

We are Losing Legendary Methods (Fieldwork 3) – By T. Mostert

Tok Mostert, a Professional Hunter from South Africa, now living in Sweden, is sharing his writings on dog training with us. [You can start reading them from Part 1 here.](#)

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Planting Birds (... & backing)

In hindsight, I should have been able to read Flake better when she was younger. I was so focused on getting her to do what I wanted that I neglected to see the little signs she gave of her natural ability to find birds. I took many photos of her as a pup and now, when I go through them, I find several photos that show she was pointing, or was interested in a bird. Never be so focused on what you want your dog to do, that you forget what the dog can already do. If I had just made the effort to get some help she would be much, much further than she is today, not that I am not happy with where she is today, she is a incredible little dog.

Feather training is one of those things you either believe in or you don't. It is no replacement for birds, but to teach a young dog to be steady and sit to the flush it does have its place. As said before, I made a mistake in teaching Flake to run a pattern simply for the sake of running, instead of giving her a reason to run a pattern. The very first field test I went to was a complete disaster, two days of running on fields and no one bird pointed and believe me she had the opportunity several times. I was basically stuck with a dog that would cut a field to shreds but did not know why she was doing it, running and hunting are not the same thing.



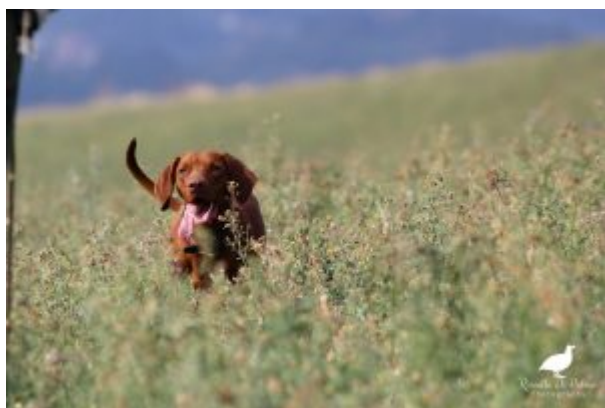
Tok & Flake

This is when I realized I needed some expert help and like we all should do, I looked for the best possible person to help me, a Legend. I also realized I needed my own birds and we built a enclosure and stocked it with some partridge. The first time I met Sten Rönnerling, he was out on a field, he was busy placing out partridge to train his dogs. I had heard of placing out birds, but I had never seen anyone do it. He was a friendly man and by his firm handshake I knew those where not the hands of a talker, he was a doer. Right off the bat he told me to tag along with Flake on a leash while his pointers were running in the field on placed birds. Sure enough his dog went into a solid point and Sten instructed me to bring Flake in, slowly behind the pointer so she could pick up the scent of the bird. I did not notice it, I could not read her yet, but Sten immediately said she has the scent when I was six meters from the pointer, he can read a dog! The pointer flushed on command and they made quick work of dropping the bird from the sky, I gave Flake the sit instruction the moment the bird lifted.

This is how we carried on for several more birds, at one stage we even leashed the pointer while on point to try and slip Flake into his place, the bird flushed by itself and made our plan unsuccessful.

We did this on several occasions, I started using a longer leash so we could slip her in tight to the pointer, it did not take more than 5-10 of these placed birds before Flake understood what was happening. This was the point where Sten decided that she had had enough and that we would or could

turn her into a point stealer if we would have continued slipping her on the pointer, that is experience. What we did now was to follow at a good distance and once the pointer took a solid point we would move on from maybe 150 meters and get Flake to see the side profile of the pointer while on point, the moment she would display backing or mirroring we would stop, some days this would be at even a 100 meters out from the pointer. I need to back-up a little here and make it clear, Flake had already pointed pheasants and grouse before I started with Sten, but this was infrequently and on some days she would simply run right over birds.



Back to Sten. It was the third time I went out to Sten when he decided it was time to place birds for Flake. We placed three partridge out on the field, they were spread pretty far apart, and we let her go. Sure enough, it did not take very long for her to go into a solid point on one of the birds. Here is where placed birds are extremely valuable. I walked up to her slowly and told her to be steady when I was a few meters away, I kept saying steady, steady until I could lay my hand on her and say good girl, girl. Now is the time to heap praise on them, right there and then is the best opportunity to reinforce that what they are doing is what you want them to do! I then took a few steps back and to the side, called her name once and gave her the flush command, while doing this I also moved briskly forward. The bird took to the air and I whistled the sit command. It all fell into place perfectly. She managed to do the same on the other two birds we had placed out.

Two weeks later Sten had a couple of clients from the north of Sweden who came down to work their dogs on birds. He had placed out several birds and there some wild birds in the area too. I was just going to tag along with Flake on a leash to gain more experience. After about a hour the guests' dogs had not found one bird and Sten told me to let Flake off leash and let her run. It took no more than two minutes before she just stopped and went into a solid point. I waited for the guests to get into a suitable shooting formation and once they were in place, I gave Flake the flush command. Up went the bird, whistle, down sat Flake and boom, bird dropped from the sky. Flake had marked the bird and I sent her to retrieve it, good retrieve delivered into my hand. That right there was one of the proudest moments of my entire life! She was finally on her way to becoming a bird dog!

