

## **David Molyneau**The Strategy of Whoa Training

By David Molyneaux

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The very basics of training a pointing dog is to have a dog that will stop when he scents a bird from a distance away. You don't want to have the pup sneak in for a closer look, nor rush in and give chase in an attempt to catch it. This not only results in a frustrating day with the birds seemingly flushed out of the country. It is also extremely dangerous for your Fido as it jumps up into the line of gun fire or is lost giving chase. You also want to have a set of brakes on your pup if it confronts a deer, rabbit in the course of hunting in the field.

Training a pointing dog to achieve the ability to stop promptly and not make any forward movements is called 'whoa training'. Depending on your pup's energy level, temperament, and softness, will decide as to which of the following methods you use.

Professional trainers use four basic approaches all of which are geared to handle the animal's ability to handle pressure and attention span. It is wise to have at your disposal knowledge of various avenues that can be taken should shut down or boredom becomes an issue.

If you are working with a pup that has the characteristic of being sensitive, soft, and very submissive, then teaching to whoa is best handled in conjunction with heeling. This requires two leashes attached to your dog at the same time. The longer of the two is snapped to the 'D ring' on the collar, run down the back, and wrapped once around the waist. This is referred to as a flank hitch in dog training. The other leash is also attached to the dog's collar, and handled as a normal lead you use to walk your pup. Your pup's shorter lead will be in your left hand (assuming the dog is heeling on your left side) like you normally walk your dog. The longer leash or rope will drape behind you and be held in your right hand.

Now, what we want to accomplish at the end of this lesson, is to quietly command our dog to stop by saying "whoa", and the hand signal to stop, as that of a cop stopping traffic. And also be able to walk around the pup with out him moving.

The concept of the flank hitch is to apply a slight discomfort to the pup's abdominal muscles. His reaction will cause the muscle group to tighten with out any pain. It's simple, when his Abs are tightened, he is restricted from moving his hind legs. He simply can't move them, so in respect we are teaching him to be a body builder. The longer he tightens his Abs the longer he isn't able to move. Try this on yourself by standing up and tighten your stomach muscles as tight as you

can. At the same time, attempt to walk, and you will notice for yourself, your legs can't move.

So, as we walk your pup, the process is to spontaneously lightly jerk the rope in your right hand and immediately release tension, putting slack in the rope. Your pup will instantly stop at which you will reassure the command by leaning forward and giving the hand signal to stop (you have given a correction and then a reward.) Step around or a few feet away, then resume holding the rope and lead so you can continue walking. After a few yards continue to repeat the sequence again. It is important to know that the flank hitch must be pulled as close to 90 degrees to the body for the best results. You don't want to pull forward for that will encourage the pup to walk, when you are training him to stop and freeze all motion.

Little by little use the flank hitch less and less. You want to be able to hold your hand up, quietly say "whoa", and the pup should stop on his own. The objective is to allow you to walk around and a few yards away from the standing dog.

There is a very common method of whoa training that is geared toward the dog with a more normal temperament. This is the implementation of the whoa post. It is simply a stake in the ground and a check cord. The nice thing about this method is that it has very minimum of intimidation or vocalization. The advantage to this method over the heeling style is the pup doesn't tend to use the handler as a sense of security and crutch. Occasionally resulting in a pup that will whoa, but is difficult to step away from and wants to have a tendency to follow you for security.

The check cord has one end tied to the whoa post and the other is attached to the dogs waist as a flank hitch, then snapped to the collar. A leash is also snapped to the collar as well. To train by this method you simply walk the pup away from the stake, eventually running out of rope on the check cord. Continue walking to the point where there is a tug felt on the leash. What actually happened was the check cord tightened around the waist. At this moment release the tension on your leash and motion with your hand to stop. This hand signal is important to install in your training program from the very beginning. For the day will come when walking in on a point you will not want to say a word, simply a single hand signal is all that is needed to solidify a point.

