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The Magic Man, Bill Gibbons

The Rest of the Story

Author's Note. The interview with Bill Gibbons in the 1998 Christmas issue met with cheers all round. I spoke to him again and he excitedly told me all the new methods for training he had developed and discovered--Karoleigh K. Allison

BILL-Before we start and I forget, I just want to remind you that I have thought up very little of this stuff by myself. Bill West is the genius he's the one who you should interview. Anyway, he and I work together and come up with one thing after another. K-Now what you're about to tell us is really a continuation of the first interview we did.

BILL-Yes, and I would recommend that everyone refer to that article as a base for this new information. I want to get a little more into using the shock collar. What I've found out is that when you have a real soft dog-you know the kind that every time you touch it it's jumping all around and he wants to lean up against you, you can't touch its tail. Well, I've found out that if you don't use your hands, use those little jerks of the rope attached to the spike collar, you can get them broke to the gun, spend time training them where they get to where they love to be out there-then you have that desire and that happiness built into the dog. That's when you start asking them for things.

Do you think I could just get you to stand here? The dog is jumping all around and you get him to stand there for just a few seconds on his own, so you tap him on the side as if to say, "Okay, you did that for me, now, I'll work you on a bird." When he starts to understand what you want, he'll do it real fast, because he knows you're going to let him get right back to doing what he wants to do. Once they learn that, they are learning to learn.

K-They're trusting you.

BILL-They're trusting you and they know you're adding all these things.

One of the things I can't over emphasize is that a dog's desire to hunt, their pointing abilities, you bring that out in them. You have to get the dog built up, give him a reason to point.

You have the dog that is starting to flash point. He loves being out there and we're starting to make him stand. At what point do we start introducing the shock collar to him?

The view I take on the shock collar is-I found out, especially on dogs that don't like to be touched, real sensitive-the faster I can get away from using force, from using my hands and that spike collar and I can start nicking them with that shock collar, I am much more successful using that collar than I am using my hands. I'm going to make them stop and stand, and by that I mean I've got them broke to the gun. They're starting to flash point. They love being out there. I have them on a check line with my spike collar, I've got my shock collar on them, I'm working behind, I've got other people out there and how we set this whole thing up is this: the fellow that's going to work the birds, whether he's check lining or turning his dog loose, he has complete control of the field. He's going to go out

and just work his dog. He's not - going to sit there and wait for us to get into position. What I do is walk at a distance behind, and I just start teaching this dog to stop and stand. If I have an issue like the dog's jumping around, I'll just let that guy go on and work his dog and I'll stay back here and work this dog until I feel I've made him do it. I won't make him stand very long. The minute he does it on a loose rope I send him On. As time goes on he gets used to that and he'll be very happy to stand longer and longer. One thing you have to be aware of when you're out working dogs is every little move means something to that dog. If you're out there, and Mike's dog points a bird, your dog sees it, and you happen to be visiting with somebody, and he flushes the bird and your dog starts moving around and you're still visiting and the dog is jumping all around and you're not doing anything about it, you're teaching that dog that when that bird flies, he's supposed to jump all around.

You have to pay attention. After awhile, when you hold him there, once the bird's gone, he's stopped, you let him stand for a little bit. Mike moves his dog on, you move on. First thing you know, when you give him that little jerk, and you don't say anything to him, he'll stop and stand there.

Let's say you have a dog that when you give him that little jerk he'll stand there but when the bird flies he bounces and jumps around. I found what works best for me at that point you can't shock him because he doesn't know what it is to keep his feet glued down-you can pick him up right off his front feet. Don't jerk him.

What can we do to impress upon him that when that bird flies, we want him to freeze?

You don't want his tail to go down, you don't want to intimidate him.

We have found out that if you pull the rope up and lift him off his front feet the dog will fight but then, all of a sudden, he'll feel his air being cut off. At that point, and you'll see it, you loosen up and let him back down. Pet him, let him catch his breath, then move him on like nothing happened.

