

Following Good Advice

My training for the Invitational began in January 2006, when my training partner and I began to stomp out lines in the snow to teach the blind retrieve. As a relatively new handler with a two-year old Spinone (Osage Caesar Brasch), I barely understood the elements of the test. Over the next months, a lot of experienced trainers gave me advice and told me their Invitational stories, all of which I was very grateful for, as we embarked upon this new training. I believe the summer of intense training and the people I trained with is what I'll remember most about my journey to the Invitational.

"Boot camp."

This suggestion from Lena Amirian was maybe the most insightful piece of advice I received. She explained that success at the Invitational would depend on several things, but one key piece was obedience. Lena felt that Brasch – an independent-thinking dog – needed to feel that he was under my control at all times, so I created obedience-oriented routines around all his activities. When he got out of his car crate, he would sit, have his e-collar put on, and then heel to a location where he was released to run. If he didn't immediately turn on a whistle, he was corrected every time. When we saw wild ducks near some water, I immediately heeled him close and used the opportunity to correct him for any deviations from his task.

At first, I didn't fully understand the value of enforcing constant, regular obedience, but by the end of the summer I saw that Brasch had become really task-oriented and was working for me. He is now used to the small, constant pressure and handles it as routine. He is not surprised by a correction, but understands what is expected. What I am most pleased with is the bond it helped create, and that his demeanor is clearly happy and confident.

"Conditioning, conditioning, conditioning."

These were some of the words of advice I heard in the spring of 2006. Everyone I talked to who had been to the Invitational before had different ideas on conditioning methods. Some people had their dogs drag weight; some had their dogs running next to them on a bike; some did a lot of swimming; many professionals use an ATV to run the dogs.

As a marathon runner, I train for stamina with long runs, learning to adapt to the distance and to take in water while exercising. I always run hills to acquire strength. I decided to free-run Brasch on nearby hilly farm fields with an ATV, as it would be efficient to build stamina. It turned out that Brasch really loved running free with the ATV because for once he could just run and run. He opened up his range, and learned to take in a good bit of water about every ten minutes, which was very important in the 95-degree heat we had in July. To complete the conditioning, I added some swimming on the off days.

"Do every Master Hunt test you can."

This was excellent advice for me. While we also did field work with others preparing for the Invitational, the AKC hunt tests created a test situation that helped make both Brasch and me test-ready. Luckily, Brasch honors naturally, but I soon learned that what a dog does in training does not always hold up under stress in a test situation. As anyone who has run MH tests knows, you encounter a wide range of Judges, grounds, and brace mates. Unlike NAVHDA tests, where Judges look at the whole picture of the dog's performance, you can be disqualified instantly in MH tests if your dog has a delayed chase on birds or a single steadiness



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break. So, we began hunt tests in the spring and finished up with a few in August, traveling to Ohio, New England, and Virginia in the process. But, along with a Master Hunter title, Brasch and I became a team in the field.

“Find water.”

It seemed as though I spent the summer looking for water for different length blind retrieves. I searched online with Google Earth, called retriever clubs to see where they trained, picked up suggestions from others training for the Invitational, and did plenty of driving around and knocking on doors to see if I could use someone’s pond.

I was doing blind retrieves from 100 to 165 yards about twice a week, with all going well until one week before the Invitational. Brasch was distracted, possibly by some scent at the line, and decided to find his own duck instead of cross the water for the one I wanted him to get. To avoid a major battle so close to the test, I decided to give him a visual with an e-collar reminder. My training partner took a kayak across the

water, showed him the duck on the other side, and returned. I then sent him with a moderate – not high – correction, and he was eager to go. We repeated several more blind retrieves in that last week.

At the Invitational, the blind retrieve and honor by blind were Brasch’s final events. I knew that a high number of dogs had failed at the blind retrieve, and of course I was more nervous about that event because I knew we had had an issue there only a week before. I fiddled around more than usual setting him up, but when I finally said, “Dead bird, BACK,” he went like a dream. At the end of the day, the summer’s long journey paid off with a maximum score of 200 points.

I would like to thank my training partner Ann Bagnell, who was there in all kinds of weather, hauling the kayak, carrying, dragging and launching dead ducks at dawn and at dusk. When I would get discouraged she kept us all going with positive energy and words of encouragement. I am looking forward to training again with Ann as she prepares her Spinone, Luchi for the up and coming Invitational in Missouri next September.



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