



There's Nothing Like A First Bird

One of my wife's and my favorite movies is "50 First Dates" with Adam Sandler and Drew Barrymore.

Being somewhat of a romantic, I have a favorite line in the movie, "There's nothing like a first kiss."

For those of you who have seen the movie, I'm sure you know what I'm talking about. For those who haven't, just think of the first time you kissed your special someone. Remember how fast your heart was beating, how nervous you were, the anticipation of the actual kiss and then the kiss. Oh yeah, "There's nothing like a first kiss."

I've been an upland game hunter for more than 40 years, and I've trained and worked with pointing dogs for most of those years. For a guy who just loves watching a young pup develop into a seasoned bird dog, I have to say, "There's nothing like a first bird."

This past season, my new pup Cota got her first bird—but I'm getting ahead of myself here. This story actually started December 17, 2011, when my best buddy and hunting companion Shiloh, my Brittany, passed away at the age of 15. (Some of you might have read my story, "A New Beginning," in the September 2012 issue of the *Versatile Hunting Dog*.) My heart was broken when Shiloh passed, but, as most of you know, a new pup is the best therapy for a broken heart.

Jumping ahead to April 6, 2012, the sky was blue and the day was warm. My friend, Bruce Collett, and I were driving to pick up my new pup, Duchess Gracie DeCota, a Wirehaired Pointing Griffon. As we headed down the road in my 2005 Ford Excursion, in my hand was a pheasant wing. You see, I believe you can't start a pup on birds too soon, as long as you keep it fun and light.

We arrived at our destination; I tossed the wing on the dashboard and headed out to see my new pup. She took right to me. While I cuddled her against my chest, she licked my neck and warmed my heart. After taking

some time to bond, we climbed into the car and headed to my wife's place of employment. I sat in the passenger seat, rubbing Cota's neck; it wasn't long before she lay fast asleep in my lap.

We arrived at my wife's workplace, parked the car, and let Cota out in the parking lot. Of course, my wife June immediately started loving up Cota; our family was once again complete. I reached into the car, grabbed the wing, and said to my wife and Bruce, "Let's see what she does with the wing." I tossed it about 10 yards out in front of Cota and she took off after it as if she had been born to hunt, which she was. She grabbed the pheasant wing and pranced around, proud as a peacock. Awesome; her first exposure to a bird was a major success. I knelt down and started praising her, "Good girl, good girl." Bruce grabbed the camera and said, "We need a picture of this: Cota at eight weeks old with her first retrieve."

From that day on, Cota and I worked almost every day on different aspects of training. Our sessions were only about 10-15 minutes long; some days had two sessions. I started out using a fishing pole with a pheasant wing, which helped bring out her natural instinct to point. From there, we moved to using live pigeons in an electronic bird launcher. This enabled her to use her nose to locate the bird and enhanced her ability to hold point for longer periods. Each time we hid the bird launcher I would ask, "Cota, where's the bird, where's the bird?" After only a few days, when I asked, "Where's the bird?" Cota would go directly into her searching mode; she loved it.

Other sessions consisted of playing fetch with a small round dowel, then with a puppy bumper and finally with a large canvas dummy covered with bird scent. Whenever I tossed any of these items out, I always said, "Fetch girl, fetch." I knew we were training, but Cota thought we were just having fun, and it was fun!

To introduce Cota to the sound of a gun, I had kept a number of large bubble wraps from items I purchased over the years. At first, my sons Michael and Nick would stand about 20 yards away with these bubbles. As I played with Cota, my sons would pop the bubbles. Each day my sons would move a bit closer, popping a bubble wrap, while Cota and I played. Soon they were right next to us, popping bubbles over her head. From there, we started popping the bubbles while she ate her food. Soon she began to associate the loud popping sound with fun time and food.

Our next phase of training was to put all the above-mentioned items together. I placed Cota in the back of my Excursion and hid the bird launcher with the pigeon inside. My son Michael had the dummy that had pheasant scent behind his back while my other son Nick carried a bubble pack. When we were ready to go, Cota was let out of the car on a lead. "Where's the bird, where's the bird?" was all I had to say and Cota went into her search mode. When she located the bird and locked on point, I praised, "Good girl, good girl."

I then pressed the electronic release button and out went the pigeon; my son Michael threw the dummy at the bird in flight. (Michael was a pitcher on his baseball team, so that dummy got pretty close to the bird.) Nick then popped the bubble wrap right behind Cota. Cota had seen the bird fly away, but she had also seen the dummy fall from where it was flying. I released the lead and said,

"Fetch, girl, fetch." Out she went; she grabbed the dummy and headed right back to me. When she reached me, I asked her to give and she released the dummy into my hand. Perfect!