The next time when he feels that collar tighten up a little, he'll freeze. And then you just pet him. And when he freezes and you pet him, you're telling him, "Man, you are the best. That's what I want." If I see his tail go down and he's upset, I take him over and let him point a bird and get happy again. But the point is, I've got his attention. Once you have him responding to that spike collar and freezing, you can reach back, style him up-you don't have to do a lot of petting, just a little pat.

So let's say you had that little battle and now you go on. Somebody's dog points a bird and your dog freezes, then you pet him. At that time, if the dog is holding his tail up and his attitude is good, I'll just put him away and let him think about it.

Say, during this whole process that your lead dog, his trainer has killed a bird for him. He got through with his retrieve and all. We call this "gathering the wagons." We'll gather around and someone will throw the bird out and my dog gets to retrieve it, then the other guys' dogs get a chance.

But while each dog is practicing retrieving, the others all stand still-they have to watch all those dogs go out there and retrieve, and they're learning that you're going to tell them when they can go over there and retrieve, but, because they were paying attention to Mike over here, even though they didn't get to point the bird themselves, they've got a little something in this. And that makes them really want to watch the lead dog next time.

And this starts the process of honoring. At that point, when the dog kind of knows to stop

and stand, I'll have my collar right here on my chest. I don't like to have it on my belt because by the time you reach down there and you find the button, the dog's already done something and the timing's off. This is really a timing thing. I start with the lowest intensity. And this time, instead of giving him the little jerk I normally do, maybe I'll just do half of that. And if he starts moving, I'll start nicking him with that collar, and if that doesn't do it, I'll go a little higher. But the minute he stops, I'll reach down and pet him. Now this may worry him but he already knows that if you petted him, he's doing good. Now this is where we start the transformation and the shock collar is going to eventually take over-like having a big rubber arm that can reach out there a half mile and get him.

K-The timing is everything. Like with kids, "Wait until your father gets home" never works. You have to make the correction immediately.

BILL-Right and with the electric collar you can. You've got to get him right then.

K-How old a dog are we talking about here?

BILL-Well, we've taken dogs that were six months old, puppies that have seen either wild birds or johnny-house birds three or four times. These dogs start pointing really nice, and I've found out that if you just start check lining them around like that, just stopping them, letting them watch another dog work, they love being out there. It doesn't make any difference how old they are.

Obviously when you have an eight-week-old puppy his body isn't big enough to jump over anything. He's too little. I get asked all the time when can you start training. We've had several dogs-on pigeons now-we were flushing birds in front of and they were standing to wing and shot, and the dogs were barely eight months old. We've done that lots of times and weren't trying to prove anything. The dogs had been around and really pointed nice and we said why wait? Why should we just let him go out and catch and chase birds?

I have a friend who's winning field trials now and we had his dog broke when she was, literally, not quite eight months old. And it just happened. She was ready. I used to say we'd start at a year old but now we take them at eight months old and have no trouble. It's a process of steps. You have to do this before you go on to the next step, and so on. That's what's important.

What I've found out is that when you use the shock collar in this manner, it really is easier on dogs. Now the down side of all of this on some dogs-when you start nicking them on real low and you move up until you get a response, I have found that, as time goes on, sometimes it takes more power for these dogs because they kind of get used to that shock collar.

One of the good things about this is once you get the dog where he respects that collar, and you can stop him when he chases a bird, as time goes on you can turn that collar way down, and you just need a little bit to remind him once in awhile. That's one of the great things about it. But one of my big issues with the shock collar companies is that we need to have a separate button for when-all else fails.

That's on the other end of the spectrum that we're usually working on, those hard-headed dogs-well, it's not exactly that, they just have more hunt in them, more desire for birds, and they can take that kind of pressure.

But back to some of the dogs that are real sensitive, when you use that real light, even a number one, some dogs really feel it. Because some dogs are so sensitive-hey, there are people like that. There's the guy that you can cut a hunk of his arm out and he doesn't blink an eye and others you show them a needle and they faint.

I found out when you use the collar and you teach them first with that rope and that spike collar and then nick them, those kinds of dogs really respect that kind of work. Another thing with working this way, when your hands are touching them, you're being nice to them. First thing you know, their interest goes right back to those birds and I can stop him, drop the rope and walk away from him. If he starts to move, I'll give him a nick. When he stops, I'll pet him and tell him I appreciate him stopping.

