

TRAINING ON THE 'WIRE' SIDE

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***“The bond with a true dog is as lasting as the ties of this earth will ever be.”
- Konrad Lorenz***

This autumn was the first time I got to experience the bond that forms between man and dog during the hunt. My hunting partner is my Hungarian Wirehaired Vizsla, Zöldmáli 'Szinva', named after a creek that runs through the city of Miskolc, Hungary. He is 14 months old when we go for our first hunt for ptarmigan in the mountain passes and tundra environment of Northern British Columbia. When you hunt here its about commitment. You work for your birds. It takes 2.5 hours one way by car to even get to the hunting area. Then, depending on weather there may be a foot or two of snow to contend with. The walking is not easy for hunter or dog with every terrain from bogs, to creek crossings to open bare scree slopes. There is no snow on this inaugural hunt , it is late September and the fall colours have just faded. What was once a blanket of fiery red, bright orange and green has subsided into a muted version of what it once was. The landscape is a large sweeping valley that follows a stream fed by glaciers nearly 10 kilometers upstream. This is the land of the midnight sun. Where grizzly bears roam, there are views of glaciers and mountain vistas, and many, many ptarmigan. A million dollar view, especially for the avid bird hunter.

We head out with great ambitions of making this first hunt amazing - I am trying to keep my perspective, remembering Szinva is a young dog and I have to let the birds teach him. Up to this point in time there have been many countless hours of training, thousands of miles traveled, lots of cash spent and four hunting titles behind us as a team. My heart and soul have been poured into my passion of bird dog training. It is hard for me to contain my excitement in finally getting out for a real hunt! Of course Szinva is none the wiser, he is all business - 'there are birds out there mum, let's go hunt 'em up!'.

We start the hunt with the routine of a team, walking on leash the 400 meters required before we can start to hunt. Already we have run into half a dozen birds. They must know where the no hunt zone begins and ends. Szinva is on his game. He knows what he is here for, his head high smelling the air and eyes wide open to the vast tundra ahead of us. Once I am satisfied we are within the hunting zone, I unclip my jaeger lead and connect a long line to the pup - he needs to be reminded of manners at this point in his juvenile hunting career. A tap on the head, "Hunt 'em up" and he is off to work. His big ears fly high into the air, the rich colour of his copper coat contrasts the landscape in which he hunts. His well muscled body is like a fine tuned hunting machine, ready, willing and able to hunt for endless hours.

It really is a thing of beauty to watch a dog work naturally at what it was bred to do. Whether they are 12 years old, or 12 months they have such an innate sense of purpose. They don't care about the worries of this world, they have no baggage, they know not where they came from or how much it cost to get them here. They live in the moment, something more of us humans could learn from. This moment was pretty special. Watching Szinva naturally quarter the terrain in front of me, I notice and appreciate the subtle things about him. His drive, intensity and speed. He checks back with me, he wants to work together as a team. The beauty of how he communicates through his body language, notably his very long intact tail. The way he is learning to track birds on the ground, where there were signs that birds had been previously. Then he gets a whiff of strong bird scent in the air and starts to raise his head and the lightbulb goes off, this is what its all about! I notice the change in his body language, he slows down and becomes more focused and inquisitive - he is getting birdy! Sure enough, not long afterward, birds are flushed and he chases for a little bit. Not too far, just enough to be interested and then stops to watch the covey fly away. I am so happy to see this natural tendency to be excited about the birds and then for him to stop of his own accord, without a word from me. I take this information and make a note of it, it will become important in the upcoming summer of training for our Utility Test.

This day I had gone out on the hunt as a trainer and an observer without the expectation to fill the bird bag. I had brought the gun out; however, I had no real intention of firing it. This day was about a young dog learning about birds and having those birds teach him a thing or two. He learned that if he blasted into an area with birds at a fast pace or the wind wasn't in our favor, the birds were up and flying. Fun to watch but not very productive. He learned that there is a difference between old scent and fresh scent. He learned that even though this is a fun and exciting task to do, there are rules in the field that are required, necessary and non-negotiable. He learned that a whistle on the hunt is the same as a whistle in training. He learned to come back when called - the recall being of utmost importance when dealing with a young dog on a hunt. He learned that we are going to be out hunting for a number of hours, that we will take a break or two together and then resume hunting. He also learned the very real reality that sometimes you go out on a hunt, see lots of birds, but none of those birds get in the bag. Be it because of training purposes, lack of shooting skills/practice, or just plain luck, sometimes we go home empty handed.

