

Starting a New Pup

By Stephen D. Carpenteri, 989 South Waterboro Road, Lyman, ME 04002, 207-247-6098

June is a lazy time for beagles and hunters. It's hot, the grass is high, the risk of snake encounters increases and it's just not a great time to spend long hours crashing through unforgiving new greenery. In some states it's not even legal to train hunting dogs in late spring or early summer, which gives everyone a chance to rest and relax after a long, hard hunting season.

While it may not be legal or kosher to run the hounds during summer's heat and humidity, there are some things the hound man can do to pass the time. For one thing, this is a great time to acquire and start training new pups. For best results, plan to buy a pup from a hunting line of dogs, a licensed kennel or a hunter-breeder you know whose dogs have performed well. Avoid pet shop beagles, back-yard breeders and rescue dogs unless you are willing to work with a dog that may have no hunting instincts or background. Some of these can turn into surprisingly good rabbit dogs with the proper training, but the odds for success are greatest when you start with a known line of active hunters. The Rabbit Hunter magazine includes ads from dozens of top-notch breeders whose owners know the business and whose beagles consistently produce in the field and at trials. Start with a winner and you can't go wrong!

Beagles born by July 1 should be able to run their own rabbits by their sixth month, which is really not that far away. In many cases beagle puppies are as silly, clueless and disorganized as any young dog, but every day they learn something new, and that's where the intrepid dog man comes into play. Your new pup won't learn anything unless you take him out and introduce him to the big, wide world, and these mini training sessions can begin as soon as the pup is able to walk on his own without tripping over himself.

"Training" during puppyhood should not be strictly regimented as might be the case for older dogs. This is the time to take the pup on short, exploratory walks along a grassy path or trail and simply allow the pup to absorb what's going on around him. I think that beagles are born with world-class noses but that doesn't mean they know the difference between a rabbit and a duck. In fact, a well-bred beagle pup should show signs of interest in just about any scent he encounters, even though it may be a frog, a mouse or a turtle. The pup may show differing levels of interest in various scents but it's important to encourage him to develop his scent-finding skills. Somewhere in the mix he'll encounter the heady scent of a cottontail or hare, at which point his natural instincts will take over. The best dogs will forsake every other scent in favor of rabbit, but if squirrels are the only game in town they'll focus on bushy tails until you show him something better.

To begin, just take your pup for short walks around the yard or some other place where you can be alone with the dog while he explores the world around him. This gets him used to being with you, helps him bond with you and creates sense of teamwork as you help him find a rabbit to run. Don't expect the pup to give serious chase for 10 weeks or more, but you should see his tail start wagging and his body wriggle uncontrollably as he sucks in great gulps of rabbit-scented air. Most pups will get excited about fresh rabbit scent even though they don't know what it is or what they should do with that. Those skills will

come with time, but for now be satisfied that he has the instincts and the interest.

To help bring the pup along, keep an old sock or glove soaked in rabbit scent handy and just drag it around the yard a few times before turning the pup loose to look for it. At first the pup may be confused, uncertain or even disinterested but give him time to work things through on his own. When he shows interest in the scent encourage him for all you are worth, letting him know that you approve of his efforts to find that rabbit. The more excited you get the more excited he will get, and over time he'll realize that he has an important job to do. Some hounds come along at a slower pace than others, but if you work with your pup daily for 20 minutes or so he'll be chasing rabbits on his own at some point this fall.

I find that working with one dog at a time is more effective than trying to keep up with a pack of new pups. Unless you have access to several acres of private land it can be a challenge to keep several beagle pups in sight and under control while they race around searching for new scents. With one dog it's possible to stay with him and observe what he's doing, pulling him off trash scents and encouraging him when he stumbles across fresh rabbit scent.

Each beagle develops his skills at his own pace, so don't be discouraged if your pup shows more interest in butterflies or grasshoppers than rabbits. Let him find something – anything – and watch him work a scent on his own. All of this training will sink in, perhaps slowly at first, but then one day he'll break out of his cocoon and be hell on wheels when it comes to chasing rabbits.

Expect some frustrating days, but don't let them ruin your sessions. I had a beagle once that seemed to chase anything but rabbits; we'd jump a cottontail and I'd immediately put the pup face down in the rabbit's form, still warm and full of scent, but the dog just walked away and went looking for mice. This happened a dozen times during his puppy training and I was beginning to think he lacked the knack, but one day he jumped a rabbit on his own and followed it (albeit only 100 yards) like he'd been running cottontails all his life. Every hound matures and advances at his own pace, so be patient and persistent. It may be several years before some beagles get to the point where they can jump and run their own rabbit all day long, but the best way to get them there is with continued practice. The way I figure it the worst beagle on earth can find and run a rabbit better than I can, so I become less demanding and more understanding during training. Remember, the best major league ball players were once T-ballers who hit the ball and ran straight to third base. It's the same thing with rabbit hounds. They have the instincts, potential and the ability; it's simply a matter of getting enough training and practice.

