Welcome to the Pack

A new puppy fits in, with a little professional help.

by Terry Wieland
In all of hunting, there is no closer relationship than that of a wingshooter and a dog.

Grandfathers may hunt with grandsons, wives with husbands, and childhood friends with each other, but none approach the bond between hunter and dog. The addition of domesticated dogs to the hunting equation 10,000 years ago was deemed so important by José Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher, that he devoted an entire chapter to it in *Meditations on Hunting*.

Wingshooting has four elements: hunter, gun, dog, and bird. Each has a different life span, and their careers revolve like wheels within wheels. A gun for 100 years, a hunter for 50; a dog for 12, a bird for 3. Yet the bird species outlasts them all. Wheels within wheels.

These interlocking circles of life provide ample fruit for melancholy brooding late in the season when birds are few and the first snow is blowing. It also provides material for any number of tearjerking memoirs of the “my old dog up and died” variety. We say “tearjerking,” and it is, but it’s also sincere to the point of disbelief. No hunter, offering his thoughts on such a sad occasion to an editor, can believe that every other wingshooter in the world isn’t intensely interested in the last days of Oll Rex. Saying “No, thanks” to such stories, with kindness and understanding, is a tough job for any editor.

Having said all this, we must, I’m afraid, recap the life and times of Broto, the Gordon setter, to tell this story properly.

Broto was 12 years old when he died last year of cancer. He was a 75-pound Gordon of the old school: rangy, long-haired, dour, and eccentric, with paws like snowshoes and a feathery tail that attracted burrs from two counties over. To say that Broto lived to hunt would be an exaggeration, and an insulting one at that; there was far more to his life than hunting. A good deal of his time was devoted to pack management, and given the unruly nature of our pack, that was no small task.

The basic social structure of the wolf is the pack, and while dogs have changed in many ways from their wolfish ancestors, the pack remains their essential community. In Broto’s case, the pack consisted of his owner, trainer, mistress, and consigliere, Dinny Falkenburg; Dinny’s husband, Mark McDonald, who was nominally Broto’s boss (huh!); and an English setter, six years his junior, named Leon.

Your obedient servant was a sort of honorary member of the pack, comparable perhaps to Treacherous Kitty, the house cat. Although, I am proud to say, I did enjoy a personal relationship with Broto. Each year, pheasant hunting in South Dakota, he and I would make one lone hunt together, out through the orchard. We always seemed to drop a cock bird in exactly the same place, at which point Broto would quietly turn around and go home.

This tendency to do things his way evinced itself in a number of ways. One time, annoyed at another hunter who was yelling wildly at his own dog, Broto went on strike, as if to say “I can’t work under these conditions.” Although Broto treated Dinny as an equal, he was unquestionably dominant when it came to the rest of us, and this dominance was a critical factor.
A group effort combining Harry’s nose, Rob and Brett’s handling, Mark’s shotgun skills, and, finally, Harry’s retrieving instincts. While all made a contribution, the pheasant made a serious commitment, and his assistance was appreciated by all. With a new dog, there is no substitute for live-bird work.
When Broto died last year, and Dinny and Mark embarked on a search for a new puppy, there was more to it than simply looking for a warm little tail-wagging bundle of joy. And, having brought home another English setter, there remained the question of both training him and letting him fit in naturally, without upsetting our admittedly peculiar dynamics.

Ever since Joseph Lang turned from gun-making to dogs and helped establish English setters as a breed, controversies have raged over the best way to train pointing dogs. More than that, there is disagreement over exactly what qualities to foster in a dog, and what constitutes proper field behavior.

The field-trial school believes a dog should be a rigid, unquestioning automaton, working back and forth with Prussian precision, locking on exaggerated points like a statue, and never moving so much as a hair until released by its handler.

The opposing school works on the principle that the dog is part of a team, and an important, thinking part at that. Knowing the object of the game, a dog should be free to observe what is happening, react accordingly, and even occasionally break the rules if it serves the greater good.

Dogs of the automaton school live in kennels, while dogs of the latter sleep on the bed and eat in the kitchen. Needless to say, Broto and Leon were the latter.

Broto was the first hunting dog Dinny trained, but her animal-training experience goes back almost 40 years. At 15, she began training schutzhund protection dogs, moved on to horses, and for 30 years was an international-level dressage trainer. Now retired from formal dressage, Dinny rides for herself, works horses for friends, and, of course, works with her hunting dogs. On our annual wingshooting forays, whether to South Dakota for pheasants or Ontario for ruffed grouse, Dinny is the official dog handler.

Bringing a new puppy into the pack presented some challenges beyond the usual house-training.

Leon, the six-year-old English setter, had a troubled childhood, and the traumatic effects of a bigger, bullying sister (I’m not making this up) carried over into adulthood. Dinny became his mother and confidante while Broto was the protective brother he never had. For six years, wherever you found Dinny, you would also find Leon, whether it was resting on the couch or grocery shopping in Fort Collins. While Broto would occasionally choose to work for Mark or me, Leon would no more go hunting without Dinny than he’d chew off his own tail.

Of course, nothing is that simple. Three years ago, we hunted ruffed grouse in Ontario. Leon, being a Ryman, comes from grouse-hunting stock, and over the course of a week he blossomed into an excellent grouse dog—careful, stealthy as a cat, listening and thinking. Broto, who considered the whole enterprise very questionable, acknowledged Leon’s abilities and demurred to him on matters of grouse.

When Broto died, Leon went into a profound and lasting depression. He missed having a big dog to take care of him, some latent thyroid problems emerged, and he began gaining weight. Then came the arrival of a new puppy, and a whole new set of problems.