[Continues here...](#)

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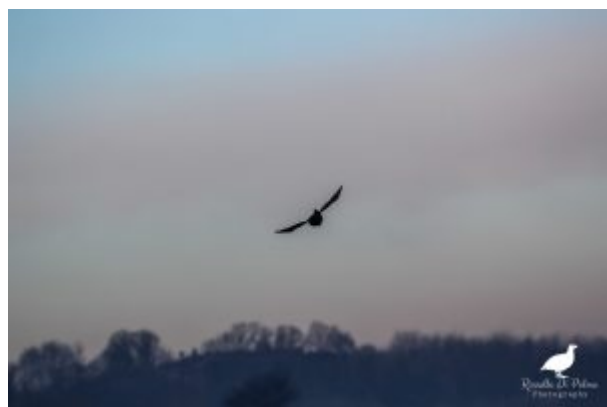
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Depth and Width

There is nothing more gracious than a good dog gliding over a field at full speed, turning at the edges without cutting back

and working a good distance from you without losing contact. Some fields cannot be run edge to edge, it just does not make for a huntable situation, just like some areas do not allow a HPR to run at speed, this happens normally where you have thick cover.

What is acceptable depth and width for a dog to run? It depends on whom you ask and on what terrain you are hunting. I participated in a field test not too long ago during which a dog found and pointed a pheasant for over 4 minutes. The point was maybe 300 meters ahead of the judge and shooter. Judge refused to walk up to the dog and have the pheasant flushed and shot, he said the dog was not hunting for him, it was too far out. I have my own opinion on this particular scenario, and I am sure many others will have too. Point is that what is desired by one handler, is not what suits another.



A good dog will work as far as needed without losing contact with the handler completely, now that is another subjective phrase depending on whom you speak to. I do not mind losing contact with my dog for 2-3 minutes when she is working high

cover or thick cover, I know if she is gone longer she is probably on point. It is for the same reason I do not call her in when I cannot see her, I do not want to break off a possible opportunity. You cannot expect a dog to run the same way in a forest, as he would on a large open wheat stub field. If your dog is not steady on point and cannot stand without flushing the bird by himself, then you probably do not want him to go too deep or too wide, because chances are he will flush the birds before you get there anyway. Do not confuse this with birds that flush by themselves without the dog moving. In short, depth and width should create a huntable situation for the dog and handler. Some dogs will start shallow and short, until they figure out there are no birds close and then start going wider and deeper.

As said before, here and only here is the time to let off on the discipline and obedience a bit. Give the dog some “freedom” and let them work. The dog needs to gain experience and confidence so he can rely on himself. There is no problem with a young dog that sticks close, as his confidence grows he will increase his range. A young dog that runs wild is another issue, here hiding from the dog to force him to keep contact is a good idea.



Flake

I have been extremely fortunate to have a Legend by the name of Sten Rönnerling who has helped me with Flake's training on field. Sten has trained multiple field trials champions in multiple breeds. He had several double and triple champion dogs, a fist full of 10/10 field scores and dogs that have placed high in pointing dogs World Championships. This easily qualifies him as a Legend. He has single handedly helped me turn Flake into a proper field dog that understands what is expected from her. His methods have been tried tested and proven, again and again. At way over 70 years old, he still runs his dogs daily and can still drop a bird from the sky with little effort. When it comes to field training he has a few chosen pieces of advice, one of his first phrases was this:.

" The only time a dog should be standing still on a field is when he is pissing, pooing or pointing".

Young dogs will, at some stage, start pointing rats, mice, rabbits, hare etc. Although this is not what we want them to

do, they are doing what comes naturally, finding game. Do not be too hard on the young dog if he does this, simply break the point as quickly as possible and send the dog in a different direction. Never, never assume it is not feathered game the dog is pointing, always presume it is feathered game until you learn how to read the dog and interpret the signals. Never, never praise the dog on point if you are not 100% sure it is in fact a bird they are pointing! This, as discussed before positively reinforces the dog, but if it is not a bird you are reinforcing him to stand for game and possibly a empty spot where a bird was before, but has long since left (more on that later).

Dogs that stand and route around in one spot are a no, no be patient with a young dog that does this, but get them to move as soon as possible.

Don't run two dogs that want to play with each other on the field, run a experienced dog with a young dog, or run him alone. Different breeds run different ways and look different, Flake ran and hunted her own way when she ran with other dogs, until I ran her with a setter, for some reason she shadowed the setter. I ran her a few times more with the setter and she let go, running her own lines again. Expose your dogs to different breeds on the field. If your dog shows any aggression towards any other dog on the field, pull your dog out, it is a completely unacceptable behaviour.

This is a broad brush I have used to describe field width and depth, there is much more detail that goes into making a dog run well, including external factors like weather, bird density, lack of birds etc.

Find a Legend like Sten to help you, it is incredible what difference it makes.

