

About The Cover

MAKENZIE HANDLING FAITH AT A NAVHDA UTILITY TEST.
PHOTO BY DANA CREGO

Shooting, Training, & Hunting... *The Perfect Trio!*

By Makenzie Heesacker
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My name is Makenzie Heesacker, I'm 14 and a competitive shotgun shooter. I've been shooting shotgun in a variety of disciplines (Skeet, Trap, Sporting Clays, and 5 Stand) for three years with the Northern Colorado Clay Crushers. Being on the team has taught me how to shoot, have fun, and relate my knowledge to the hunting field. In the beginning, I had to focus on how to find the correct amount of lead for different situations. Lead is an invisible distance ahead of a target. After leaving the barrel of the gun, the shot pellets need to have the correct angle in order to intersect with the target when they meet. Depending on which direction and angle the target is traveling, it requires a different amount of lead. For example, when shooting Trap, if you are standing on Station 5 with a clay heading to your far right, you would position your gun four invisible barrel lengths ahead of the clay. Who would have thought that the geometry we learned in math class actually applies to hunting? Lots of practice has let me experiment with how much lead I need to be successful in different situations. One of the best things about shooting in a competition is being grouped with people you don't know. You can observe how they set up for their shots, especially during sporting clays. Sporting Clays is the closest discipline to wild bird hunting. With all the different clay presentation combinations, you see different flight patterns that can occur in the hunting field. This year at the SCTP (Scholastic Clay Target Program) Colorado state shoot, I was paired with a collegiate shooter, who was very good. I examined his process prior to each station. He stood behind the shooter in the cage and held his hand out like it was

his gun and watched the pair of clays as they flew across the sky. When he went up to shoot, he replicated the exact same movements this time with his gun mounted. He hit almost every single target that was thrown that day (97 out of 100). It was inspiring to watch someone with such talent and skill, but most of all, I gained insight from his process to apply to my own shooting. One thing I learned from my observations that helped me is now my tip to you: get on the birds quickly before they get too far away from you.

Remember at the beginning of this article when I said I relate my knowledge to the hunting field? Well, I am a member of an upland bird hunting family. I have a two-year-old German Shorthaired Pointer named Faith. My parents are dog trainers, and that has definitely helped me with my dog. There have been many learning moments, corrections, and lots of "yeses." We have had to work through our share of issues, but over time and with positive reinforcement we have made lots of breakthroughs. Training for the Natural Ability test was fun, except when it came to puppy water. Faith wasn't a fan of swimming in the beginning, so I had to go in the lake with shorts and sandals to show her that it wasn't scary. I spent the first month of summer wading in the lake with Faith until she fell in love with the water. Once her confidence was built, she swam like an otter, and it became challenging to convince her to come back out. I enjoyed watching Faith point pigeons in preparation for the field portion of the test. However, the week before her NA test, recall became a challenge as she found a new level of independence. We ran our first NA test in May of 2021. The test was chaos! Faith was a maniac



puppy who was rearing to go in the field! She pointed beautifully, but after the bird flew, my attempts at calling her back were futile. We received a Prize II, and I decided that we were going to run again in August to gain more experience.

While I counted down the days to our next test, I decided to continue moving forward with Faith's training. The first thing we worked on was steadiness. Faith was seven months old, but my mom and dad said she was ready. My parents showed me how to start the progression and then watched me as I took over. Faith was very obedient to my commands, and she went through the progression with ease. When we re-ran NA, I had two of the same judges that I had the first go round. One of them saw Faith's name on the running order, looked at my mom and teased, "Here we go again." The best part of my day was showing the judges how much Faith improved, that her cooperation was back, and we received a Prize I.

Faith earned a break from training for her first hunting season and showed off her new skills with proficiency. When the next training season began, Mom and Dad took Faith through trained retrieve. I watched every step of the progression on the table, and when it was time for yard drills, it was my turn. Next, we started

duck search training. All the time I spent with Faith getting her comfortable in the water paid off because she took to the task quickly and loved it! We soon came to a snag. One day when we were doing an easy duck drag, Faith didn't want to go. She was avoiding the duck, and I could read the concern in her eyes. My parents and I traced it back to duck search the day prior when Faith was chasing down a lively duck. We concluded that the duck must have bitten her at some point and caused her to be somewhat timid. To help her build up her confidence, I worked with her on a lot of dead duck retrieves. In August of 2022, Faith and I ran our first Utility test. She was a year and ten months, and we got a Prize III. While she had built her confidence on live ducks (she even brought me back her duck at the duck search!) she wasn't fully confident and struggled with her retrieve of duck at the blind sequence. I was still very proud of our teamwork through her test day.

