

A photograph of a person in hunting gear, including a hat and a bright orange vest, walking through a field of tall, dry grass. A dog, possibly a pointer or similar breed, is in the foreground, looking towards the person. The background shows a line of trees and a clear sky.

VERSATILE HUNTING DOG

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a question of
HONOR

training a “WATER DOG” on a PADDLEBOARD

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One of the most challenging aspects of training a versatile hunting dog is the wide range of skills at which the dog must become proficient—including field work, tracking, and water work. The traditional tools for training a dog to hunt and track upland game on land are well established, but many difficulties remain when teaching a young dog to work in the water. Some trainers of the pure retrieving breeds that focus almost exclusively on water work recommend doing all the skills training on land, only moving the dog into water once obedience and retrieving are fully established on dry ground¹. The basic logic is that on land, the trainer can stand up, move around much more easily, and readily reward or correct the dog as needed during training. However, once the dog enters the water, the connection between dog and trainer is much weaker given humans' poor swimming abilities and the tendency for trainers to remain on shore, physically separated from the dog by the water. If one could overcome these limitations, then training a “water dog” would be much simpler.

The stand-up paddleboard (SUP) offers a unique solution to these dog training challenges. By allowing the trainer to maneuver easily, even in shallow water, and to maintain a fully standing position throughout training, the SUP greatly improves

1. Mike Stewart (2012) *Sporting Dog and Retriever Training: The Wildrose Way*. New York, NY: Universe Publishing.



one's ability to stay connected with a versatile hunting dog in the water. A standing posture is especially useful when training a young dog to work, since it projects control of the situation and commands more respect from the young dog than does sitting low to the water in a kayak, canoe, or other boat. Furthermore, the large, dry, flat surface of an SUP provides an ideal platform for interacting with the dog out of the water without having to return to shore. In fact, most dogs react to being on an SUP in the middle of the water with the same cautious attention that makes elevated training tables so popular on land.

The initial introduction of a pup to water is usually best accomplished with the dog's trainer getting into very shallow water with the animal in a stress-free and playful manner, but one soon finds that there is a very large gap between a pup that is willing to wade into shallow water and a true "water dog" that is flying off a dock into deep water and swimming a hundred yards to make a difficult retrieve. It is precisely in that transition where an SUP can provide the most benefit to a training regimen. Just like the pup that finds comfort in having its trainer get into the water with it, most dogs take comfort and gain confidence quickly when their trainer can effortlessly follow them out into deeper water while standing nearby on a paddleboard.

One danger of water work with any young dog that is still learning to swim is the risk of sudden exhaustion, panic, or even drowning. On an SUP, one can easily paddle



alongside the dog at its natural swimming speed. So if the dog begins to tire or accidentally takes in a mouthful of water and panics, it can be pulled onto the board in an instant, even 200 yards from shore. This is not only safer for the dog, but also greatly reduces any psychological trauma that might stem from a mishap while learning to swim, since the dog can be instantly rescued and then quickly returned to the water once it realizes it is safe and has had a chance to rest—all before a durable fear of water can get established.

Overall, SUPs are easy to use, surprisingly stable, less expensive than other watercraft, and provide a comfortable space on which a dog and a trainer can both stand while in the middle of the water. It is the ideal platform for safely training a versatile hunting dog to swim and retrieve in deep water. The dog quickly learns to truly enjoy working in the water with its handler, which is the essence of a real “water dog.”

Note from the author: People often comment how nice it is to have a dog that naturally loves water. I'm guessing that's true, but what they don't know is that my dog's first experience with water at nine weeks was an accidental fall into seawater between a dock and a boat in Sausalito Harbor. He was luckily uninjured and quickly rescued, but it left him terrified of the water for weeks as a young pup. It was all the time on the paddleboard that built the confidence back and allowed him to learn to love the water. I hope it is a training tool that can help other versatile dogs become great retrievers. 🐾

A Few Tips For Stand-Up Paddleboarding With Your Versatile Hunting Dog

1. Don't forget your personal flotation device (PFD), which is required in many states.
2. Make sure you are comfortable balancing on the board and paddling by yourself before you add a dog.
3. The beginner style of soft-topped SUP is best for training a dog (and they cost less!).
4. It is much easier to pull a dog onto an SUP if the dog is wearing a harness or vest with a grab handle or a waterproof collar. If there are powerboats on the waterway, choose hunter orange so the dog is more visible to boaters when it is swimming.
5. Be prepared to occasionally get wet yourself if the dog jumps off the board unexpectedly!