

# Making The Most Of Your NAVHDA Training Day

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Each year, new people join NAVHDA and attend training days. Maybe the breeder who sold you your dog asked you to run the Natural Ability test. Maybe you got your first hunting dog and heard NAVHDA would help you learn how to train your dog. Maybe you're thinking about getting a hunting dog, and a NAVHDA member invited you to check it out and see a lot of different dogs work. Maybe you just happened to be in the area and wondered what was going on. Regardless of how you got here, if you:

- a) want to improve your working relationship with your versatile hunting dog
  - b) are interested in game conservation, the prevention of cruelty to animals, and good sportsmanship by hunting with dogs that are well trained in work before and after the shot, on land and in the water
- then you've come to the right place.

It is not unusual for a new member to come and not know what to expect or what to do; we hope this helps paint a picture of a training day. We also provide ideas to make the most out of your training day. You may want to do some or all of the suggestions below. We hope this inspires you to think about what your dog needs and how to use the training grounds to help them.

## AN EXAMPLE TRAINING DAY

Every chapter organizes its training days differently depending on the number of folks attending, the number of dogs at various training levels, the accommodations or limitations of the training grounds, the number of volunteers, and their preferences for managing the day. They may have everyone register at the same time or in waves. They may have a scheduled lunch, or you just find time to eat. You might pay for birds or the use of birds when you register for the training day or pay when you sign at the training.

Please leave your dog in your vehicle and check in when you first arrive. You will be told when and where

to go and whether to bring your dog to the initial meeting spot. You may receive any birds that you ordered at this time. If you are not told, ask where you can relieve your dog. If you have them, take your birds back to your vehicle, and use the time before you meet up to relieve your dog.

Throughout the day, you and your dog will work on various training scenarios. Volunteer mentors will help set up the training scenario, explain the scenario, and suggest how to work with your dog in that scenario. The volunteer mentors will likely ask you questions to get a sense of your dog's familiarity with the task, their personality, or related obedience work. They will give you suggestions for continuing to build that skill at home. When you are waiting for your turn, we suggest working on keeping your dog calm and contained, watching how others are working with their dogs in the scenario and the related results, and learning how to set up the scenario (how to plant birds, how to set a track, etc.).

*What to bring: a leash, a longline, a flat collar, water to keep you and your dog hydrated, snacks and lunch for you, a crate to contain your dog in your vehicle, a stake out to contain your dog outside of your vehicle (if you choose) and at stations if the chapter doesn't set up a chain gang, a field vest or backpack to carry your supplies around the training grounds, ways to keep your dog cool at the vehicle (a fan or a canopy), a bird bag and/or crate to contain any birds that you purchase, something to take notes, and maybe cash/check if you still need to pay.*

## OBEDIENCE

You've been working on obedience in your home, yard, neighborhood, and maybe in a formal obedience class. That's great for building your relationship with your dog and having a family pet. However, it's also critical to hunt training and success in NAVHDA tests. Your dog knows how to "hunt" – search a field and find game. The point of hunt training is to build that rela-



tionship even more and have them work with you in the field instead of for themselves.

The training grounds provide you with a very distracting environment for obedience work. New strangers – both human and canine – look and smell different from what they experienced before. There are different and exciting smells in the air and on the ground. There is a lot of movement to catch their eye. Can your dog sit or go into a down in this new environment? Recall from a couple of steps away all the way out to the length of your long line? Can they not bark at others? Remember that this is a new and possibly stressful environment. Expect little and mark/reward often. "Our dogs are doing the BEST they can with the EDUCATION we have given them, in the ENVIRONMENT we've asked them to perform." - Susan Garrett.

Have you started place board training? Bring your place board and a long line. Start by working in a quiet area. Then, work your way closer to distractions.

You can practice leash work, heeling, or random sits and downs as you walk between stations or around the training grounds. However, we do not recommend formal heeling for an extended time with a young pup.