Now this device has become the replacement of your rope. We have a way now to remind the dog that he must stand. And he'll try you, because his nature is to hunt for himself. All you're asking him is if the two of you can work together as a team.

Now up to this I haven't done much about teaching him to come. I've had dogs where you'd turn them loose and they'd just take off and people would say they were big running dogs, field trial dogs. When I get a dog to where I can drop the rope and they'll stand there while I flush birds, sometimes I'll lead that dog around to where I know there's a bird and just stop him. And I'll drop the rope. I'll go and flush the bird and he'll stop. If he doesn't, I'll nick him with the collar.

We work on a lot of pigeons out here in Arizona. We have wild birds but our land and our landscape-we have all these little burrow weeds allows us to sneak around, hide birds. They act a lot like wild birds but the dog will see a lot of them. I think that it's good that the dog will handle a bird when he sees it. Because, boy, you never know. The trials I used to run in in California were on chukar, and sometimes a dog'd point and there'd be five or six of them that had gotten together and they're all milling around, running all around the dog. The dog has got to get used to that.

When you're on wild birds, they don't see them, but they need to know how to handle birds in all capacities.

I'll take him out and when he points the bird and somebody flushes, and if he starts to go after it I'll just have him on a loose rope- I'll just pop him with that collar. And he'll stop and not mind it a bit. Now, for the first time, we've used a shock collar on him where he was directly involved with a bird.

This is something you have to watch, watch your dog every minute. I've found out that you don't have to kill a lot of birds for them with this method. When I was training fifteen dogs a week, I was killing around fifty birds. I was being too hard on them and I had to kill a lot of birds to keep their interest up. Where now I can keep their interest up without killing birds.

It is really fun out there. Every dog is different, and even after all these years it's still a thrill.

K-How often do you work a dog?

BILL-I like to work a dog three times a week. Sometimes it ends up being four times and sometimes it's only two. You have a lesson and put him on a good note. When I look back at the good teachers I had in school. I can see that they adjusted themselves to help me, they recognized, saw and stopped right there to make sure I understood.

That's why you're watching them, to make sure they're happy, make sure they understand

what you're trying to teach them.

The reason why we don't like to yell "Whoa!" at them is that because sometimes they can't hear you and they need to just do it. They need to know that if there's a bird in the air, to stop. And that's what we're teaching them.

You have to really pay attention to your dog but also to the guy who's working the birds. If I see the guy out there trying to flush birds but my dog can't see the other dog, I'll stop him anyway. Because when a guy is flushing birds, his whole body takes on another demeanor and the dog learns to recognize that.

K-You're also teaching the dog to stop when he sees a flushing situation, no birds in the air, no scent.

BILL-Association. And anybody that's done any hunting or field trialing can look at the guy flushing and know there's something going on over there. The handler got off his horse. A dog recognizes that too and can learn to honor the flushing man. This is taught on the check line. Finally, he'll back that situation.

It's wonderful to see dogs do things like that but they only do them because you taught them. This is all the stuff I learned from Bill West. Bill's the one who saw and noticed that kind of thing. It took me a long time to become sensitive to the dog. You have to really pay attention. You hold that vision of how you want your dog to look and then have to figure out how you can get him there.

What I'll do a lot of times is lead the dog up to where there's a bird, just drop the rope and let him go. He'll run up there and point it, and then he may stand on it the first couple of times, but the next time he may go after it because he realizes he's free for the first time. When he gets to that stage to where you can turn him loose, I think it's a good idea- instead of working him on birds the next time-if you'll just go out where there's no birds when you first turn him loose. Because by now you've also taught him to come with a little jerk of the rope. When you say "Here" that's a voice command he should recognize and come to you.

K- You told me you teach your dogs to stay away from rattlesnakes.

BILL-We go out and we de fang a snake, put him downwind. The whole time he's looking at that snake we don't do anything, and then all of a sudden he'll go in and the snake will strike. But most dogs will take their eyes off the snake for a second and when he does, we'll hit him with the shock collar-it scares the beegesus out of them. The last thing they were looking at was that thing. You've destroyed them from ever wanting to be around a rattlesnake.

