

About 735 words

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HOW I TRAINED PATCH

-- and vice versa

Unlike some parents, I will lose no sleep when my teenager goes on his first date. Why get excited? He probably won't take me along anyhow.

It was a thrill, however, when my budding bird dog got a hunting invitation and I was allowed to play chaperon. I had to be included because Patchwork obeys me, sometimes -- and no one else at any time. Modesty aside, I have discovered the secret of successful dog-handling. You wait till your dog hits scent, then say "hunt 'em up!" This is like ordering a human adolescent to take an interest in the opposite sex.

The problem is that Patchwork gets in trouble even faster than a teenager. He runs those scent-trails to the end, and sometimes the end is a barbed-wire fence, which is why his hide resembles a quilt stitched together by a veterinarian. But I'm getting ahead of my story.

When Patch was a little squirming puppy, not long ago, I used to carry him out of the house whenever he started sniffing the undercarriage of our rocking chair. By the time he touched ground, all four legs would be moving so fast that they were blurred. He looked like a mechanical toy that had been turned on too soon. He'd tear off and I'd watch the furrow made by a short dog in the tall grass. In front of him, things would start flying -- indignant blackbirds and flustered coveys of horned larks. Then, after the birds were attended to, Patch would look for a tree that needed marking. First things first.

As Patch got older, he ran into bigger birds, and that's when the hunting invitations started. It was also when I discovered that my dog had an embarrassing character defect. He refused to find pheasants where I told him to do it.

This breach of discipline first came to my attention when Patchwork and I were hunting with a friend called Slim. (People who chase pheasants are often called Slim.) We sneaked up on Hell's Half-Acre, which is a secret cover known only to Slim, me, and a few others who hang out at Nagorski's Gunsmith & Sporting Goods. Any fool looking at that brush would recognize it as pheasant habitat, and Slim and I were convinced, in addition,

that we could get the bird in there surrounded. I heeled Patchwork to the downwind edge of the tangle and sent him in. He sniffed around, made a U-turn, and ran into a field of hay behind me.

Slim and I pushed through the brush anyhow and found no birds. Then we looked for Patch and noticed that he was on point out in the grass. The rooster flushed before we got close enough to shoot. Got cramps from sitting so long, I suppose.

This is the kind of thing that happens when your dog won't find pheasants in the right places. Slim hinted that my training techniques were at fault, but I blamed the pup's natural perversity.

Patch had plenty of training, goodness knows. Every time we went hunting, I would tootle my whistle frequently so that he could locate me if he should feel lonely. He seldom had an attack of loneliness till dinner-time, but that wasn't my fault. I told Slim that he couldn't expect me to train a dog when to be hungry.

In fact the problem lay deeper than my training methods. Patch and I did not even agree on what we were chasing. Details follow, so take a last, nostalgic look. We're looking for a big bronze rooster with a green head and streaming tail-feathers -- right?

Wrong. We're not looking for anything. We're sniffing around for the right scent.

I have been moved into the garage because of a misunderstanding on this subject, but it was Patchwork's fault.

Last time we went hunting, he ran wide around a patch of bristling wild-rose bushes. I called him back and gave him a lecture on the importance of working cover thoroughly, even when there are thorns involved. Then I stood him at the edge of the prickles and, with two sharp blasts on my whistle, ordered him forward.

Patch backed up.

Not me. A clump of the shrubbery began to shake and I pounced on it, but the thing sneaking around in there was no pheasant. It was a little black animal with white stripes.

About 1100 words

Long Version -
Not used

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READ MY NOSE

Here's how to smell your dog,
in case you've been wondering

Unlike some parents, I will lose no sleep when my child goes on his first date with an adolescent of the opposite sex. Why get excited? He probably won't take me along anyhow.

It was a thrill, however, when my pup got a hunting invitation and I was allowed to play chaperon. I had to be included because Patchwork obeys me ^{sometimes} -- and no one else ^{at any time}. Modesty aside, I have discovered the secret of successful dog-handling. You wait till your dog hits scent, then say "hunt 'em up!" This is like ordering a teen-age boy to take an interest in girls.