We ended the day having hiked for a number of hours in one of the most beautiful places on this earth. We took the gun for a nice walk and the pup got to see a lot of wild birds. I could see the potential in this firecracker of a red dog and I couldn't be happier with his performance that day. There were many more days of hunting ahead of us that fall and no need to get ahead of myself - ptarmigan season runs until the end of February.

Szinva progressed finely over the season, and had a number of super solid points from very far away on ptarmigan. Apparently his littermate sister in Hungary is also pointing from quite a distance - now those are some good genes! Better to point from afar than to bust in and flush the birds. On one hunt in particular we were working in the high

alpine and walking with a back wind. Ideally you would run young dogs into the the good wind, so that you can use it to your advantage. The pup will scent the birds from a much greater distance, even give you some warning with their body language. In this case we were on our way back to the car and Szinva was ahead of me hunting when all of a sudden he turned back, hit the scent cone and slammed on point. What a sight to see! I had my gun ready and I tried to see the ptarmigan he was pointing in the direction of. I could not see them. When I finally saw the birds they were between myself and Szinva who was pointing back towards me. This was tricky because I didn't want to risk accidentally shooting my dog. I stepped forward, flushing the birds to my right and away from the dog. I fired two shots and missed. Meanwhile, I looked back and the young pup was standing staunch watching as the birds flew away to freedom. I can only imagine what he was thinking.....The reason I couldn't see the birds was because ptarmigan go through a moult phase in the fall where the feathers change from brown to all white. These birds were nearly all white, making them very camouflaged in the snow of the high alpine.

The remainder of the hunting season has been one to remember. For the better part of October we productively hunted and explored various locations around the Yukon Territory and Northern BC. My goal was to discover new hunting grounds, I even had a friend and fellow HWV owner (Szinva's half brother from the same kennel in Hungary, Zöldmáli Kennel www.zoldmali.hu) travel all the way to the Yukon from Toronto to join us for a hunting holiday. In two weeks we hunted nine full and epic days. New spots that I had never hunted before. Places of such astounding beauty and remoteness they took my breath away. Having a hunting partner during this formative time was such a blessing. I had the opportunity to focus my attention on handling the young pup, while my friend could focus on shooting the birds. By the end of November we had hunted Ptarmigan, Ruff Grouse, Blue Grouse, Spruce Grouse and Snowshoe Hare. Szinva was a happy and keen retriever. We even made our first milestone as a hunting team with me successfully shooting a grouse and him retrieving it to hand. My happiness was written all over my face and Szinva was happy too - he was jumping 6 feet in the air in a typical ridiculous and humourous Vizsla fashion :)

As I think of all the training that led to this beautiful moment of companionship and cooperation, I reflect back on how I got to this place. From a little girl who was attacked and bitten by a large dog and was for a very long time afraid of dogs, to a 34 year old woman successfully training and titling a working line hunting dog.

My story is too long to get into here; however, it involves a German Shorthaired Pointer puppy, the North American hunting dog testing system, two training trips to Hungary and successfully testing my Wirehaired Vizsla in both Hungary and North America. Stay tuned as these topics of discussion will be in my future articles.

As a scientist by trade, I am rather analytical and straight forward, yet this experience of discovering hunting dogs has awakened a passion inside of me that drives me to do what I do. It brings me camaraderie, respect for nature and the satisfaction of knowing I

can put food on my table. It brings me to tears and now brings me the happiness I have always longed for. There is a primal need inside of us to provide, to gather, to hunt. It's natural, yet in our present day culture of technology and convenience, we are far removed from the activities that used to be necessary for survival. Please watch the following video - it beautifully expresses why WE HUNT.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tk0DLH5eViw>

Bio:

Tanya Gates lives in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory with her two hunting dogs, a Wirehaired Vizsla and a German Shorthaired Pointer. She is an avid outdoors woman and hunter. Recently, she left a government job of 14 years as an Environmental Research Technologist in the Energy, Mines and Resources department to pursue her dream of being a hunting dog trainer. To this end, she has started her own business training hunting dogs and selling raw dog food and quality gun dog gear. Her credentials to date include a FCI Certified diploma as a Training Director, hunt titling both her dogs in Hungary and North America well as CKC obedience with the GSP. You can follow her business on facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/onpointyukon>