So here's the other lesson-if you shock them while they're looking at a bird, what do you think will happen? Maybe he'll just stay away from those things.

Anyway, one thing you also have to teach him is that when he's running, when he's free, he just can't do any old thing he wants. You have to hack him around with all those "Here, heres" and make him come with you. You know sometimes when you have to get on him with that collar, he won't want to come to you-and then he gets on a bird real quick, the bird pops up on him-that's too much. Too many things.

What I'll do a lot of times, if we're out in Oklahoma, I'll have one of my helpers and we're working dogs, and I'll say, hey, I've got maybe four or five dogs, and we'll load all of our dogs up in the dog truck, saddle our horses, and he goes off to an area-and we'll run the

dogs to the truck, for an hour. While he's waiting for us, he'll turn these dogs loose, hack them around, get them where they mind him and come back.

Then, when you get back to the johnny-house, or if you're working on pigeons, if he misses the bird or if you see one, you can hack him around. Then if he finds a bird, if he runs it up, or let's say he smells it and the bird just gets up and flies and he starts after it and you stop him with that collar, he'll stop because he understands. And he'll just start handling birds. It's amazing.

But you know when you get dogs that are wiggly and are laying down, sitting down and all these things, it's because you didn't lead that dog behind other dogs enough and teach him to stand.

I just went over real quickly how you use the collar to teach him to stand. When you go to flush that bird, the dog may lay down. .well, I just jerk him up, give him that little tap on his stifle on his hind leg, push down on him a little and pet him and the first thing you know you have him standing there when birds are flying all around him.

So when you finally turn him loose, and you chase him and you have to stop him with that collar, you know he's completely predictable in what he's going to do. Another thing I've found out too, that I didn't mention in the last article, especially on the johnny-houses, and it happens-what do you do about creeping?

Say I'm in Oklahoma working at the johnny-houses and I'm just starting to turn this dog loose. He goes out and maybe the second or third time he points a bird he starts creeping. I don't do anything; I just let him creep right in on it.

Sometimes he'll get right up on it and jump it. When that bird flies and he starts after it, I stop him with that collar. You do that a few times and when the dog smells a bird, he won't move.

It's like he's saying to me, "Okay, dad, I tried to flush them myself and it didn't work out. Do you think you could flush that bird for me?" And I say, "Sure, son, I'd be happy to." I flush and now we're all eager to find another bird. (Laughter) Look, I don't know if that's what they're thinking but that's what I have in my mind. So it makes me happy, and I think it's transferred to the dog. And he gets all excited.

Sometimes with pigeons, they'll point them a long way off-and they'll look like the pigeon's right in front of them, they're real intense. And you walk a long ways-especially in Arizona where there's not much ground cover.

I had a dog the other day where he'd point and then start creeping in and creeping in.

Finally the bird got up and he stopped on his own. I didn't use the collar, because he did right, he stopped. See, it's kind of like, when the bird left, that was his punishment. And then the third bird he pointed he started to creep and he stopped. Then I walked in and flushed it.

Now yesterday when I worked him he went out there and pointed those birds a long way off, really good. His tail was only about 45° but pretty soon, when he wants to handle birds, that tail will come right up, and that's when he's telling you, "Hey, I know what my role is here and I accept it." That's when the two of you are a real team.

K-Do you think people are in too much of a hurry with their dogs?

BILL-Well, I average anywhere from thirty to sixty days. I'll be turning a lot of these dogs loose, in about thirty days to six weeks.

And I say that, and it doesn't mean that you can do it. You have to know when to move forward and when to back off. But you learn that if you try to see everything from the dog's point of view. You have to watch him very closely. Some dogs just love to stand there-they take training real easy. They're the real nice dogs to work with because they want to please you. And those are the ones you want to breed to, the ones that can take training.

That's why, in a lot of ways, your English pointer and your German Shorthair, some of those breeds are really easy. When you look at the number of pros who train those dogs, the reason is they're so much fun to work with. With some of the other breeds, when you are getting into a lot of things with them you sometimes lose that bird dog instinct. I don't want to name breeds of dogs, because you always have real exceptions.

