

The Continuing Adventures with Ollie:

A Week's Worth of Whistle Work

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This past Tax Day (April 15th) marked my one year anniversary with Sigbrit Ollie.

It's been a year of new adventures for both Ollie and me, not to mention our cat, Fraidy.

Moving from the lush green lawns of Virginia to the cactus and sand of the Santa Fe high desert was a major transition for Ollie. The nasty stickers of the Cholla cactus precluded Ollie's rapid movement in our open spaces.

Instead, we began obedience work practicing every day with notable gains. After taking two obedience courses through the Los Alamos Dog Obedience Club, Ollie and I ventured into the Rally obedience ring. Four competitions later, Ollie had his first title: Rally Novice. In his three back-to-back qualifying scores he earned two placement ribbons. (He would have done even better if his handler didn't cost him a few points along the way!)

Having shown an aptitude and desire to do obedience work, it was time to train in the field. I thought Ollie would enjoy it being a Brittany and that his breeding should put him in good stead in the field. His litter mate, Sigbrit's Catch Me Now, was the 2006 ABC Central Futurity Gun Dog winner. The challenge, however, for Ollie was he had never been on birds, not even in a backyard setting. My challenge was that I had never trained a dog for field competition. After all I shoot with a Canon Digital SLR. Think of the blind leading the blind.

My early attempts at introducing Ollie to the working in the field involved taking him into our greenbelt on a check cord. He spent his time side stepping the nasty stickers of Cholla cactus and prickly pears which are in ample supply. I spent my time making sure the check cord wasn't caught in the cactus plants. We came upon a covey of at least 10 Scaled Quail about 40 feet in front of us. Between us and the quail were numerous Cholla cacti. Ollie was focused on avoiding the pain he rightly associated with the Cholla stickers and did not move on the quail.

At this point we both needed help . . . and a pain-free environment! I turned to Bill Bradford of the Central New Mexico Brittany Club. We worked with Bill on the West Mesa outside of Albuquerque. He planted hobbled quail and worked Ollie twice on a check cord. Ollie was on scent followed by a strong point within seconds both times. That answered the question about Ollie being birdy.

Ollie and I continued to work in our greenbelt with him learning to work across in front of me into the wind. His avoidance of the Cholla limited his gate but he responded to my verbal commands and hand signals. The Scaled Quail were no were to be found and it was the first of April. I decided to enter Ollie into a Hunt Test to see where we were.

On April 12th we headed to Las Cruces, NM for a combined Hunt Test sponsored by two German Shorthair Pointers Clubs from Las Cruces and El Paso, TX. This format provided us with two Hunt Tests on a Saturday. Ollie was ready as he bolted from the starting line and in short order found a bird on the back course, went on point until I flushed it and fired my blank pistol. With the bird airborne, Ollie took off in hot pursuit. My calls fell on flapping ears. Ollie did double back to the spot he found the bird and continued to work that area

looking for more birds. By the time I was able to convince him that we needed to move on to the bird field we had less than a minute left in the test and did not find any birds there. The excitement of running in a field free of cacti and full of birds was all so thrilling to Ollie . . . thrilling to the point of ignoring me. We needed to talk!

After lunch we had our second Hunt Test opportunity. Our conversation paid off as Ollie again quickly found a bird on the back course. This time he did listen to me and we headed to the bird field where he found more birds . . . and earned his first HT qualifying score. It was clear that his excitement and my ability to control him were also a test.

The following weekend we headed to Kiowa, CO for Hunt Tests on Saturday and Sunday. Saturday was close to a repeat performance of our previous Hunt Test. Ollie again qualified but was not by much. In both tests, our lowest score was in "Trainability".

This was underscored on Sunday. Running the same course, Ollie took a hard left from the starting line towards the bird field. He remembered its location from Saturday! I convinced him to come with me on the back course. It was here he took off and found a number of birds along the tree-lined river bank. Two problems: first it was way off course and second he was happy to find and chase those birds and ignore me until after time had been called. Result: a well earned trainability score of 0!

Four Hunt Tests, two qualifying scores and more than 1400 miles and \$500 in fuel and hotel bills. And time was running out on spring Hunt Tests. Our last opportunity until the fall was in two weeks in Agate, CO another 800 mile round trip with two nights in a motel.

Could using a whistle make a difference? Virtually all other participants in the Hunt Tests used a whistle. Could I train Ollie in time to qualify both Saturday and Sunday? And how would I go about this training?

First stop: Google. Results: good to whistle-train a dog. Missing was the how-to. Knowing our obedience training daily routine, I inserted the whistle into my commands. Ollie's recall command became: Ollie front (whistle). Ollie responded with his usual burst of energy and a running recall and centered front. With repetition, the moment of truth came. He did a recall and centered front on a whistle command only. Success! Maybe we were on to something. We continued this practice graduating to out of sight recalls with a whistle. It worked!

Then the testing got more serious. The spring in Santa Fe brings with it salamanders. Last year these were Ollie's first prey and he remembered just where they live . . . amongst the rocks of our retaining wall aside our home. It was while he has located a salamander and was on watch for it to emerge that I blew the whistle. He left the salamander for me! Wow, we just may have a chance.

Last weekend was the Spring Hunt Tests of the Skyline Brittany Club in Colorado. Saturday morning was cool with the residue of snow on the ground. By the time our fifth brace arrived the temps were in the upper 40's with sunshine and a slight breeze – great weather for the dogs. Ollie took off from the starting line and headed out on course and worked far and wide. When he headed back towards the starting area the moment of truth was at hand. I blew my whistle. Ollie arched backed past me back on course! The whistle training worked!

He qualified both days earning his Junior Hunter title! He maintained his great enthusiasm for running, finding, pointing and chasing birds. To these, he added responding to the whistle proving that he is "Trainable!"

What a difference a week made!

