

[A hunter's friend ... is not just a good dog, but a really good dog trainer](#)[News](#)

Written by Carol Pomeday

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This is the season owners of hunting dogs wait for all year.

Whether the dog is a novice or seasoned veteran, owners say working with the animal brings as much pleasure, if not more, than shooting the prey.

"I don't hunt anything that you don't need a dog for. For me, it's not about killing something; it's all about working with the dogs," said Larry Sonntag, owner of Salty Dog Farms, a 90-acre game farm in the Town of Belgium where he trains hunting dogs to retrieve game birds and waterfowl and to sit quietly in blinds and boats.

"I've been hunting with dogs since I was a teenager," he said. "I was probably one of the few people in the UP (Michigan's Upper Peninsula, where he grew up) who didn't hunt deer."

Client Carroll Kieckhefer of the Town of Grafton feels the same way. Three of her Labradors — Jessie, 8, Ginger, 5, and Wicca, 2 — have spent the summer at the farm being trained by Sonntag.

Kieckhefer comes every day not only to work with the dogs in training, but she also brings her seasoned hunting dog, Millie, 11, to refresh her skills. Another Lab, Macbeth, is 14 and prefers staying home.

Kieckhefer, who grew up in Whitefish Bay, started hunting when she was about 12, but only after her father reluctantly acquiesced.

"My father did a lot of upland game hunting and always took the boys, but wouldn't take me," she said.

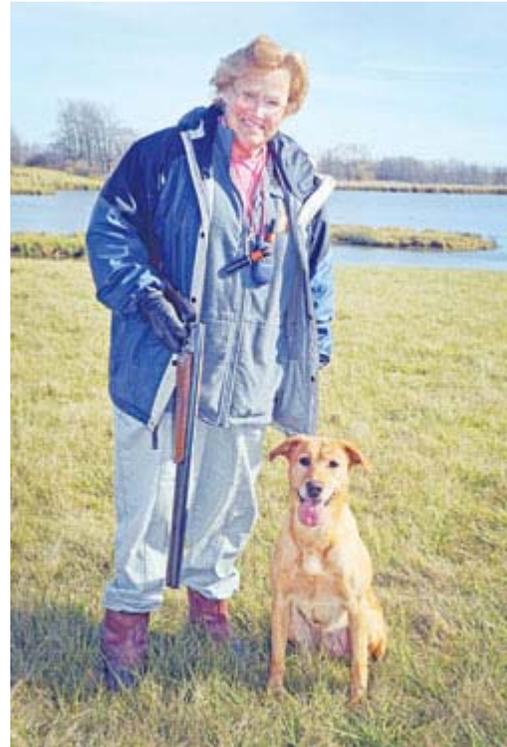
"He used my dogs and said he couldn't get them to do what he wanted. I asked what he did. When he told me, I told him I trained them different. He let me come along to handle the dogs. I had been training the dogs for hunting, but he didn't believe I could hunt with them. It wasn't supposed to be a girl's sport."

She said there are still times she's not invited for a family hunt.

"My brothers are up north hunting now, but I wasn't invited. It was men only," she said. "I go out whenever someone lets me go."

Which is as often as she wants, Sonntag said, because the hunting party she goes with gets to use Kieckhefer's dogs.

Jessie has achieved master status in AKC hunt tests and Ginger has senior status. She has one more test to pass to earn her master title.





When Kieckhefer isn't at Sonntag's farm, she can often be found trapshooting at the Saukville Gun Club.

Kieckhefer, who moved to the Town of Grafton 10 years ago, learned about Sonntag from another dog owner five years ago. Her previous trainer was too harsh with Millie, she said, and the dog no longer wanted to hunt.

"Another trainer almost ruined her," Sonntag said. "The dog was punished for doing anything wrong, so it got to the point she didn't like to hunt. Now, she loves to hunt and is a junior AKC retriever. It's all about communication."

Communication is something Sonntag can talk about for hours. In addition to training dogs, he is a certified master practitioner in neuro-linguistic programming, a behavioral-modification technique initially developed to help people overcome phobias.

He uses similar principles to teach dogs to respond to non-verbal cues.

"The dog's language is body language. They don't really know what the word 'sit' means, but they know what the signal means," Sonntag said.

He uses remote training collars set at the lowest level to get the dog's attention if it's moving in the wrong direction or not responding to a signal.

"The collar is a signal that we're going hunting," Sonntag said. "I often don't use the remote at all, but I have it with me."

His signals are mostly hand and body movements — such as pointing and stepping in the desired direction. For advanced dogs, the signals may be as subtle as a nod of the head or even a look with the eyes.

The dogs are trained not to move until their names are spoken.

On a recent sunny, crisp day, diversion birds were used to train dogs. One bird would be tossed with a gunshot, then another one tossed and "shot" from the other side of the field. Sonntag would send the dog to retrieve the second bird, bring it back, then go for the first one.

Experienced dogs constantly looked to where the first bird landed while retrieving the second bird, while younger ones sometimes had to be directed to the first bird.

The dogs were always praised for bringing back the bird, even if it took a little coaxing.

"The reward for retrievers is built in. Retrieving the bird is what they want," Sonntag said.

Sonntag also does obedience training to correct problems owners are having with their dogs, such as barking too much, jumping on people, jerking on the leash or not minding.

"In dog training, the saying goes, 'It's easier to train the dog than the owner,'" he said.

"Most of the problems are because the owner doesn't research the breed and learn what it was bred to do. All dogs were

bred to be helpers, to help man with work.”

Beagles, for instance, were bred to bark and flush a rabbits from its hole. The rabbit would lead the dogs away from the nest, but eventually circle back home. The hunter could rest until the barking became louder and be ready to shoot when the rabbit returned, Sonntag explained.

“I can get the dog to bark less, but it will always bark,” he said.

Dogs are pack animals and their personalities determine where they are most comfortable in the pack, he said. The owner must establish that he or she is the leader of the pack, Sonntag said.

“A middle-of-the-pack dog will become aggressive to protect its pack if it perceives no one else is doing that,” he said.

He has advised owners to put down a dog if he is unable to control its aggression.

“That’s rare, but some dogs are wired wrong, just like some people,” he said. “If I can’t control it with my training, the owner won’t be able to control it.”

When Sonntag decided to board dogs, he trained with TV’s “Dog Whisperer” Cesar Millan’s team in California.

“I knew I would get some dogs with problems I hadn’t dealt with, so I wanted to be prepared. I didn’t train with Cesar, but I trained with people trained by him,” Sonntag said.

Sonntag, who has worked with retrievers for almost 30 years, left his job selling copiers to become a full-time trainer 10 years ago.

“I was tired of wearing a shirt and tie every day. I just wanted to do something different. I think we all dream of making a living with our hobbies,” he said. “I was fortunate enough to be able to do it and had the support of my wife and friends.”

Sonntag and his wife Elizabeth Orelup, an attorney with Quarles & Brady law firm, bought their farm nine years ago. His wife works from their home a few days a week.

Sonntag usually has a dozen dogs boarded for hunting, competition or obedience training. The dogs stay on the farm two to six months. Owners are encouraged to come as often as they want to work with their dogs. They are required to attend an end-of-training orientation to learn how to maintain the training at home.

Some, like Kieckhefer, come almost every day. Others come on weekends and some only show up for the required session, Sonntag said.

“I guarantee every hunting dog I train for life,” he said. “It’s an easy guarantee because none ever come back.”

Obedience dogs are guaranteed for the issues corrected. Often a telephone session is enough to correct problems that arise, he said.

Information on Salty Dogs Farm is on the Web site www.saltydogfarms.com.