

INTRODUCING GUNFIRE

(from *THE BRITTANY: Amateurs Training with Professionals*)

By

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Introduce gunfire to a Brittany puppy when he is at least 5 months old. Take your time with this lesson and pay close attention to his initial response. When done correctly, a pup should ignore the noise. If your pup stops, changes his gait, or turns his head during the introduction, he's telling you he's not ready. Back off and give him some time to mature before continuing. Most gun-shy dogs are man-made. While some pups may be more noise sensitive than others, a noise sensitive pup can learn to enjoy gunfire if he is properly introduced.

The professionals we work with introduce gunfire in a couple of different ways. Gene Stewart likes to introduce it away from birds. This is the safest method and we recommend it to anyone who is a beginning trainer. Bill Gibbons introduces gunfire around birds—when the pup makes a dive at a bird he is chasing. More experienced trainers may prefer this method. Both use a .22 caliber blank pistol but a cap gun also works.

Gene Stewart likes to introduce gunfire while the pup is running in the field. When the pup is about 5 months old, Gene starts taking him for runs afield. Once he is confident running on different grounds, Gene fires a blank gun when the pup is about 50 yards ahead. He watches to see if the pup stops or changes his gait. If he does, Gene turns and goes a different direction, ignoring him. The pup quickly forgets about the noise and runs to catch-up. If the pup does this, he's telling Gene he's not ready. Gene gives him a little time off, maybe a week, before trying again. Once the pup is ignoring the gunfire, Gene will fire closer.

Now, Gene is ready to introduce gunfire around birds. He does this while the pup is looking for the bird. Gene puts out a couple of quail along a tree line as if he were introducing the pup to birds. As the pup hunts the tree line, Gene waits for him to flush a bird and chase it. When the pup chases the bird and it lands again, he gets excited. He's racing around trying to find the bird, but he doesn't know exactly where it is. At this time Gene shoots. The pup knows the bird is there, but he doesn't see or smell it.

Bill Gibbons likes to introduce gunfire around birds, at the instant the pup makes a dive to catch the bird he's chasing. The pup is usually so excited he ignores the noise. Before Bill begins he wants the pup to chase and catch a bird. Until the pup does this, he's not ready to be shot over. Some puppies may point the bird, flush it, and

even chase aggressively. However, other pups may be afraid of the bird, and, instead of catching it, they re-point it. A pup that re-points may not be ready to be fired over.

To begin, Bill puts out a couple of pigeons with cardboard tethers in an open field as if he were introducing a pup to pigeons. He might pull some flight feathers from one wing of the bird if it is a strong flyer. He puts the check-cord on the pup and lets him hunt a little before bringing him into a bird. The pup will either point or pounce. It doesn't matter which he does as long as he doesn't catch it. Once the bird is in the air, Bill drops the check-cord and lets the pup chase it. Bill watches to make sure that the pup runs aggressively and catches the bird. Only if he catches the bird is he ready to be shot over.

Now, Bill works him on a second bird. Once the bird is in the air, Bill lets go of the check-cord and the pup chases again. He doesn't fire yet but waits for the instant the pup makes a dive for the pigeon. Now, Bill fires the blank pistol. At this time Bill is at least 50 yards away. He carefully watches the pup for any signs of concern. Does the pup notice the report of the gun? Most pups are so fired-up they ignore the noise, but once in a while a pup will hesitate. If the pup hesitates at the sound of the shot, Bill works him on a third bird. This time he does not fire. He wants the pup to enjoy catching another bird before he puts him up. Bill gives him a couple of days to think about it before re-introducing gunfire. Once the pup ignores the gunfire, Bill can shoot earlier—while the pup is chasing the bird. At this time, Bill also begins to fire multiple times and gets closer to the puppy.

Once the pup is ignoring the blank gun or cap gun, he's ready to be introduced to the shotgun—but only after he has been fired over for a couple of weeks and he's oblivious to the noise. A light load works best before moving to a heavier gauge. Remember to introduce the bigger gun in stages, the same way you introduced the blank gun.

Once gunfire has been introduced, continue to be careful when you shoot around your pup. Since you can make a dog gun-shy at any time, here are a few common sense rules that apply throughout your pup's hunting career.

- Never take a pup to a skeet or trap range to see if he is gun-shy. You will have a gun-shy pup from this type of noise exposure.
- Never fire a shotgun when you are behind a young or inexperienced dog. Fire when you're in front of him so the noise doesn't startle him.
- Use one gunner, especially the first season. Four or five people shooting over a young dog is the fastest way to send him, panic stricken, fleeing back to the truck.

- Shoot only at the birds that your dog points. If he's pointing, he's anticipating the shot. If you shoot at wild flushing birds, the noise may frighten him.

As your pup's training progresses, the noise of gunfire will become a reward. The sound tells him that birds are in the air. If you are careful, if you introduce the gun intelligently and use common sense, your pup will thrill to the sound of the shot for the rest of his life.

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