Unfortunately, Patchwork gets in trouble ^{etc} faster than a teenager. He runs those scent-trails to the end, and sometimes the end is a barbed-wire fence, which is why his hide resembles a quilt stitched together by a veterinarian. But I'm getting ahead of my story.

When Patch was a little squirming puppy, not long ago, I used to carry him out of the house whenever he started sniffing the undercarriage of Mom's rocking chair. By the time he touched ground, all four legs would be moving so fast that they were blurred. He looked like a mechanical toy that had been turned on too soon. He'd tear off and I'd watch the furrow made by a short dog in the tall grass. In front of him, things would start flying -- flustered blackbirds and indignant coveys of horned larks. Then, after the birds were attended to, Patch would look for a tree that needed marking. First things first.

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Slim and I pushed through the tangle anyhow and found no

birds. Then we looked for Patch and noticed that he was on point out in the alfalfa. ^{grass but} The rooster flushed before we got close enough to shoot. Got cramps from waiting ^{for a} so long, I suppose.

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In fact the problem lay deeper than my training methods. Patch and I did not even agree on what we were chasing. Details follow, so take your last, nostalgic look. You're hunting a big bronze rooster with a green head and streaming tail-feathers -- right?

Wrong. You can't see your quarry at all. What you hunt is just a sneaky little smell in the grass. In technical terms, it is an olfactory phenomenon, not a visual object. No one would believe this scientific breakthrough if I were the first to propound it. Dr. Federkopf, however, has credibility, and he is the one who interviewed Patch.

Before his retirement from the Third Reich and NASA, in that order, Dr. Federkopf was responsible for computer enhancement of images made by spacecraft. Thanks to him we have pictures of

Venus. If I understand this accomplishment correctly, his computers reported what the cameras would have photographed, if only clouds had not blocked the view. Recently Dr. Federkopf used similar software to communicate with Patchwork through electrodes taped to his muzzle.

Dr. F Not to fidget, please; you are tangling the apparatus. Do you understand me?

Patch I smell you fine.

Dr. F What is your name?

Patch Dad calls me "Patchwork," "Patch," and "you little brown (deleted)."

Dr. F Why does he use such language?

Patch Because I'm chewing on his boots.

Dr. F So why don't you stop?

Patch I do, if he takes me hunting. Otherwise I gnaw the buttons off his shirt. Dad needs to wake up and smell the chipmunks.

Dr. F Couldn't you hunt by yourself?

Patch Yes, but he couldn't. I find birds; he shoots at 'em. Once in awhile he hits something and I have to find it again.

Dr. F Why can't he do it?

Patch I don't want to talk about his handicap.

Dr. F Be assured that this conversation will be held strictly confidential.

Patch Oh. Well, a pheasant can be running around, plain as the nose on your face, and Dad won't have a whiff. Fact is,

I've never met a two-leg who had any common scents. [sic]

Dr. F You mean, we have no sense of smell?

Patch Right. Dad's scent-blind. He'd be useless without a seeing-nose dog.

Dr. F I see. I mean, I smell you.

Now that Patch's nose-language has been translated into English, I too can smell him. Usually. Well, sometimes. My wife has moved me into the garage because of a misunderstanding, but it was Patchwork's fault. He persuaded me to take him hunting and then, with a careless sniff, ran right past a gorgeous patch of snowberry bushes. I saw them shaking and jumped right on top of the pheasant that was sneaking around in there. ~~In mid-leap I remembered~~ that birds aren't the only wildlife capable of agitating the shrubbery.

Afterwards Patchwork recommended that I take a bath in tomato juice. He pointed out that, unlike certain two-legged hunters, he knows the difference between a skunk and a pheasant. He suggested that next time I get an urge to pounce on something, I should smell him more carefully first.

"Read my nose," he said.