To this point nothing has been stated as to how to release your pup from the whoa command, where he is not to move till commanded to do so. In basic training it is advised to not allow any movement till two release commands are given. By teaching the dog to wait for two different cues, he is forced into achieving patience rather than breaking point. This is also the procedure to instructing the pup to relocate, ....a method of pin pointing a more precise

location of a bird, without flushing it. The most common physical cue we use is a sharp tap on the dog's left shoulder along with a verbal command. It doesn't matter what word is said but, for instruction we will say "okay". Now, how loud and what pitch you speak makes a world of difference in how fast the pup will move toward the bird. You want the dog to move as cautious as possible, and only take a few steps before being commanded to stop. The louder you speak (or higher pitch) the harder the animal will charge forward, which is what you don't want.

The check cord is a fine piece of equipment, but it's difficult to replace the e-collar when properly used. For whoa training it is attached around the waist with the probes against the flank area. It is best advised to fasten the e-collar to pup along with the check cord. This will enable the pup to accustom itself to the extra sensation of the collar wrapped around the waist, while using the check cord. To find out what setting to use on your transmitter begin with your lowest setting. It is mandatory to use only the nick/momentary function and not the continuous. Tap the button and watch the flank area of the dog for a slight twitch, and no discomfort. This will be the number setting that you'll be using to whoa the pup.

While you are in the process of whoaing your pup with the check cord introduce the sensation of the e-collar. It will feel different so expect a bit of confusion at first. Use it intermittently along with the check cord in training. Work toward weaning yourself off using the check cord all together. Before you completely stop use a shorter lead attached to the dog along with the collar. This way the dog will believe the rope is still commanding when it is now the e-collar around the waist.

Many owners seem to omit the last step in whoa training which in return, comes back to haunt them in the end. Up to this point you have a reliable pup who will stop on your request. Now is the time to go to a field with no birds or any distractions. It is advisable to have your e-collar attached to the flank of your pup for the first few trips to the field. You are trying to achieve a very fast and crisp stop when the whoa command is given. Make sure your pup is under motion at a rapid gait when you wish to put on the brakes. As soon as you see the dog come a stop, IMMEDIATELY give your release command in an energetic and happy manor. Don't hesitate to clap your hands and give lots of praise.

Many owners want to enjoy observing the dog standing motionless for a period of time. This is a mistake at this point in training and is not recommended. Many of those dogs will resent being tortured standing on whoa for a while, and become soft losing their intensity, often sitting or lying down. Continue this exercise till the pup is relaxed with your request to stop briefly and move on with confidence.

Now is the time to put it all together expecting perfection under stressful bird work. With the e-collar still around the flank (in case you need it), go to the field with a

wing clipped pigeon in your pocket. Again, as previously rehearsed work your dog across the field and this time throw the bird into the air allowing it to flutter out for a ways. It's obvious you want your pup to see the pigeon flying and institute stopping your pup on the flush.

It is always advisable if there is any doubt your pup will blow up and be tempted to chase the bird, use the check cord and flank hitch as a reprimand. The rope will stop the forward motion abruptly where as an e-collar may cause confusion and misunderstanding. Institute the e-collar

Once there seems to be steadiness on the flush, this is a great time to introduce the sound of gun fire. If this is your pup's first experience with hearing a gun shot, be sure there is some distance between the dog and the report. You can always work closer as your dog gains experience. But, having the first initial gun blast too close to your pup will likely cause irreversible damage.

It cannot be emphasized enough to get your pup into lots of birds. This requires lots of encouragement making every experience happy-happy. If the pup happens to catch a bird...so what. Or, if he happens to give chase to a bird, don't come down on the young dog. But, to get most intensity possible in your points, make every effort to get the pup absolutely bird crazy. This will go a long ways in preventing apprehension and shutdown in the event of receiving too much pressure during training.

The finished product is a trained dog that stops under pressure, understands the objective, and enjoys his job. Use this bird to your advantage, when sending your dog in for the retrieve. Whoa and stop 2 -3 times briefly in route to the bird, confirming you now have a reliable obedient hunting dog that is trustworthy.

There are other methods of whoa training such as using the table, barrel method, platform, and the buddy stick. Each of these has an advantage and a disadvantage, which we will discuss in future articles.