

Training the Basenji for the Field

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There are several things which many people talk about but few do anything about—one of them is the hunting capability of the Basenji. Most breeders of Basenjies will expound on the fine hunting qualities of the breed, but never hunt with them. This is unfortunate, since, though a well-controlled Basenji does make a wonderful pet, and a well-constructed one does make a fine show animal, it is the Basenji who has been trained and who is being used as a hunter who gives the most pleasure.

As our breed is becoming better-known and more popular, I am gratified that more people are becoming interested in the breed as a hunting dog. Those few of us who have hunted regularly with these dogs in this country over the past years are being asked with ever increasing frequency by novice Basenji owners how they should go about training their dogs for the field. There has been very little written on the subject – perhaps because we who hunt with Basenjies are having too much fun at it to take time to write about it! However, our north-woods paradise presently has about four feet of fluffy snow, and since Basenjies aren't equipped with snow-shoes, I find myself with some time to write about field-training our breed.

"HENTYPKENYA" REG.
"Home of the Hunters"



Because of the Basenji's distinct traits, there are people who feel he is difficult to train, or that he should be field-trained differently than other hunting dogs. While I do not agree with this feeling completely, I do agree that it takes a thorough understanding of this dog's temperament to train him to obey your commands happily. He must be made to feel that what you want is what he wants, without insulting his intelligence. It is almost impossible to train him to do your bidding through force alone – he will eventually obey, but resentfully and with reluctance. Much better results can be obtained through patient, loving firmness – he must be taught that you are the boss and he must obey, but that you do love and understand him.

Most people who have contacted me about how to field train a Basenji already have one which is six or more months old. Many old-time hunters and trainers claim that field training should begin only when a dog is mature. I agree that a mature Basenji can be trained, and have done so myself with success; but unless the dog has had some basic training as a puppy, I feel that chances of success are slim and require a great deal more patience, knowledge, and time than most of us have. It is, I am convinced, much easier and better to start with a puppy.

I also believe it best to start with a pup selected from a litter which is the result of a mating of Basenjis who have demonstrated hunting desire and ability. Within that litter, there will be some pups who from infancy display more hunting tendencies than others – they will notice birds perched or flying nearby and take an active interest in them, perhaps freezing in their tracks when they see them; or they may go into the Basenjis "point" with forelegs flat to the ground and rear end up in a crouch; or they may streak toward it and flush it. These are the pups who also most enjoy chasing and retrieving a ball. If you take such a pup and train it properly, your chances of having a worthwhile hunting companion are very good.

Basic training should start at a very early age. You should buy your pup and take him home when he is seven to eight weeks old, at which time his nervous system and brain have nearly adult capacity and he can learn to respond to humans. This is the time to establish your relationship with your dog. You are taking the place of his parent, and you can begin his training as a gun-dog now by making your informal play and important part of his discipline .

From the 7th to the 12th week, you should spend as much time with your pup as possible since this is the period when he is most receptive to and retentive of training given. You should feed the dog yourself to build emotional security and establish rapport, give him a definite and preferably a separate place to sleep, and teach him to cope with the frustrations of puppyhood. Through constant repetition the pup first learns his name; then the meaning of a firm "No!" Followed by corrective action; and the "Good Dog" followed by gentle fondling. With firm but loving discipline and plenty of praise, and with patience on your part, at the end of this 12th week your pup will know and respond to his name, will be housebroken; and will be walking nicely with you on leash. Throughout this period, the pup learns the most important lesson – you are the boss, but life can be pleasant when he pleases you. These are the things the pup must learn, and early, for him to be an enjoyable lifetime companion for you, both as a pet and as a hunting dog.

Formal hunting training starts at 12 weeks. From this time until the pup is about four months old, you concentrate on teaching him to Sit, Stay and Come. I won't go into detail here on how to achieve this – there are entire books on the subject and there are obedience schools. I suggest you read up on the subject – the Saunders book is a good one --- and observe the training at an obedience school, then use what you've learned to train your dog yourself at home. The reason for this is that

most obedience schools will not accept a dog until he is six months old, and some obedience trainers use methods which do not work well with Basenjis. Also, the type of obedience training given in many schools results in a stylized formal type of obedience routine which the dog follows only when in the ring and ignores when out of it, especially on the recall (Come). You must teach your dog to respond to the commands Sit, Stay and Come promptly and happily in a field situation, rather than in the rigidly militaristic manner taught in obedience schools. The basic training tool is voice command, and when the dog is responding to that, you teach him to follow also by hand signal and whistle. The hand signal for Sit is given with a closed hand held up with forefinger extended, then dropping the hand and pointing the finger to the ground. The hand signal for Stay is the upraised hand with palm out. For Come, you give the hand signal for Stay and then drop the hand toward the ground simultaneously giving two blasts on the whistle. Obedience to these commands is essential for further training.

Since the Basenji's natural hunting instinct is to find, flush, drive and hold game; you could use this natural instinct together with the commands he now knows and make a pretty good hunting dog out of him. Take him to a field, preferably in an isolated area away from traffic, and of course, one where you expect to find the type of game you want him to hunt. Release him, and he should start exploring the terrain with his nose and eyes. If he takes off out of gun range, give the hand and whistle commands for Come and when he returns, praise him and send him off again with the verbal command "Go On." It won't take him long to learn that you want him to course back and forth in front of you, and the limit of distance he may go. He will also learn through praise that while quartering he is encouraged to indulge his instinct to find game. When he finds it he will naturally burst in and flush it. Since his is within gun range, you have your shot. When you knock

down the game, you may wish to allow your dog to muzzle and mouth it so that he knows what he is after. Some hunters also give their dogs the game's heart, liver, etc., particularly when the hunt is over, to sharpen their hunting desire. (I personally like to work in the field with a dog who is a bit hungry, never with one who has just eaten.) If you take him out and work with him in this fashion with any frequency, before your Basenji is a year old you will have a dog that you can take into the field, knowing that he will find and flush game within gun range for you.

For some hunters, however this may not be enough; so when the dog is responding immediately and correctly to the vocal and visual signals for Sit, Stay and Come; which should be by four months of age, you can start training him to stop in his tracks while running. You may wish to use the obedience school method known as "Drop n Recall," but I do not feel this is effective for field work. I prefer instead a method developed by a gun dog man in which he gets the running dog to "Whoa;" then gradually diminishes the use of the hand signal until the dog is responding to the verbal command Whoa. He uses the command only when game is involved – to stop the dog, steady him on point, preventing him from flushing the bird, and to teach him to honor the point of another dog. When he wishes to stop the dog on occasions when game is not involved he used the command Sit. Once you have taught your dog to stop instantly on command in the field, you are well on your way in "high-school" field training.

To familiarize your dog with the scent and reel and sight of birds, if you haven't an abundance of live game in your area, you can use a training tool made up of a fly rod with a wing attached by a piece of strong string about eight feet long. With this tool and the proper voice and hand commands, you can teach your dog not to rush in on a still bird; to stalk a moving bird; to move in easy' and to freeze (which is about as close as you'll get most Basenjis to come to a point). Using this tool in conjunction with a cap

pistol, you can familiarize your dog with the noise of gun shot while the wing is swirling around in the air above him. With the wing off the rod, you can also start his lesson on retrieving.

The groundwork is now laid – you have a lot more work to do together, but from now on it is mostly in gaining experience in the field.