[The next part will cover how to work a dog on planted birds.](#)

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This is the single most rewarding discipline for a HPR owner or trainer. Often called the Formula 1 of the dog world, our little “machines” flying over a field, head high and then that sudden dead stop into a rock solid point. A good advance into a sit and the bird gets dropped from the sky, dog marks perfectly, retrieve is brilliant and at the end of the day you get a first prize!! Yeah, I dream too, because getting to this point takes more time and patience than any other disciplines. Many dogs run well, many dogs find birds, many dogs are steady on point, many dogs have a good advance and many still a good retrieve. Putting it all together in ONE DOG is where it gets very, very complicated! Field trials rules, criteria and regulations are different for HPR’s in Scandinavia, Europe and the USA, but we all want our dogs to find birds, point them and be steady. I cannot speak for other test methods, I train for our field test and our criteria. Some of what I say will not be applicable to you and it will not make sense in why we do it the way we do it. I don’t like ‘kicking up birds” myself and I believe it is easier to have your dog stand still when you ” kick up” birds than to stop a dog after sending him to put the bird on the wing, it does not mean I am right and others are wrong, to each his own. Train within your

framework.



Flake

There are those that believe you give a young dog birds and when he shows potential you teach him to run a proper pattern. I did not do it that way, as said before I was new to this two years ago and I taught Flake to run a pattern long before I got her onto birds on a regular basis. The single biggest problem with my method with the result that Flake ran, she did not hunt, not her mistake, but mine. She was doing what I told her to do and taught her to do. In hindsight I will use a combination of birds and teaching a dog to run a pattern at the same time. A dog that gets “fed” to many birds too early will not run as hard as he should, he will think it is easy hitting birds, more on that later.

To make it more structured, I will start with how to teach a dog to run a pattern and how to correct and steer the dog. I do not start a dog on field training that is too young, joints, ligaments and so on can be permanently damaged! Do not run a too young dog with another young dog, start your dog alone.

Exhaustion is a real danger, low blood sugar (hypoglycemia) and dehydration will kill your dog, learn the signs and keep a close watch. Young dogs rely on their owners to take care of them. Do not train field if you cannot stop or recall your dog, those who are saying “screw you” right now have not seen a dog run over. If you do run them without a stop or recall in place, run them in a fenced area or a area that has no cars or

trains for 5 kms. Finished preaching let's get to patterns.



If someone helps you...

To teach a dog to run a pattern is fairly easy, to teach a dog to run the desired pattern is harder, a dog that can adjust his pattern depending on terrain and prevalent weather conditions is a very smart dog.

I have seen many dogs on trails that are released, run straight ahead of the handler for 200 or 300 meters, then make a left or right turn head out 100-200 meters, turn left or right and head straight back to the handler before they start running a haywire pattern. I have seen dogs run the boundaries of a field only, educated dogs whose handlers trained too hard on the boundaries and not enough on the fields. There is nothing more funny for a young dog to go out and run freely, use that energy by training the dog to run a pattern. One method of doing this is by going to a field that is 50 meters wide and maybe 200 meters long. You can use larger fields, but your dog will run less pattern and you are trying to teach him to run a pattern. It works best with two people or, if you can run and keep running, you can try by yourself, I did a lot of that!

Let's say you have the 50×100 field and you have two people. Always start training with the wind in the dogs face. Start both people and the dog in the centre of the field, release the dog and both people move in opposite directions, each to one side of the field, right at the edge on each side. I like to take a few steps back after I reach my end and then I call

the dog in, this teaches the dog to cover every edge, do not expect a young dog to do this every time by itself. Then I start walking forward on the edge of the field, the other person should be able to see when the dog reaches me after I called him in. They now call the dog to them, remember to keep walking forward! The person that does the call in should not call in too soon or too late, timing is everything. Continue calling in the dog from one person to the other while walking at a steady pace towards the end of the field, the dog will eventually turn by itself. Do not let the dog turn short on either side! Once they start getting tired, they tend to turn short, the person that has the dog closest to them when he turns short should call the dog back! Please, please do not forget to heap praise on the dog when he gets to your side! He is doing what you want him to do! Do not do this for more than 10 minutes with a young dog, take a 30 minute break or longer if you intend repeating the exercise. Do not push the dog too hard in the beginning of its training on field!



Doing the same exercise alone is possible, but harder, I ran from one side to the other with the Flake, she would beat me to the other side every time, I could turn short! I had one advantage with Flake when I started pattern training, she could

already take directions with hand signals (arms) and with the whistle. A judge once told me that a dog cannot read arm signals, he is wrong. Some dogs take to the pattern easy, some dogs take a little more time and some dogs just don't get taught right. A dog that enjoys your company will follow you, no matter how hard he runs, he will keep an eye on you every now and then, a young dog even more so. Use this, when the dog reaches a point where you are happy for him to turn, turn and walk in the opposite direction (always forward), make sure your back is to the dog, do not walk backwards! You do not need to be as fast as the dog, if he passes you keep walking

in the same direction until the dog reaches your chosen turning point, turn and walk in the opposite direction.

[To be continued with depth and width.](#)