that attribute, have difficulty understanding it.

That's all the more reason to teach them hand signals when they are

us aware of their age related limitations.

Think ahead with your good sense plan for you and your dog. The older dog doesn't bounce back like he used to after a day's hunt. With this in mind, you have alternatives. Your old dog may need to skip a day in the field. Hopefully you have a younger gun dog in the household who can fill in, or perhaps it might be good idea for both of you to take a day off.

Maybe you can take to the field for a half day or, better still, mornings and late afternoons. Take off the middle of the day when the hunting isn't that good anyway—NAP TIME FOR ALL!

**THE GOOD SENSE HANDLER**

Just like our dogs, we also can get too caught up in the spirit of the hunt and need to draw our own "good sense" line. The story of the black duck on the ice is a good example. We probably should have used the canoe instead of the wader/lifeline technique.

In addition to making bad decisions because we are overzealous, the aging handler's lungs don't work as well as they used to and the bones break easier. The list keeps getting longer: bad knees, bad backs, blood thinners, heart issues, osteoporosis, poor balance, rotator cuff injuries, pulmonary disorders, blah, blah blah.

Some or many of these ailments are bound to rear their ugly heads after five, six or seven decades. Let's face it, just like our gun dogs, our bodies start to give us trouble. If we



Sunny as a puppy.



Filling up the tailgate with pheasants.



haven't done it already, it's time to look at what ails us and make a sensible plan.

If we break easy and/or bleed easy, then let's not subject ourselves to an environment where we are asking for trouble. Walking into the woods where there has been a recent cutting has to be a "no-no." You shouldn't follow your dog into that ankle-breaking situation or worse still, an accidental discharge.

If you do go where you shouldn't, you'll be looking where you are putting your feet and you won't see the bird flush anyway. Your best bet is to stay on the edge or find a skidder trail and hope the dog flushes the bird in your direction.

Then...don't take the shot if the bird goes where you or your dog have no business going. Be tough! It's not easy watching a bird fly away; it's not easy telling yourself "No" when you and your dog are in that moment. But, hey! You're out there! You are *hunting*! You may not be *getting* what you used to, but that's okay. Revise your expectations and you can still be there!

If you talk to yourself before taking to the field, you'll be a lot easier on yourself when you get there. You'll take shorter forays into the cover; you'll stay more hydrated because you'll take more breaks. You won't be on a forced march; you'll be enjoying the environment.

You'll go where you have cell phone coverage and you won't be alone. You'll walk the tote roads, the skidder trails, and the edges. You might even take turns with your hunting buddy with only one of you carrying a shotgun and the other a walking stick. The one with the stick is allowed short departures from the beaten trail if it's called for.

You *won't* try to be the tough guy who can do it all. Instead, you are going to be the smart guy who can do it *again*—and when I say "guy" I am including the gals like the one writing this story.

■ **MORE GOOD SENSE** Speaking of yours truly, I recall the day I got on the scales before leaving the house to go to a local woodcock cover. An



One of Sunny's two litters.



She is still deadly on pheasant with lots of practice on a running cock bird.



extra 14 pounds was what I was carrying in my gear and I hadn't even picked up my shotgun! Losing weight from under our skin isn't easy, but there are some speedy solutions if we consider working from the skin out.

Let's consider this grand opportunity for buying new hunting gear:

Comfortable lightweight boots with great support.

The old heavyweight wool shirt carries a lot of good memories, but silk and those new age fabrics are a lot lighter.

Antiquated canvas coveralls have been a great friend for many years but they are HEAVY!

A new space-age pair of long johns can do the job of keeping you warm very well.

Check out your hunting vest for weight. This might be an opportunity for one of the new "strappy" ones.

Start with empty pockets in your vest then pack only what you abso-

lutely need. If you are doing shorter forays in the field, you can cut back on shells and the amount of water.

Go with a lighter shotgun—a magnificent excuse to acquire a new one!