After that day, whenever I placed Cota in the car and she saw the electronic launcher, she would turn circles of excitement until the bird was hidden and she was released. Things were coming together. Whenever she would break point, the bird would fly and no dummy would be thrown and therefore no retrieve made. She soon learned to hold until the bird flew, never again breaking point. We were well on our way.

Jumping ahead to November 12, 2012, it's a perfect day for hunting pheasants. The blue sky is spotted with white clouds, the air is crisp yet moist, there's a slight breeze and the ground still has the morning's dew resting on the native grass. I'm with my sons Michael and Nick; it is our first time out this year and Cota's first time ever.

My heart is beating fast and my nerves are in high gear. Excited? You bet. For those of you who have been bitten by the hunting bug, you know it never changes...the anticipation of the hunt. But today there's even more anticipation; how will Cota do on her first outing?

The boys and I put on our gear and unsheath our shotguns. I open the rear hatch on the Excursion and let Cota out. She runs around, checking out this new environment. As we begin to walk the field, I say the words Cota has come to love, "Where's the bird, Cota; where's the bird?" You can actually see the light come on in Cota's facial expression and body language; oh boy, you mean we're here to find birds; yippy!

She works the field like an excited puppy, searching all over and constantly checking with me. The look on her face says, is this okay, dad, can I keep frolicking about? I just keep smiling and say, "Good girl Cota; where's the bird; where's the bird?" We work about three-fourths of the field with no action. I'm hoping she doesn't get discouraged and give up the hunt.

Then it happens; there is a sudden change in her body language. She has scent and has made game. My heart rate increases and I say



to my sons, "Watch the dog, boys. It looks like she's on a bird." We can all see the intensity increase in her movements. She is definitely getting close to something. Then, bam! She locks up. What a beautiful first point; it's not the most stylish, but nevertheless beautiful.

As we approach, guns at the ready, I softly say, "Whoa, girl; whoa." Before I can get the last whoa out, an explosion of color erupts from the ground. The pounding wings of a rooster pheasant fill the air. My shotgun comes to my shoulder all on its own; as the barrel swings through the bird, I say to myself, "Don't miss; please don't miss." I slap the trigger and feel the recoil. At the same time, I hear the shots from my sons and watch the bird fold in flight and fall toward the ground. We got it!

Cota breaks point at the shots and is on her way to her first retrieve. I keep prompting her, "Fetch girl; fetch." She reaches the bird and stops. Oh no, I think; she's not going to pick it up. She looks at the bird and because it is so large, she is not sure what to do; "Fetch girl; fetch." She reaches down and grabs the bird by the neck; she's figured out how to pick it up!

Watching her come toward us, I have to smile. The pheasant's tail feathers drag on the ground, the wings hang down and the legs

dangle, but Cota is not going to let go. She's got her first bird and she is going to bring it back to her family, whatever it takes.

Not knowing where to go, she goes to the closest person to her, my son Michael, and stops with the bird hanging from her mouth. I was prepared for this moment; my camera was ready and I had been snapping pictures as this story unfolded.

As I stood in the field, sun on my shoulders and the breeze in my face, I thought to myself, how much more can a father ask? My sons and I are out in the open fields, spending quality time together. My pup is discovering a new world, one that is in her genes, and I'm as excited on this bird as I was on my first bird more than 40 years ago.

God willing, Cota will point and retrieve hundreds more birds and I'll be there, thrilled to witness each one. But I'll never forget this moment because, for a romantic like me, there's nothing like a first kiss, and there's certainly nothing like a first bird.

Authors Note: On April 7, Cota took her Natural Ability Test and received a maximum score of 112 points and a Prize I.

