HUNTING GAMES – GROWING TOGETHER

🎾 Game Day 41 – Hunting

Give your dog the satisfaction to hunt for food and items, using their incredible sense of smell.

🎾 Why This Game Matters

Using their sence of smell is the most rewarding behaviour for a dog. We can utilise this desire to hunt together, still being focused on us while searching for the food or item.
This skill is very useful later when the dog hasn't seen the dummy fall and needs to start using their nose to locate and retrieve it.

Furthermore, it is a great game to play together for staying connected on off-leash adventures.

This game focuses on independence, building up confidence to hunt further away from you.

My hunting area is an approx. 6m radius around me. Further than that we go into casting/directional cues.

🎾 What You'll Need

- Your dog
- High-value treats
- Tennis- or rubber balls or small dummies
- Phone on tripod

🎾 Step-by-Step Guide

Use consistent numbered stages across all lessons:

1. Set Up

Find an area with long grass, to hide the food/balls. Start with food initially. Take the direction of the wind into consideration. You want them to be downwind (into the wind) of the retrieve.

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2. Build the Behaviour

- Have your dog standing or sitting next to you
- Allow them to watch you throw the food/ball/dummy into the area immediately around them. Make sure it is obscured
- Repeat the above so there are a few balls/treats/dummies within 1 – 2 metre around your dog
- Say your chosen hunt cue (I use "scatter" for food and "check" for retrieves) and extend your lower arm, body weight slightly downwards
    - Cue – pause – lower arm extension – body weight slightly down
- Praise cheerfully when they find the first hidden treasure
- If you have used a retrieve, reward the return as usual
- Tell your dog when the session is over and they can stop hunting
    - I use the verbal cue "You're finished", then move away from the area, sending my dog of to "go play".

3. Add a Layer

Remain close to your dog when cueing but slowly reduce your body movement so your dog will respond to your verbal cue only.

4. Raise Criteria

When the behaviour is fluent on verbal cue, increase one criteria at a time:

- Move further away from your dog
- Move the dog further away from the hunting area
- Have your dog wait upwind of the hunting area
- With your dog downwind, place the item out without your dog seeing where
- Increase difficulty of the hunting area e.g. scrubs, higher grass etc.
- Change environment
- Increase radius of hunting area

Once your dog is confident with all the above, combine scenarios. Eventually you can send them anywhere to hunt with your verbal cue only.

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Troubleshooting

My dog is not moving off to hunt.

In the beginning stages, make your body movements more pronounced to encourage your dog to hunt. Slowly fade these to a verbal cue & hand signal only.

My dog has trouble finding the ball/dummy.

In the learning phase it is important for your dog to see where you have placed the ball. You can also rub a bit of soft treats into your hand and rub the ball to increase the scent.

My dog is loosing interest or is not retrieving.

Take note of what your dog decideds to do instead. Shorten the exercise by only letting them hunt for a couple of treats/items. Verbally celebrate when they go into hunting and incorperate balance breaks into your session. Increase duration slowly.

Revisit previous games to build more value.

Daily Use

Watching your dog go hunting is a great privilege. You will observe and notice patterns in how they use their environment, identifying their unique hunting style. Over time, they will grow confident to go hunting at a distance.
It is a great game on its own when out and about to meet your dog's needs for seeking and engagement.

Checklist

- Did you record your session?
- Were sessions short and successful?
- Did you increase criteria gradually?
- How does your dog's T.E.M.P look?

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