I have not hunted in years and have never hunted over a dog. But last September I got a new puppy, named Calli, and she is a bird dog. It is in her genes, so now I am taking up hunting for her. And the emphasis is on for her; when asked if I hunt, I tend to answer, "She does."

This spring we joined the North American Versatile Hunting Dog Association (NAVHDA). NAVHDA is centered around encouraging hunters to use dogs that are well-trained in work before and after the shot on land and in the water. Members meet on a regular basis to work together for training their dogs. They will not train your dog for you, but they do share their experience and insight to help you train your dog.

A key feature of NAVHDA is that it has several tests to evaluate the performance of the versatile hunting dog. The tests can be useful for breeders trying to improve certain traits. And some breeders and professional trainers use it as a seal of approval to sell themselves to potential buyers and clients. And ego can certainly play a part in wanting recognition for a Prize I or a Versatile Champion.

But for me, a conversation with Brian White, the president of the local NAVHDA chapter, really captured the meaning of the test. He said that the test is not about the prize, it is about an evaluation to learn what areas of training may need more attention. Does the dog have drive? How is the dog searching a field? Does the dog cooperate and work for the handler? Or how does the dog retrieve? As an evaluation, the test helps us learn what training to work on.

And, despite the "prize" terminology, the NAVHDA test is not a competition. Dogs are judged against a standard. This way the evaluation focuses a dog's growth and improvement.

When I tested her this May, Calli did not prize and really did not do very well. At the time I knew it was too early and she was not ready. She loved wading in the water and would even stretch on her tiptoes to venture into slightly deeper water. But she would not swim. And without swimming, she would not "prize" on the test.

From her test, I learned that she needed more exposure to the water to gain confidence to swim. I also saw that she needed continued exposure to birds. And, although obedience is not part of the test at the puppy level, I could see the need to continue working on her basic obedience.

The monthly NAVHDA training day is good and helpful, and we will continue to benefit from those weekends. But I think Calli will really get the exposure she needs by actually hunting and gaining experience, so we are eagerly awaiting the fall season.

I see a parallel between the NAVHDA test and the mid-year performance meetings that I have with our department heads. Now, please do not get me wrong, employees are not dogs. But I do see a parallel between the NAVHDA test and mid-year performance meeting: they are both an evaluation emphasizing growth and improvement.

For the last year, we have had an ongoing discussion at our department head staff meetings about Great Performance, meaning job performance that is more than just business as usual. The discussion is about bringing out the best in an individual.

Jeff Russell, an adjunct professor at the University of Wisconsin – Madison, presents the Great Performance Cycle. In the early stages of the Great Performance Cycle, we identified the essential functions of the job and discussed goals with an emphasis on improvement. Areas for improvement may be because of a new job responsibility, a change in needs, or simply a need for better performance.

The next step in the Great Performance Cycle is to evaluate performance. This involves asking a series of questions. What worked? What didn't work? Why? What will I keep doing? Or what will I do differently? What help is needed in the future? This is where the mid-year meeting comes in.

The mid-year meeting is mostly a self-evaluation with the department head reflecting on and discussing his or her own performance, identifying both performance to maintain and performance to improve. Together, we discuss organizational support (training, resources, tools, information, etc) that may help future success.

The mechanics of each evaluation may differ, but whether for a versatile hunting dog or a city department head, an evaluation is beneficial feedback on what is going well and should be maintained, on what is missing and needs attention, or on where there is room for growth and improvement.