NAVHDA Test Results

ST CROIX

Natural Ability
BRICKYARD'S REBEL WHISKEY
CAMKOTA THE CONTENDER
CAMKOTA'S IRON MAN
CAMKOTA'S STARMAN
DOUBLE GUNS HAIR TRIGGER
GROUSE POINT'S GERTIE
GROUSE POINT'S HE A LUMBERJACK
GROUSE POINT'S SHOWGIRL
NORTHWOODS AMAZING GRACE
OXBOW'S DIONYSUS

Breed	Mo - Yr	Pts	Prz
GS	12.67	112	I
GS	15.17	112	I
SP	15.17	73	None
SP	15.17	112	I
GS	6.63	110	I
GS	13.30	112	I
GS	13.30	112	I
GS	13.30	112	I
GS	13.30	112	I
BS	12.70	112	I
PP	11.17	104	II

2013-0109

Owner
KENNETH M BRIERTON
MARY E CAMPBELL
MARY E CAMPBELL
PAMELA S FOLZ
R CAREY MC MILLAN
PATRICK PITTMAN
R CAREY MC MILLAN
PAT OLSON
ANGELIA JESKA-VENNIE
DR JEROME M COLLETTI

TESTES: NEUTERED

JUDGES: JEFFREY S RHODES, ANGELA L COENEN, WALTER J RICHARDSON

ST CROIX

Utility Test
ELK RUN YUKON JACK
LAKEVIEWS JAGER BOMB
SHARP SHOOTERS HYPNOTIC HANK IN HD
SHARP SHOOTERS LADIES MAN
TAG ALDERS NIGHT STALKER
TOP SHELF'S KEG IN THE KLOSET

Breed	Mo - Yr	Pts	Prz
BB	3.26	198	I
GS	2.49	194	I
GS	3.03	197	II
GS	5.15	204	I
GS	2.81	204	I
GW	3.06	197	II

2013-0110

Owner
MATTHEW S LURKEN
DAN ROSENBAUM
JACK W WEBBER
CLYDE E VETTER
CLYDE E VETTER
RICK A FRISCH

JUDGES: JOSEPH M RAIA, SCOTT C SEMRAD, CHARLES L CASANOVA

ST CROIX

Natural Ability
ASPEN GLO FINN
BLUESTEM TRACHER
DOUBLE GUNS EDELWEISS
ELK RUN DANIELSON
ELK RUN FEARLESS SHADOWFAX
GROUSE POINT'S ARGOS
RIPSNORTER'S DELTA LOLA
SHARP SHOOTERS NAUGHTY NORAH
THUNDERHILL'S CYCLONE LACEY

Breed	Mo - Yr	Pts	Prz
GR	12.10	101	II
GR	15.17	98	III
GS	6.67	108	I
BB	14.83	112	I
BB	9.47	107	I
GS	12.37	106	I
PP	14.57	112	I
GS	14.83	110	I
GW	11.03	112	I

2013-0111

Owner
TRAVIS H WAGNER
SUSAN L DAVY
SAM CHAPINSON
STEPHEN A EVANS
MATTHEW S LURKEN
JOEL HEUSCHELE
CHRIS S BENJAMIN
RALPH K SOBOKOWICZ
KEN JONES

JUDGES: JEFFREY S RHODES, ANGELA L COENEN, WALTER J RICHARDSON

ST CROIX

Utility Test
FIN RENARD IRON MAN
GROUSE POINT'S COCO OF DAVENPORT
GUNSLINGER'S BUFFALO BILL CODY
INWOOD PINES EBENEZER
SHARP SHOOTERS HIT THE ROAD

Breed	Mo - Yr	Pts	Prz
PP	2.31	192	II
GS	3.13	198	I
GS	4.27	201	I
GS	2.48	139	None
GS	4.04	177	III

2013-0112

Owner
JAMES T KENNY
ERIC GRAHAM
ROSS GOERDT
CHRISTOPHER A BAKER
MICHAEL RANUM

JUDGES: JOSEPH M RAIA, SCOTT C SEMRAD, CHARLES L CASANOVA

ST CROIX

Natural Ability
BORDER COUNTRY'S DISTRICT 11
INDIAN SUMMER'S AZZO LUCA
SHARP SHOOTERS DEUCE'S WILD
UPLAND MASTER'S BUDDY

Breed	Mo - Yr	Pts	Prz
GS	14.17	108	I
PP	14.17	112	I
GS	15.27	77	None
GS	15.10	112	I

2013-0113

Owner
MARK LUKONEN
KENNAN BELL
ERIC MARTIN
ZACH WAGNER

JUDGES: JOSEPH M RAIA, SCOTT C SEMRAD, WALTER J RICHARDSON

ST CROIX

Natural Ability
GROUSE POINT'S MILKA
Utility Preparatory Test
STELLAR VISTA BOREAL FOREST
Utility Test
FIN RENARD IRON MAN
TOP SHELF'S KEG IN THE KLOSET

