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That dog'll hunt

Trainer James Collier turns pups into hunting partners

By Paula Felps

Photography by Jason Palmer

When James Collier earned \$50 for training a dog — big money for a 13-year-old — it set his course for becoming a premier obedience and hunting trainer.

Now, some five decades later, Collier Kennels, located in Alvord,

Texas, just northwest of Dallas, attracts clients from coast to coast who want their puppies and dogs trained — whether in hunting or obedience.

In hunting dogs, Collier simply enhances their natural instincts.

"You want to put the dogs in

Training is a lifelong process, and he simply gets the ball rolling, James Collier says. Once a dog is trained to hunt, it becomes the owner's responsibility to continue working with the dog to keep his skills sharp.

the right circumstances to bring out their hunting instinct," says Collier, a second-generation dog trainer whose two sons have followed him into the family business. "All I do is direct those genetics and train the dog in the direction (the owner wants) them to go."

As a lifelong animal lover, Collier's training method was developed by watching his parents. His father trained dogs, but his mother worked with children.

"I'm using a lot of the same philosophies to motivate dogs as you would kids," he says. "What works for children works for dogs."

His positive, reward-based system, coupled with his unique, innate ability to communicate with animals, has resulted in a high success rate. At any given time, Collier and his younger son, Jackson, are working with 80 to 120 dogs.

A dog in training spends two weeks one-on-one with Collier, allowing him to develop a relationship with and understand what motivates that particular dog.

"Every dog is different, and I am always learning new things from them," Collier says. "You have to change your method of training to accommodate the breed and the individual dog, or you're not going to get the best results possible from that particular dog."

Once he has that understanding, actual training begins, progressing at a rate that works for that dog. After two weeks, the owner joins in to become part of the training process.

HUNTING FOR A COMPANION

While 99 percent of all dogs can be obedience trained, not all dogs can become hunting dogs, Collier says.

"They're just like people — they have skills in different areas. If he doesn't want to hunt, there's nothing you can do about it," he says. "You can make him come back, you can make him hold a point, but you can't make him want to hunt."

To increase the odds of successfully training a dog, look for breeds that are genetically predisposed to perform a specific task, Collier advises. Pointer breeds are genetically bred to point birds, so with very little training, those instincts usually will kick in. Likewise, retriever breeds will, as the name says, retrieve game and objects. Even among these sporting groups, each purebred line is different, so it requires some research on the owner's end to determine what particular breed suits his hunting needs.

"A Chesapeake Bay retriever is different than a Labrador retriever, even though they're both retrievers. You have to get a breed that is conducive for (your) particular hunt," Collier says. "If you want to chase rabbits, you wouldn't get a Boston terrier, you'd get a running dog like a Greyhound or a Saluki. You'll get better results because that's what they've been bred to do."

Even mixed breeds with the right drive can become good hunting dogs. He's trained many that made great hunting companions.

"You can even find dogs at the shelter that may have had a good environment growing up, but the owner just couldn't keep it," he says. "They're often very easy to train — or might have some training already."

However, there's never any guarantee that the dog you choose from either a shelter or breeder will have the individual drive or skills to live up to its bloodline or hunting reputation.

"Bottom line is, it has to be something he wants to do," Collier says.



Labrador retrievers, such as this one being trained by Collier's son, Jackson, are genetically predisposed to retrieve game, rather than point. That's why an owner must research breeds to choose one that best suits his needs.

Training is an ongoing, lifelong process, and his role is merely to put that ball in motion, Collier says.

Once a dog is trained to hunt, it becomes the owner's responsibility to continue working with the dog to keep his skills sharp.

"The main thing for people to understand is that they have to work with their dog every day. You can't just say, 'he's trained,' and that's it," Collier notes.

"They're like athletes — football players work on the basics every day until they're no longer playing. If you don't work with a dog every day once he's been trained, he's not going to be in tune with everything that he can do," he says. "As an owner, your job is to let him be the best that he can be." ★

Paula Felps is a dog-loving, Texas-based writer.



Every hunting dog gets a customized training method from Collier because every breed and every individual dog within that breed is different.