Remember that pups don't have the energy or stamina of an older, seasoned dog. Keep training sessions to 20 minutes or so and try to go out in the cool mornings or evenings. Don't demand or expect too much out of a pup during the first 8 to 10 weeks of training, but do watch for signs of maturity and improvement. Give the dog all the encouragement you can when he does something right but avoid scolding him for being

slow, listless or pup-foolish. He is, after all, a puppy just a few weeks old; you can't expect him to find and run rabbits like a pro right out of the gate. Come early and late fall you'll see a definite improvement in the pup's ability to find and follow scent, but the process takes time and persistence.

When your pup does begin to show signs of increased interest and enthusiasm it's time to take him to a starter pen, which is simply a fenced-in area full of brush, rocks, tree-tops . . . and rabbits. Most breeders and kennel operators will have (or know where to find) a starter pen, and they may charge a nominal fee to toss your dog into the pen and let him run. This would not be the best approach for extremely young pups, but beagles that are around 12 to 16 weeks old should do well under these conditions.

There is nothing for the hound man to do but put his pup in the pen and watch him run. The rabbits will run from brush pile to brush pile and the pups will follow, but there is rarely any reason for concern for either participant. The rabbits will be too fast for the pup and the pup wouldn't know what to do with the rabbit if he caught it, so the scenario is usually the same each time: Lots of barking and howling but no real damage done.

This is a good way to observe your pup in action and to see what skills and abilities he has. For example, some pups will stand outside a brush pile and bark at the hidden rabbit, while others will dive right into the mess and try to get close to the cottontail. Some will stand on top of the pile and howl for all they are worth, and others will shut down and start digging till the rabbit decides to make a run for it. Watch and learn because what your pup does in his early training will likely carry on to adulthood. It is fun to hear your pack run and then know, just from the way they are barking, which dogs are doing what.

Listen to your pup as well, because he'll have a "jump bark" a "train howl" and a "treed" voice that only you would be able to recognize because you are the one in charge of the training. Remember that bonding and teamwork approach we discussed earlier? Now you understand that when your pup is talking he's telling you what is going on just using the sound of his voice.

I would recommend taking your pup to a starting pen at least once per week through late summer and early fall simply because you know there will be rabbits in the pen and the pup will get more useful training there than he would on a random ramble in the woods. At first the starter pen training may not be especially hectic or frantic but as the pup grows to know his job he'll become more aggressive and much better at finding and running rabbits on a small scale. When the cool, crisp days of fall are upon us, that's the time to start serious training on larger parcels of land.

Check your local regulations for dates when dog training can begin, and then plan to be out there at least twice a week as long as weather conditions permit. Wait even longer if poisonous snakes are an issue where you run, certainly till after the first couple of hard frosts. The cooler the conditions the better it is for the dog for a variety of reasons, so plan your training sessions accordingly. If you belong to a club that has access to

a large training area so much the better, but good fall running may be found on farm fields and wildlife areas that are well managed for small game habitat. One area I used for training was actually managed for quail habitat but the place was full of rabbits and no one hunted them. In fact, several times I had to shoo off a pesky Brittany or setter that decided rabbit hunting was more fun than chasing quail!

There will be a point around your pup's 6-month birthday that he'll be ready and able to run rabbits on his own. This is a good time to introduce your pup to the pack (if you have one) so he can learn to run rabbits at a faster pace by working with the big dogs. Expect the younger dogs to perform poorly or not at all the first few times, but be patient. Those older dogs know what they are doing and are likely very good at it; they will ignore the pups and get right down to work, which can confuse younger dogs for a period until their competitive instincts come into play. It is a pleasure to watch a pup mature from stepping on his own ears to running side by side with experienced beagles, but remember that the training process takes time. Most beagles won't hit their stride till about their second or third year, not because they lack the ability to excel but because there are so many tricks a rabbit can teach them. Some cottontails can be downright sinister in the way they run, putting the dogs at risk on roads and railways, taking them through deep water and otherwise doing their best to lose the hounds. No pup can be expected to know all of these tricks at the outset, but with time and experience he'll learn and remember how to handle even the most super-challenging cottontails.

The final stage of training is to run your freshman pups with other packs and individual dogs. Every beagle of experience has his way of finding and running rabbits and the brightest of pups learn from their elders very quickly. In fact, I once had a female that seemed to study the actions of other dogs and always emulated the most productive techniques. She was actually a very lazy beagle, not content to just run and howl all day. She'd find ways to outwit the rabbit, taking shortcuts and recognizing trends in the cottontail's tactics so it would often seem as if she was running ahead of the rabbit! And, at the end of a successful run she'd give me a look that said, "Ha! That one was easy to figure out!" Not every beagle is as shrewd and astute as Dixie was, but they all have their strengths, and it all comes from consistent training.

Hunting season is still months away but there is plenty of time to pick out a hunting-line beagle and begin training. Twenty minutes a day from now through the fall will help turn a stumbling, bumbling beagle pup into a hot-nosed rabbit chaser. All it takes is time and dedication. The first time your beagle finds and runs his own rabbit you'll feel like a million bucks. The price on such dogs goes up considerably, too, although selling a beagle that can run rabbits on his own at 6 months of age may not be the best idea. You put a lot of time and effort into getting him there, why not enjoy the fruits of your labor and let the dog show you what he can do?