06/16/2013			
Breed	Mo - Yr	Pts	Prz
GS	13.37	112	I
Breed	Mo - Yr	Pts	Prz
GR	1.57	157	II
Breed	Mo - Yr	Pts	Prz
PP	2.31	194	II
GW	3.07	204	I

JUDGES: JEFFREY S RHODES, ANGELA L COENEN, CHARLES L CASANOVA

RED RIVER VALLEY

Natural Ability
BENTLEY HEGE-HAUS SOLEM
TEETH: MISSING 305&405 - COAT JUDGED DRY & USED BIRD AT WATER
DAKOTA'S MIGHTY SLICK ANNIE
USED BIRD AT WATER
JOSIE V GREIF
MISSOURI RIVER BANDIT
MISSOURI RIVER RAZOR
MOCHA'S SERGEANT BOONE
PAGLIACCI KIZMAR WICKED GOOD
STONEWALL'S TOP SHELF BLITZKRIEG
COAT HAS NO FURNISHINGS
TAIL FEATHER'S MOSSY OAK MADCHEN
THREE PAWS CAVALIER
TEETH: MISSING 305&405

Breed	Mo - Yr	Pts	Prz
GS	6.67	67	None
GS	14.00	92	III
GS	15.70	98	None
GS	15.20	95	II
BS	17.03	112	Eval
GS	14.37	112	I
VI	15.37	91	II
GW	9.33	112	I
GS	14.07	92	None
GW	10.70	108	I

JUDGES: TRAVIS R MILLER, DARIN W TOLZIN, DAN L PFORR

KETTLE MORAINÉ

Natural Ability
VIMARS STRAIGHT SHOOTSMOOTHBORE
Utility Test
SEEFEST BALDUS
THUNDERHEAD'S AURORA BOREALIS
THUNDERHEAD'S LAST CHANCE
TEETH: EXTRA 205 & MUTILATED GAME
THUNDERHEAD'S OUTRAGEOUS OTTO
WALL CANYON DESATOYA DREAMS

07/13/2013			
Breed	Mo - Yr	Pts	Prz
VI	10.81	108	II
Breed	Mo - Yr	Pts	Prz
LM	2.66	184	II
GS	4.15	201	I
GS	3.56	174	None
GS	4.15	185	II
VI	4.97	174	III
E, ANGELA L COENEN, WALTER J			

JUDGES: TRAVIS J MCKENZIE, ANGELA L COENEN, WALTER J RICHARDSON

KETTLE MORAINÉ

Natural Ability
ASPEN GLO FRIEND OF MINE
TEETH: MISSING 305 & OVERSHOT
BILSTAR CATHERINE ROSS
CLADDAGH'S DUAL BARREL
CLADDAGH'S DUAL FATE
CLADDAGH'S DUAL THREAT
CLADDAGH'S MOONLIGHT MAGIC
CR'S OTIS IS OUT HUNTING
DARTH VADA DE ALESSANDRO
SHOWDOWN'S PIED PIPER
ZEKE MAX VOM STRAUSS
COAT LACKS FURNISHINGS

Breed	Mo - Yr	Pts	Prz
GR	13.06	105	II
SM	15.23	108	I
GW	9.55	112	I
GW	9.55	104	III
GW	9.55	110	I
GW	12.29	108	I
WM	15.00	107	II
BF	9.39	110	I
GS	12.03	112	I
GW	9.68	108	II

JUDGES: TRAVIS J MCKENZIE, ANGELA L COENEN, WALTER J RICHARDSON

2013-0114

Owner
STEVE BECKEN
Owner
DAN R SHELTON
Owner
JAMES T KENNY
RICK A FRISCH

2013-0115

Owner
JACOB SOLEM
MATTHEW M BIES
BRENT A JAMES
DONALD R DEBUHR
DONALD R DEBUHR
ALLISON M MELBY
JEFF S BOSAK
TYLER B SHOBERG
STACEY L HAUFF
LEVI JOHNSON

2013-0116

Owner
MATTHEW P TEPP
Owner
MICHAEL F MARSH
RONALD J STOTT
JASON GILLETTE
ROBERT B NADLER
SHERYLE J TEPP

2013-0117

Owner
MICHAEL S KORDUCKI
PATRICIA A ROSS
JOEL H DOBERPUHL
COURTNEY J VOGEL-BASTIAN
MELISSA M WENDT
DARREN D DEBLACK
BENNY NICHILLO
BRANDON W BRUNNER
TIM CARVENOUGH
JOHN W ANTONETTI