I have a Weimaraner that's a real nice dog, and they bought her out of a pet store-I don't know if that means anything. I found out long ago that it doesn't matter where a dog comes from. You have to look at that dog. But, at the same time, if you have a real good pedigree out of real outstanding performers in field trials, your chances of getting a good puppy are a lot better than, you know, my buddy has a dog and we breed, or you got a Brittany and I got a Brittany, let's breed.

What I like about field trials and competition is, it doesn't have a heart. You're only as good as who you are competing against.

K-What do you look for when choosing the dogs you will accept for training?

BILL-When somebody brings me a dog, I'll take him out on a pigeon or quail and just see if he wants to chase them, if he's interested in them. I'd like to see him catch a bird and he's not afraid of it. And I watch how gung ho he is, if he gets after it real hard and grabs that bird-that's all I need to see. I feel I can go ahead and train that dog. Most dogs can take training, especially to be a hunting dog. .

Now when you get into field trialing, your requirements are a lot more. But most people that I work for love their dogs and they really-especially if it's a family thing where the wife and kids are crazy about the dog-want to go hunting and go with this dog. So when I get him, if I feel the dog absolutely doesn't like birds at all, then there's not anything I can do.

I have to have some talent. I have a dog now that I had to teach to be interested in birds. She's got to where she points and will even chase but I wonder what will happen down the road when I have to put a little pressure on her. I'm sure she'll fold. So I'll tell the guy to just take her home and have fun with her. And no matter how much time I've spent on her, I won't charge much, just enough to pay myself for making her huntable.

When you are training dogs for individuals, you have to figure out what kind of a dog this owner really wants. The owners usually really love their dogs and want to see them do well, but at the same time, you have to tell them the truth. No matter what the judgment, I like to take my owners out and see their dog worked with a bunch of other dogs. When they see what these other dogs are doing, and if their dog is not in that category, you don't hurt their feelings.

Also, when I go to summer training, if I'm looking at a field trial dog and it's not going to measure up, and I'm going to keep it all summer, I go ahead and break it. Because if it doesn't make a trial dog, at least he is worth something as a hunting dog.

Sometimes you get a dog that you've made a mistake, you know, they were gung ho and

they seemingly liked birds but they weren't very intelligent. I had a case this summer where I worked a little Vizsla and found out she was gun shy. But I got her broke and got her over it-she liked birds enough. That's why it's important that they love those birds. I got a call from her owner the other day. He was so thrilled with her.

There folks with hunting dogs are really fun to work for. This is a new thing to them and they're just so caught up in it, and they appreciate what you do.

K-One other thing is that when you are training, you never abuse the dog. You know they say you should never spank or correct your child when you're angry, same thing with the dog. I think he needs to be corrected right when he makes the mistake. I'd want to send my dog to you because I think your training methods are so humane. And don't forget, I trained with you for a whole seven days. I saw you handle every kind of training situation-some that would have made me mad if I was the trainer. And you never lost your temper. I think that's why the dogs you're training respond so readily to you-you really are their friend.

BILL-Well, when people think a lot of their animals, they want them cared for in the proper way. Even my two little dogs-I don't want them out in the cold, I don't want them uncomfortable. Now in this area of Phoenix, all kinds of "pet hotels" are going up. They have TV sets for the cats and dogs!

K-Do you think there are many field trial trainers training this way?

BILL-I judged a field trial and saw George Tracy. I can understand why he has 70 dogs. He's successful because all the dogs I saw him have were really trained. Those dogs were all I broke. When he lost one, I he got his tracking collar out and someone asked him where he found it. It was over on point when I they located it. When guys are successful like that and those dogs look so good on their birds, even I during the flush and they walk back to them-as a dog trainer, you notice little things like that. It was raining and some of the birds were awful and wouldn't fly but the dogs still stood there with a lot of intensity. That shows that this guy knows what he's doing and he's breaking them right.

