

Incomplete Guide to Natural Ability for Newbies - Revisited

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Note: I wrote the following article several years ago at the request of the Sebasticook Chapter. I have revised and edited it in June 2006 in order to reflect some insights gleaned from my first Natural Ability Test in about five years and with some experience with my litter going through the test.

At our chapter's spring test, I saw the look on a new Natural Ability handler's face, and said, "That's the last time we'll see him."

I could tell from his expression that the handler, with his first dog, who'd attended only one clinic, was thinking that NAVHDA didn't seem like a lot of fun. In my years with the chapter I have seen a lot of folks come and go. It's my experience that new handlers who test in Natural Ability and do poorly leave. Those who do well, even in spite of the fact that they were unprepared get excited and stick with NAVHDA.

I believe the only way to keep new people excited about NAVHDA is to make sure they and their dogs are prepared for the Natural Ability test. I don't intend to write a new dog-training book. Rather, I want to explain the elements of testing and training that aren't well covered elsewhere, and will try to point you towards the information that is well outlined elsewhere.

One might think that given the name of the test, all you have to do is read the VHD, attend most of the clinics and show up on test day. After all, this is only Natural Ability. You know -- the things your dog is *naturally* supposed to be *able* to do.

The difference between expectations and results is what sours folks after a bad Natural Ability test. As a new handler, you need to know what to expect. If you know what to realistically expect, not only will a bad outing not upset you, you will get better results.

The first thing you need to do is get prepared. We have had folks show up with to the Natural Ability test with dogs that were not properly prepared. Here are a few of the examples (not to criticize, but so others can learn):

- One pup had never been off a leash or a check cord for fear he would run away. Given his first opportunity at the test, he ran away. There are a

fair number of pups that come to the test that never get off a leash for one reason or another.

- Several pups have come to their test never having experienced a game bird before. If your dog points the first, second or third bird he finds, consider yourself lucky. Most dogs do not. In fact, I have asked several judges what is the number one thing that fails a Natural Ability dog, and pointing is it.
- One pup swam every day in the ocean leaping from a dock in his backyard. The dog stubbornly refused to swim in fresh water, from the muddy bank. In a similar example, my brother's dog refused at the water. They lived on a pond where she swam every day.
- Many dogs swim eagerly for their favorite dummy, ball or stick. There are no balls offered, and you can't bring the favorite dummy, chances are pretty good that the handlers before you have scrounged and thrown every stick within reach of the test site.
- Many folks, me included, have started forced fetch before the NA test. Most of the dogs I've seen that are only at the holding a bumper stage of forced fetch will not pick up a bumper at the test.
- Tracking (the way we do it at the test) is NOT something your dog will just do. It is a foreign concept to most dogs and must be trained. Dogs that have never tracked a live bird over open ground have failed many a Natural Ability test. The release is particularly important.
- I took my dog to a test after being in a crated in the back of my truck for two straight days because of the travel involved. I was shocked when he ran off immediately during the search. Colt had been a close-working obedient dog. Do not radically change the dog's schedule and expect him to be the same pup.

While the Natural Ability test is designed to test the heritable instincts of our dogs, proper training is needed to bring those abilities to the surface. In the field your Natural Ability pup needs to search (not just run around), listen to your commands (particularly "come"), find birds, and point them. Expecting a dog who has never smelled a live game bird before to point is much like expecting a child to speak never having heard a word. You need to expose your pup to live birds, early and often. The wing-on-a-string point at eight weeks in the breeder's back yard is not going to carry you through the NA

test. The older your pup is when birds are introduced, the harder it will be for your dog to start pointing, the more likely it will be that he will catch birds, and the more it will cost in birds and time.

On the track, your dog needs to track a live bird, possibly over short grass. You can start training with dead drags, but you will need several live-bird tracks as there is dramatically less scent left by a live bird. It also gives the dog something exciting at the end of the track, a reward. Fortunately a 1 in track (or about 25%) is passing.

In the water, your dog needs to swim twice while being enticed by a white piece of rubber. Your Natural Ability dog will not pass the test if it will not swim. Get a wide range of exposure to different swimming areas and different dummies. Try to go to the test site and swim there. I have heard of NA swim areas in brackish tidal marshes, ponds, rivers and streams and even a rock quarry; solid rock that goes down in steps. Either finish forced fetch before your NA test or do not push a bumper into your dog's mouth. Don't let anyone else do it at a demonstration.

All training starts with a foundation of obedience. This starts the day you bring the new pup home, and should be engrained before your first clinic. If nothing else, the dog should come when called, and be able to walk on a leash without toppling you over. You need to work on off-lead control of your dog in open fields with and without planted birds.

You will be much happier with your training regimen if you start it at home, early. NAVHDA sells several excellent training recourses, as does our sponsor, Tri-tronics. Although I don't think a new dog trainer should slap an electronic collar on a young dog, if you think you are interested in using this tool, buy the video first.

There are a lot of dog training books available. Try to stick to one method. If you read them all, you tend to be inconsistent and try new things each time the same problem arises.

Chapter clinics are designed to train you to train your dog. For most chapters, you cannot expect to train your dog solely at the clinics. When you get home, you need to repeat the exercises you learn at the clinic. Then, when you get to the next clinic, you will know what areas you need help training, and the club can help you get over that hump.

You ought to find someone who lives close to you and team up for training. Don't be afraid to ask

someone whose training knowledge far exceeds yours. You can help that person more than you can imagine because all dog training goes much faster with two people. Two people can train two dogs in much less time than it takes one person to train one dog alone. On the other hand, do not be afraid to join forces with other newbies. You will be shocked at how well you can do learning as you go.

Another benefit of the clinic is that you can simulate test conditions. Most dogs are not trained with three judges, two apprentices, a trailing gunner, and you (that's seven) plus a "gallery" following behind them. You need to find out how your dog will deal with these strangers. You also need to get the butterflies out by practicing handling in front of people. At the clinics, you can help others and learn by following a dog in the field as the judges will do at the test.

The cycle is: train your dog, attend a clinic, train your dog with your new friends, attend another clinic, train your dog some more, and then test. (Then repeat; you still don't have a finished hunting dog, yet.)

If you train your dog, with the help of your chapter and the friends you make in your chapter, you will know what to expect. Once your expectations are in line with reality, you will not be disappointed on test day. Both you and your dog will be winners on test day, prize or no prize.

Whether you get a 112 point Prize I on your first Natural Ability test, or blow it completely, keep in mind it's the journey and not the destination that's important. The Natural Ability test may seem like a milestone similar to high school graduation, but it is not nearly as important. (Your dog doesn't need a passing score to get a job or into college.) Like a high-school graduation, it is only a milestone; you pass by it on your way through life. It's really not the end or beginning of anything. You take the lessons learned while getting to that milestone and build on them forever.