Get on the scales now in your new gear and thank technology for helping out when it comes to traveling lighter. Personally I've cut those 14 pounds by more than half.

After having all the fun of re-equipping ourselves, what about our gun dogs? Much of the solution is as true for them as it is for us. The older dog should have shorter forays into the cover, stay hydrated, and have more breaks.

Here again the amount of weight they carry is so important, and, like the handler, we don't want our dog carrying extra pounds. In their case, however, it's not added weight on the outside, it's FAT! We see too many dogs who are grossly obese and it's not funny.

One time a good friend was giggling when she told me she just

Dutch swam across the cove, clambered over the ice, and checked the shore out for scent.

couldn't refuse her dog's pleading eyes when he was begging for food. NOT funny! Gun dogs can't be overweight and they must stay in good shape to perform and have a long rich life.

We're responsible for their diet every day. In the hunting season, they probably need more fat and protein in their diet, especially if it's cold and wet out there. In the off-season, amounts probably need to be reduced.

If they become distressed over not getting enough bulk to eat, give them one of those little carrots or two. It's worth a chuckle seeing them crunch away. Green beans that are parboiled in chicken broth are good filler. My dogs like apples: I eat most of the apple; they eat the remainder, including the core. But no grapes—they can be toxic!

We can offer the older gun dog easier covers: the edges, the flat, the fields near water, and the new growth areas, as opposed to the slash in the mature woods. We walk the old roads for grouse, hunting only one side until we turn around and hunt the other on the way back.

We remain on the road and the dog hunts the side banks and ditches. It's leisurely on all participants and can be very productive. And speaking of productive, taking your older dog to a preserve where he is assured of bird contact is fun for all.

#### ■ WHAT ELSE CAN YOU DO?

When hunting, always have identification on your dog—a collar with your cell number on it is the easiest. For safety and visibility a blaze belly protector works. If you go for waterfowl, buy your dog a form fitting neoprene vest. If you sit with your



Dutch at age of 15.





Sunny retrieves a mallard: One is enough in the cold Maine waters.

dog, take a stool for yourself and something waterproof for your dog to lie on—a sample carpet square works well.

We did all these things for Dutch, one very smart spaniel we were fortunate to have in our household for 15 productive years. He was a magnificent gun dog: pheasants in the Midwest, quail in the South, grouse and woodcock in New England, and waterfowl wherever we could find them. In his old age, when he could no longer run the fields, he still got his retrieves even if we had to set them up.

One winter day when Dad and Dutch were sitting at the edge of the Maine woods on a nearby salt-water cove, Dad was offered a shot at a fly-by mallard. The duck fell, but it was wing shot and paddled to the opposite side of the cove then

waddled up the ice-covered bank into the snowy woods.

Dad sent Dutch. He had marked the fall and possibly the waddle into the woods. Dutch swam across the cove, clambered over the ice, and checked the shore out for the scent trail. He took the track into the woods and disappeared from sight. Dad just sat and waited. After some time had passed, he heard the “quack, quack” and soon Dutch appeared on the opposite shore with the mallard in his mouth.

The spaniel looked across the ice-filled cove at Dad, then casually strolled along the shoreline toward the local road at the head of the cove. He looked back at Dad who got the message. Dad walked back through the woods on his side of the cove to his truck, and drove to the place where Dutch waited patiently—

mallard in his mouth.

We wouldn't have the pleasure of telling this story if Dutch hadn't been given the opportunity to hunt in his later years. He was SMART!

Let's take a lesson from old Dutch and be smart. We know what to do. It's just a question about being honest enough with ourselves to do it. Dad and I still get out there at our age, the late 70s, and, yes, we are often tempted to do what we shouldn't.

Luckily we two can remind each other and sometimes that reminding isn't so gentle. We seem to be better about caring for the dogs than we are about ourselves, but so far we have been lucky and are getting smarter as time passes.

So...don't hang it up. Join the Geriatric Gun Dog club and be an active member. There is still a lot of fun to be had out there! \*