It was great to read an article about how he works his puppies and gets them all fired up. If you can get a dog all excited when you fire your gun, then you've got it made. I've worked a Gordon setter and I noticed that when I fired the gun up close to him, it scared him. The dog pointed well and I everything, and the owner says that all he's ever done is chase birds in trials when the gun fires. So I really had to watch it-but that all went away because I kept my mind on the dog and really watched him during workouts. Some people just don't think about those things.

Like I said before, when you are out there training your dog, you have to be thinking about him every minute because you can do so much harm if you are not. But, you know, if we are really having to go after a dog, and things are not going well for him, sometimes it's best not to fire the gun.

Because a gun firing, even though they may be used to it, is not a happy thing-it's noisy and, I don't know, but if I'm having any kind of trouble at all with a dog, I don't let anybody fire around him. When you put too many things too close together with that dog, he gets confused and it makes it worse.

Also, if a dog isn't handling a bird right, I'll just let him go right on that same bird-if he points and the bird pops up and goes right over there I'll let him go on and point that same bird until he does it right. Then I put him away. And I've found out that it's easy to call a dog and keep him from going after that bird on a delayed chase. Let's say a dog pointed a bird-especially, let's say chukars-the chukar sees the dog is pointing and you walk out in front of your dog. Of course when your dog sees you coming up there-the chukar have moved. You start kicking around and there's no birds, so what are you going to do?

The dog saw the chukars run off. You're going to go to him and say, "All right." They learn that when you don't fire the gun, they should run over there and point the bird again. When you fire the gun and kill the bird and it falls, then they can go retrieve it. Another thing I've found out. When clients have hunting dogs, they will not keep it broke to wing and shot.

They'll keep it broke to when they flush birds, most of them will. Because they can understand that when the dog jumps the bird before they get there, they're not having a good time, they'll hit the collar. Then the dog will point the bird and let them flush it. When I break these hunting dogs I break them to wing and shot. And the reason why I do it is, when you're working on planted birds, a lot of these planted birds just fly a little ways and they land. You fired your blank gun but you didn't kill him. How does that dog know?

So here it is. You turn the dog loose. He points. You kill the bird, it drops, you send him to retrieve. Now the next time the dog points you kicked the bird up, fired the blank gun, he landed but you didn't kill him.'

Now if you were a dog, what would you think about that? What does he want? I got to go to the bird the last time. He fired the gun. When you break them to wing and shot, that way the lines are drawn. Everything's the same. He understands.

Now if you don't want him broke to wing and shot, when you shoot the bird, you tell him, "Fetch" while the bird's in the air, falling. Of course you have to keep working with them when you're shooting birds for them all their lives to keep them steady. Because they're always wanting to go a little bit before you tell them. They want to do right, yet they want to get that bird too. You let them digress on that shot but if you let them regress in too many areas, you can get them with that collar. But they need to have a standard to come back to. And that's why those dogs are happy.

And that is very important. That's the reason why I break those dogs to wing and shot and you just let them digress on the shot, and it really works good.

I'll tell you, after all these years, it's still a joy getting up and going out there. And I love training my owners. When you have a bunch of guys out there and they get to seeing what you're after. Like Bob Miller, he has two Vizslas and he said, "Look, Bill, I could have you train them, but I'm retired. Is there any way I could come out and work them with you?" And now, in just a little over a month, we're turning both his dogs loose.

K- You're training trainers. You're training owners to be able to train their own dogs and, certainly not many trainers want to do that.

BILL-There's nothing wrong with that. Sometimes it costs me a few extra hours a day, because they're out there. But I tell them that, and make them pay attention and help me. They have to listen to me and pay attention.

Sometimes I'll ask where the birds flew and they'll all shrug, and I say, "I find it so amazing that we have six of the most brilliant minds out there and not one can tell me where the birds are!" And they kind of look around like, "Uh oh, Bill's mad." We really basically have a great time-I love helping them. I don't keep any secrets; you can ask me anything and I'll try to help you.

You know, we all go to bed at night, and I'll bet you don't lie awake worrying because you did somebody in. And I don't either. When it's all said' and done I really sleep good. I feel good and one of these days I'm going to die like everybody else but if I can see that I helped somebody and they in turn helped somebody this is what is going to keep the bird dog business going on.