

Gun dogs trainers must have patience, respect and love

For over a year, I had wanted to write a column about training hunting dogs so when I read about a website for "morrisingundogs" in a Mercury classified ad, I immediately phoned Jeffrey Morris and set up an appointment.

When I asked him how he got started, he replied, "When I was in grade school, my granddad took me to a shooting preserve outside Sauna where he used a hunting dog. I thought that was cool and in sixth grade, I got an English setter. We lived near Warner Park here in Manhattan so there was plenty of space to practice. I got a book on training English setters and started. I've been doing it since 1970."



"I've trained pointers, labs, golden retrievers, Vizslas, short hairs, and Weimaraners for other people but I like English setters best."

"Specifically, how do you train a dog to hunt?" I asked.

"First, a good trainer has to have three traits: love for dogs, respect for them and patience with them because it requires an intense, long-term interaction with the dog," he said. "Second, for the dog to be ultimately successful, it must have a good background either in pedigree or heredity," he continued.

He then described in detail how he begins bonding with the dog, in the best instances, a puppy. "We play fetch in the kitchen I and give him or her lots of love, just as you would your own kid. No yelling, no scolding, no abuse, just socializing."

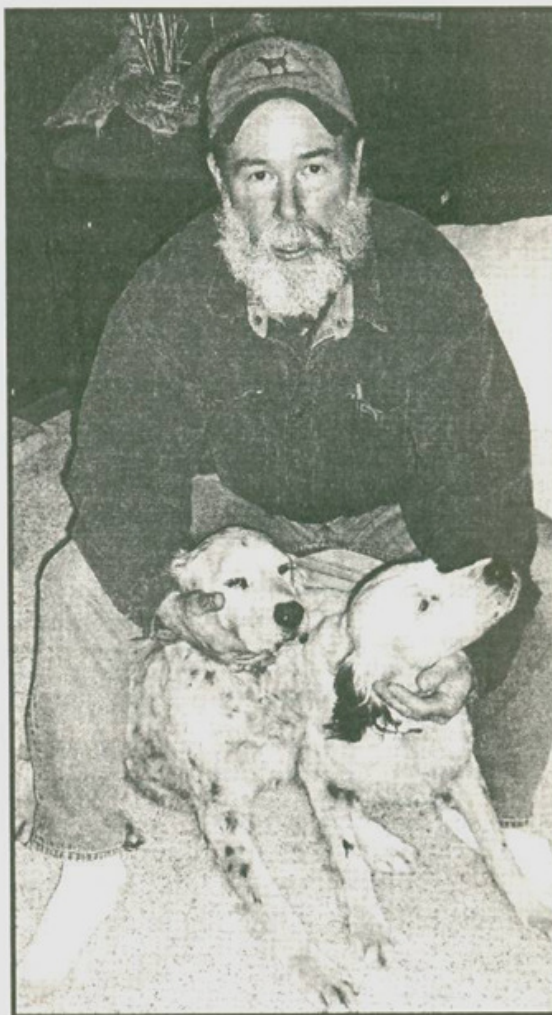
"When the dog is about three months old, I put it on a 2" by 6" board about thirty inches off the ground. My territory. Over and over and over, lots of repetition. That's the patience. I teach the dog to stay on the board by saying 'Whoa' and using a police hand sign," he explained.

"Do you reward it with food when it obeys?" I asked.

"Nope," he replied. "Just two taps on the head to tell it to release."

"Keep going," I urged.

"Well, then we do the same thing on the ground, his territory. Some learn quickly, others may take three to four months," he added. "Then twice a day, it's back to the board. I'll release a pigeon, tell the dog 'Whoa' and fire a starter pistol. He'll watch that pigeon and hopefully stay on the board. Then I'll repeat the process, over and over until he stays on the board without wanting to chase the bird. When he does that, we're ready to go to some land I own south of 1-70 for some real, not simulated,



Courtesy photo

Jeffrey Morris sits with his gun dogs, Rocket and Goldie. Both are English setters.

work."

"There'll be good days and bad days but the trainer can't get frustrated or upset," Jeff said. "Just come back the next day. That's the respect."

"On your outstanding website, I read you also breed dogs as well as train dogs for other people," I said.

"Yes, I'm now on the sixth generation of my gun dog line from my first English setter in 1970. I now have my dogs in twenty states," he said.

Just then Rocket and Goldie, English setters, ambled into the room and immediately requested some attention from me. I saw why Jeffrey loves that breed: gentle all-around good pets as well as great hunting dogs. And it was obvious they were raised with love, patience, and respect.