

A Very Different Game!

I recently attended an event at a hunting club called a “Peg Shoot.” It is difficult to explain but I will give it a try.

This hunt club establishes 25 shooting locations, or “pegs” on its land. Each location is designated by a numbered stake, or a numbered bucket (the peg). The pegs can be in a horseshoe configuration, or a circle, or an “S” curve or whatever suits the terrain. The pegs are about 40 yards apart and two gunners are set up at each peg.

Here is where I come in. They need retrievers and handlers to collect the birds shot. So, at least one dog/handler pair is assigned to each pair of gunners. This is the second peg shoot I have participated in, thanks to my friend Susan Kleusner from MN who invited me to both events. This time, I took my Master Hunter, Scarlett.

Once things get started, it can be pretty chaotic. Imagine 50 gunners shooting in different directions, and then 25-30 dogs with their handlers all blowing whistles and shouting commands over the din of the shotguns. Everyone is very safety conscious with that many guns around and the dog handlers working around the guns. We all had ear protection and the gunners I was working with were very conscious of my position and Scarlett’s whereabouts during the whole event. With the chaos and trying to make sure all the birds are collected, sometimes the dog handlers get in the line of fire.

So here’s how it works. Bird handlers are positioned around the course, behind cover, with crates of pheasants and pigeons. An air horn is blown to designate the start of each round, the birds are released and the shooting begins! After about 20 minutes, the air horn sounds again. That means weapons down and emptied and the gunners move four pegs farther down the course to set up again. The dog and handler stays with the gunners, not the peg. The rotation to different pegs is to allow all the gunners equal opportunity with varying wind conditions and terrain.

While the gunners are relocating, what I call the “body wagon” makes the rounds. This is an ATV with a trailer on skis used to collect the shot birds. After everyone is settled into their new locations, another horn sounds to start the next round and the process continues.

Some of the birds have ribbons tied on their legs. The ribbons may list a prize for the lucky shooter, or may just say “loser.” Everyone tries to down a ribbon bird for a chance at the prize.

At this club, they released pheasants and pigeons. It was fairly windy so even though the actual temperature was in the high 20s, it was quite cold. There was snow cover and areas where the snow had drifted a couple of feet deep. Other areas had a crust on the snow from melting and re-freezing which makes it tough going for the dogs.

I have to say that it took Scarlett a couple of pegs to figure out what was going on! She was trying to watch all the birds going down around her—she could easily see three pegs—so it was a bit tough to get her to focus on the birds I wanted her to retrieve. We are supposed to retrieve the birds shot by “our” gunners. A couple of times, I sent her to retrieve one of our birds, only to have a dog from a neighboring peg beat her to the bird. Then the challenge was to call her off a bird she saw go down. That is a tough thing to do!

In a perfect world, the dogs from neighboring pegs wouldn't infringe on “our” turf or birds, but in the chaos it is often hard to tell who shot the bird, or the bird drops in another peg's area, or the dog from the other peg breaks in all the excitement. I can happily say that Scarlett did not break even with all the chaos. One of the other handlers stated that one thing was for sure—with all the peg shoots she takes her dogs to, her dogs are all steady as a rock. It is a great training opportunity in that sense, but the rest of it makes for some sloppy work. You want to get the birds as quickly as possible, so sometimes the handling isn't very pretty.

It is all over in about two hours, but the time goes fast with all the excitement and chaos. When it was all said and done, Scarlett retrieved about 30 birds, mostly pheasants. The last peg was the best location for the gunners we were supporting—they got 12 pheasants and four pigeons that Scarlett happily retrieved.

Some of the dog handlers are avid hunters themselves and they use this as another opportunity for the dogs to get some work. Others don't hunt at all, but want to keep their dogs in shape for hunt tests and take advantage of the fresh birds. Any way you look at it, the dogs have a great time, they serve a useful purpose and the birds aren't lost or wasted.

The club cleans the pheasants and freezes the breast meat for future club events. The gunners and handlers are treated to a wonderful lunch of pheasant, jambalaya and other treats. The pheasant breasts were wrapped around jalapeno peppers, wrapped in bacon and slow cooked-- an excellent compliment to the spicy jambalaya!

I know Scarlett enjoyed her Christmas present. It was worth the drive and the cold to watch her work and enjoy herself so much!

Happy training!

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