After that, I thought it would be good for her to relax and enjoy another hunting season. We went to Montana, South Dakota, and New Mexico with my family and the rest of our dogs. I had loads of fun from learning how to walk fields to shooting my first wild pheasant. It was an amazing experience, from the diverse

scenery, to watching the dogs work different terrain in pursuit of a variety of upland bird species. Walking along with my parents and little sister made the hunting season an enjoyable memory. We walked many miles, climbed hills, stumbled along the sides of mountains, all to be rewarded with fantastic views and lots of birds. I remember when we were in South Dakota, Faith went on point just in front of us. I walked in to flush the bird. I took three steps past Faith and a covey of Sharp-tailed grouse got up. It was the perfect straight away shot, and yet I just stood there, my gun halfway mounted, watching the birds fly into the sunset. I got laughed at, not only by the grouse, but also by my parents who asked me why I didn't shoot. I didn't even get a chance to look at Faith, but I'm pretty sure what she thought about my cooperation at the moment. Sometimes you need to just stand there and watch the birds fly away, as you enjoy their beauty, and wonder. It's ok to decide not to shoot and just enjoy your surroundings.



MAKENZIE'S FIRST ROOSTER
KAYLYN HEESACKER © 2023

When this past hunting season ended, Faith and I spent the cold month of February doing more confidence work. She had realized that ducks weren't scary, just... challenging. I was excited to see new determination develop as I worked her on more challenging retriever drills. Faith and I ran our second Utility test on June 9 of this year. We passed with a Prize I! We are now qualified for the 2024 Invitational! I've been going to the Invitational since my mom ran our first NAVHDA dog, Elsa, in 2019. NAVHDA is such an amazing program; it has been a part of my life since I was a toddler. I am grateful for the opportunities that have been provided. The NAVHDA Youth Testing Incentive Program has graciously provided reimbursements for my testing ventures. I've also been the recipient of two Kristin Rieser Aims & Rules Clinic Scholarships; one for a Natural Ability/Utility Clinic and most recently for an Invitational Clinic. I found the clinics gave me more insight on how NAVHDA works and helped me feel more confident testing my dog. I'm excited to begin putting in practice everything that I learned last year at the Invitational Clinic to start preparing Faith for Iowa. But before we head to the "Big Dance," we have another hunting season ahead of us. This year, I plan to hold up my end of the bargain when Faith goes on point.

For young shooters out there, here are some of my tips for you, from my experience and my coaches:

1. Have Fun!!! If you don't have fun, it defeats the whole purpose of why you are shooting.
2. Shotgun is a mental game. In competition, you aren't competing against everyone else, but against yourself, your own personal records, and the voices in your head telling you that you aren't enough.
3. Know that you are enough, that you are as good as everyone around you. I have trouble with this myself, but I remind myself every day that I am enough. You ARE enough!
4. Whenever you change the amount of lead when you miss a target, consider the six inches of lead between your ears. Shooting is a mental game.
5. If you have a miss, always change something. Don't make huge changes, take baby steps when you are experimenting with the changes you can make on the next target.

"Youth are the future of the hunting world." I don't know how many times I've heard people say those words, but they are completely right. We are the next heirs to the hunting world. We are vital in the sport of hunting. We need to continue the journey of hunting for future generations.

NAVHDA is a journey that has shaped me into the dog trainer I am today, and I owe my love for hunting and the outdoors to NAVHDA. It has been the growth and development for me and my dog, and it has given me the best experiences. It's a great way to work with my dog, make new friendships, and it always shows me something new. Thank you NAVHDA for believing in, cultivating, and supporting youth like me. 🐾



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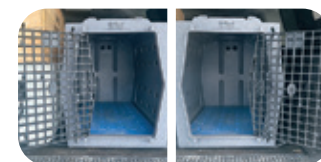
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