Leon is from Setters West, in Montana, and Dinny would have gone there for a second dog if they’d had a litter in prospect. Alas, they didn’t.
so the new puppy came from Round River Setters in Iowa. Like Leon, the puppy—christened Harry Flashman, after the noted Victorian soldier—is from Ryman stock. From the start, he fitted into the pack nicely, and also displayed signs that he was a dominant personality and would, someday, take over.

Harry arrived just before pheasant season, accompanied us to South Dakota, and did some early bird work on a lead, but no formal hunting. The intoxicating scent of pheasants, the bursting whirr of wings, and the sound of gunfire faded him not a bit, and through the winter his training progressed nicely.

Brett Arnold and his son, Rob, are the resident dog handlers, although their involvement is much more than that. They operate High Country Sporting Dogs as an adjunct to the ranch, working out of a kennel the size of a Motel 6, but more luxurious. Their services include dog training, and also training dog owners.

The point is often made that, to keep their edge, top professional golfers regularly take lessons, and the same is true of the best shooters. No matter how much experience you have, a second opinion never hurts.

“Working on my own, a lot of the time I feel like I’m working blind,” Dinny told me. “If nothing else, it’s good to have a professional’s affirmation that you’re on the right track.”

Although Harry was the primary student, working with Leon was an important part of the activity. Dinny both worked the dogs, and learned about teaching them; Mark provided the shotgun work when we reached the stage of flushing birds and keeping the dogs steady to shot.

In such a situation, it’s easy to try to do too much, so we concentrated on a few key areas. Using the check cord was the main one, and keeping Harry steady to shot was the other. Of course, the two are closely related.

“For a six-month-old dog, a check cord is the right thing because it gives you control as he goes in on point,” Dinny said. “Watching Brett work with a check cord—well, he’s fabulous. His technique of looping it around the dog’s body gives him absolute control. After having him coach me as I did it, I feel much better using a check cord than I did before.”

Working with Brett also gave us a better understanding of the importance of being steady to shot.

“I always thought of it as a safety issue, not having the dog charge in as the bird flushed and maybe getting shot,” Dinny said. “Brett stressed that, when a dog is still, it can mark the birds down much better than if it’s moving.”

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If there’s one single factor that makes a trip to a place like High Lonesome worthwhile, it’s the opportunity to work with not only live birds but also live birds of varying characteristics under controlled conditions. We worked with both pheasants and chukars. At first, we used birds that were very docile and stayed put, but this worked both for you and against you. With a young dog, there’s always the temptation to creep in and seize the bird. That way, you’re not walking in on an empty thicket. I think that’s the reason for a lot of so-called false points.”

Brato had always insisted on shadowing a bird as it moved, keeping it under surveillance, as it were, while one of us either came in on it, or circled to cut it off. He would also, if Leon was on a moving bird, circle around in front to pin it. That’s a trait of a thinking dog, rather than an automaton, and it paid off for us many times, with both pheasants and ruffed grouse.

We gradually worked up to placing wilder birds in thickerets and overgrown ravines, letting Harry locate them, point them, and when they flushed and were shot, find them and bring them back. Unlike some setters, Harry is an enthusiastic retriever, to the point of bringing back bits of clay bird when Dinny and Mark are practicing. At High Lonesome, he experienced his first full monty...
situations with birds, flushes, gunfire, and the taste of feathers in his mouth.

But it also worked well for Dinny, as a trainer. "It's a pressure situation, where I have to do my best," she said. "That makes you concentrate. Every dog owner wants the pro to think her dog is good, I don't care who it is, so you try harder yourself. The single most important thing I gained was control. They stressed the necessity of having control at all times, which is particularly important with a young dog where, to have a proper outcome, you have to control it yourself. They taught me some invisible ways to have more control on a point, as well as reinforcing some things I already knew."

Although Harry was the focus of the trip, we also worked with the two dogs together. Leon, good-tempered to the point of blandness, just naturally took to hunting with Harry and letting him have his dominant way about things.

Weird thing, though. Harry’s best friend is the house cat, Fabio (aka Treacherous Kitty). He not only imitates him (ever have a 75-pound dog climb...
onto the back of the couch?), but also lets him be the dominant one.

It would appear the pack’s pecking order is about to undergo a shakeup. ■

Wieland’s place in the pack has been roughly akin to Boswell’s relationship with Dr. Johnson. As Broto’s biographer of many years, he now needs to find a new slot. Fortunately, Harry seems to like him. No accounting for taste.

If You Go

High Lonesome Ranch (www.thehighlonesomeranch.com) is a full-service hunting, fishing, photo, dude, wedding, and . . . well, you get the picture. It covers 300 square miles of western Colorado, with everything you would expect from a venue that aims to be world class.

Brett and Rob’s High Country Sporting Dogs (www.highcountrysportingdogs.com) operates in conjunction with the ranch, but not as a part of it. They are independent trainers with their own dogs and run their business separately—although, if you go to High Lonesome for wingshooting, Brett and Rob will provide the dogs and guiding. Both operations have complete websites that tell you everything you need to know about their facilities and available services.

Dog training, and dog-trainer training, was our focus, and Brett and Rob’s service in that regard is as good as any I’ve seen and better than most. They’re both personable and knowledgeable, and—most important to me—they don’t insist everything be done their way. They’re genuinely interested in getting your dog to work the way you want it to, and help you make that happen.

Having been in the field with more ill-trained, ill-mannered dogs than I care to remember, I wish more hunters would take themselves off to High Lonesome and learn how it’s done.