*What to bring: lots of treats; a clicker; a leash; a long line; depending on where you are with your leash work, you may need a slip lead that you can turn into a halter, a prong collar, or an electronic collar in addition to your dog's flat collar; and finally, a place board if you are doing place board training. Note: as with any tool, learning proper use of these various collars is critical to ensure the dog's quickest learning and to keep the dog safe.*

## TEACHING YOUR PUP TO BE CALM

Almost universally, our pups come with a lot of energy. But some dogs, including John's Ursa, can become obsessive and cross the line of what is healthy. And, unfortunately, when your dog becomes stressed, the stress hormones can stay in your dog for days (<https://bit.ly/3FljCqX>).

Like athletes, dogs perform best when they are "in the zone." If their energy/focus is too low, they are easily distracted or not even interested in you and the task at hand. On the other hand, if they go past the zone, their focus becomes too narrow to assess what is happening around them in the field, and they might experience negative physical effects.

We can help our dogs learn to control their excitement – to be in the zone one moment and turn it off when the activity is over. Starting at home, play the "Chill Out" game (<https://bit.ly/30N5szF>, though, we don't recommend playing tug to arouse your hunting dog). Then, take it to the yard, a park, etc., to increase the distractions.

Then, on training days, you can reward calm behavior in the crate, on a stake-out, or on a chain gang. You get out of your vehicle, maybe open the back so that your dog gets fresh air, and go sign in. If your dog starts barking, stand out of sight, wait for them to stop barking, then mark and reward the good behavior of







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being calm. Keep doing that until the dog is calm when you leave your vehicle. Do the same thing on a stake out – first further away from the group, then work in closer until they can be on a chain gang.

*What to bring: lots of treats, a stake out.*

### **MAYBE DON'T BRING YOUR DOG**

Both of us spent time in our first year of NAVHDA at training days without our dogs. In Sara's case, she left their older dog at home and chose to walk fields with the training day mentors for the entire training day for a whole year. Over the course of that training season, she learned tremendously how to plan a training progression, set up their obedience foundation for higher-level work, and feel comfortable with the components of both the Natural Ability and Utility tests before she even had a puppy to begin training with. John found that he focused on what silly thing Ursa was doing and not learning the exercises well enough. Both of us saw and learned a lot more without our dogs. Then we took those lessons home and figured out what worked for our dogs and us.

### **COME WITH QUESTIONS, HAVE A LEARNING ATTITUDE, AND HELP OTHERS LEARN**

"Binky boo hates going to her crate. How have folks gotten their dog to love the crate?" "Bear is still having accidents in the house – any suggestions?" "Every time I call Emily into the house, she takes off sprinting around the yard. Has anyone else had that problem?" "I noticed that some people do x while others do z. Why?" "Where do folks get x thing?"

If you've been struggling with an issue, someone in the group has probably experienced that problem, or someone else is also struggling with the same thing. When you are waiting for your turn, ask those around you. Ask the mentors in the group. If there's a shared lunchtime, throw out your question.

Have a learning attitude regardless of whether you ask a question or just show up at the training. Folks might have suggestions for you – listen to it, think about it, maybe try it. Of course, the only right answer is the one that works for you and your dog. You may need to try many solutions to find the right one.

And finally, help others. If your dog is calm while waiting their turn, learn how to set up the exercise and offer a helping hand for the next person. If there is a Natural Ability part of the day and a Utility part, stick around for the other session and help. Sometimes that's planting birds. Sometimes that's laying a track. Sometimes that's as simple as walking the field behind a dog so that the dog gets used to working with others around. Someone might ask you to reward their dog for being calm while they walk the field behind another dog. Along the way, you'll see a lot of different situations – situations that may come up in your training journey – and you'll have seen what has or hasn't worked for someone else.

The training mentors, local NAVHDA judges, and more advanced handlers in your local NAVHDA chapter are eager to help support you and help your young dog succeed. As Eleanor Roosevelt said, "Learn from the mistakes of others. You can't live long enough to make them all yourself." 🐾