

Sporting Dogs



— A MAINE SPORTSMAN SPECIAL FEATURE —

Is Your Dog Fit for the Fall Hunt?

by David Van Wie



Kurt Spear's dog Moxie is looking happy and ready for a workout at Setter's Point.

Is your dog fully fit and ready for the fall hunt?

Hunting dogs are athletes that need to be ready to perform at the highest level when the season starts. Like football or soccer players, dogs need to build up their fitness level from

the off-season before they get out in the field. A proper training regimen will incorporate weeks or months of workouts to shed extra pounds and develop endurance, agility and strength while avoiding injuries.

There is no way a dog

can go from the family-room floor or a backyard kennel to the field or forest and run for a two- or three-hour hunt. Dogs need to be both physically and mentally prepared to do what they love to do – chase birds, or bears, or whatever game animal is the quarry of choice. And the same goes for the hunters!

Make a Training Plan

Competitive athletes often use a written training plan to work up to peak conditioning and designed to avoid injury. This concept applies equally to hunting dogs. It doesn't have to be elaborate, but the plan should reflect common sense – set a regular schedule, start easy, and work up to the harder stuff. And it is also important to balance diet and nutrition with the types of activities or workouts the dog is doing.

Getting the dogs out for a run on a regular basis isn't as easy as it sounds. Elite athletes train almost every day with built-in rest days. This may be impossible for many dogs

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and their owners, but the goal should be to work out three or four days each week as the season approaches.

It is best to alternate between longer, slower workouts (an hour or two at an easy pace) to build endurance, and harder, more intense sessions (30 minutes to an hour of full speed running) to build strength and agility. Even on "off days," the hunter can work on less physical training, such as obedience exercises or fun games of fetch.

After the dog reaches a solid baseline level of fitness, it is time to begin regular sessions of real-life field time – working with birds, swimming, or tracking hares or bears. However, especially for those Mainers living in populated areas, finding a good place to work the dog in the field can be a challenge.

This spring, I was fortunate to tag along while Maine Guide Kurt Spear from Gray took his three Llewellyn setters – Storm (10), Moxie (7) and Gus (2) – out for an early tune-up at Setter's Point in Albany Township, just south of Bethel. Kurt's goal was to give his dogs a strenuous workout under field conditions with real birds, while also providing specific field training for Gus, who is in just his first year in the field.

I rode up to Albany with Kurt and the dogs, about an hour from the Gray exit of the Maine Turnpike. "The dogs need to train and work year-round," Kurt said, while watching for the turnout. "They can't sit on the couch for half the year, and then go out into the field for a long day."

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Room to Run

Dennis Jellison, his wife Kathy, and son Torin run Setter's Point, one of seven commercial shooting areas licensed by the Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife. Setter's Point encompasses 240 acres of fields and forest, and offers year-round bird hunting (including Sundays) for chukar partridge, pheasant and quail. The birds are raised locally and released into more than 80 acres of fields in rolling hills.

The view of the White Mountain National Forest from the farmhouse and guest lodge is spectacular, and the terrain offers plenty of variety for dogs to work under natural conditions. There are fields with clumps of brush and trees, stone walls, streams and ponds, and thick woods. As a Master Maine Guide, Dennis provides one-on-one training assistance for the all breeds, as does Torin, also a certified Maine Guide.

When we arrived, Kurt and Dennis discussed the training plan. In the first field, Dennis would place two chukars in some cover about fifty yards apart. This challenged the dogs to focus on one bird or the other. Later, we would move to a different field to place a third bird. All three dogs were fitted with bells and electronic training collars for tracking, with motion sensors to signal the hunter when a dog is running or on point.

Trust the Dog

We walked into the field to let the dogs warm up and build their anticipation. Then Dennis

rode out with the ATV to place two birds. For this type of training it is helpful to know where the birds are, so the dog and the hunter learn how close they can get before flushing the bird.

"We help train the hunter and the dog at the same time," noted Dennis. "Hunters have to learn to trust their dogs. I can't tell you how often hunters call a dog off point because they don't believe there's a bird there."

"It's always best when the dog thinks you know more than he does," he added.

Soon the dogs were running hard, noses up. Young Gus proved he was catching on quickly, while the more experienced Moxie and Storm got down to business.

It didn't take long before all three dogs were on point for the first bird. Kurt flushed the bird, and downed it cleanly. Before long, Storm returned proudly with the partridge. Kurt let the other two dogs also carry the bird as a reward for their work.

Plenty of Water

The afternoon was quite warm. The dogs were running hard, and soon all three tongues were lolling. Kurt called the dogs in one at a time for a drink of water. I had never seen dogs drink from a water bottle before, but clearly they knew the drill.

After finding and downing the second bird, we gave the dogs a swim and a short break before moving to the far field to place a third chukar in the stone wall. I went ahead to get positioned for some photos of the dogs working the wall. Kurt was pleased



Kurt gets ready to work with Gus and Storm at Setter's Point in April.



Storm gets a drink during field work on a warm day.

when he soon had all three dogs on point waiting for the command to flush.

This time the chukar ran and then flew to the trees before Kurt could get a good shot. After ten minutes of searching the edge of the woods, the dogs were clearly getting tired and warm, so we settled for two out of three for the afternoon. Kurt gave the

dogs more water from a bottle before we trudged back to the house to see Dennis's latest litter of pups.

Keeping Fit

On the ride home, Moxie, Storm and Gus were happy to nap after a tough workout. Kurt said he will keep working the boys on a schedule through the summer to

have them in top shape for the fall grouse hunt up at The Forks, where Kurt hunts and guides with Maine Bird Dog Adventures. I expect Gus will be a seasoned pro by then.

I was impressed with how Kurt and Dennis worked together to keep the dogs on the same page. "It is good to have two people working together, especially with two or three dogs," Dennis observed. "The dogs need to learn to point, find a wounded bird, and retrieve. We help the hunters and the dogs put the pieces together so they are fit and ready to go come fall."

Moxie, Storm and Gus will surely be fit and ready.

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