

Tweaking a dog into a perfect retrieve

This article pertains to hunting dogs who once had an acceptable retrieve and over time the performance has become sloppy. This can be anything from fussing with a bird, dropping it constantly, not bringing it all the way in, and a multitude of other bad habits that have progressed over time. Something major like a pup eating or mangling birds is a case where the trained retrieve program should be applied so as to control the dogs lower jaw action.

Often times the handler is partially the fault for the dogs misconduct. Therefore, a change in your manners and communication has got to change if you desire the pups habits to be altered as well. Altering the handler's mindset is often more difficult than training the dog so this is where we are going to begin.

Verbal communication has got to be direct, have authority, and leave no question as to your desire. We want to have a very compliant partner that has no question in its mind as to what the task at hand is. Therefore when you send your dog in for a retrieve, there will no longer be a two sentence story 'requesting' (asking) Fido to fetch the bird. From here on a single word command should be given with a deep voice inflection and an authoritative tone, such as "Fetch!" The same applies the instant the pup picks up the bird such as using the command "Here!" I personally don't care for the word "Come", because it has a much softer tone with a question like sound. To release the bird into your hand you should have a word of your choosing to drop the bird directly into your hand, we will cover this topic momentarily.

Probably the largest complaints I hear is,... "my dog drops birds 10 -15 ft from me". Premature dropping can be cured by changing your vocal language. If you honestly think about it, the pooch drops the bird when you look directly into his soulful eyes. When you look into your dogs eyes on a retrieve, you have acknowledged compliance, and a task well done. To correct this, where you focus your eyes must change. Where you focus is where you want your pup to stop with the bird. For simplicity, we are going to request a front facing delivery, for the remainder of this article. From now on, as the dog is advancing toward you, only look down at your toes. This sounds easier than it actually is, for the instant you glance up at your pups face, he/she will drop it. Use you peripheral vision to observe your dog's action.

Dropping a bird at your feet is not only perceived and sloppy, but a dropped live bird results in an unnecessary loose bird that can easily take flight or swim back out to open water. Consider the case of a duck hunt. The moment your dog walks up to your feet, we want to establish a firm grip on your bird. To acquire this, using your index finger, briskly tap your dog's muzzle, as if you are trying to jiggle it loose. If he does drop it, in a firm voice expressing your dismay, command fetch. Giving corrections will be covered directly.

Last but not least is your body language. When you initially send your dog don't be in a big hurry. Give the pup time to memorize the fall. Walk over to his side, look at the fall site, and don't allow him to go until you send him, using a tap and a verbal fetch command at the same time. This will accomplish two things. First, if you enforce this habit, your dog will not go for the bird on his own accord. It prevents your dog from breaking and possibly running in front of gun fire. Also, if you are a waterfowl hunter, you don't want your pup leaving the blind early and chasing incoming birds. The second reason it teaches

your dog patience and results in a faster running dog because you were holding him it back. Once the bird is picked up and you are focused looking at your toes, during the initial re-training, slap your leg and lean forward pointing at the ground in front of you. At this point there is absolutely very little doubt exactly what you want from your dog and where.

So, let's put it all together creating a retrieve that simplifies the task for the dog. Now we can institute together our verbal commands, voice inflections, and body language so we are justified in implementing a correction should we receive a refusal.

We are going to imagine we have Fido in our back yard re-training the retrieve. As he is at heeling position, you toss a bird some 10yds or so. You wait a moment so both you and your pup can gain your thoughts. You lean down, focus on the fall, and quietly command "FETCH". (That is all you say) As you notice the bird being picked up, you lean over, point and look at your toes, using you peripheral vision to notice the pup returning. Fighting the urge to make direct eye contact with him, when he comes in, give his muzzle a brisk tap with your index finger. As you are tapping, slowly slide your hand down around the muzzle and grasp the bird with the release command of your choice. This process must be followed in the same manner on every retrieve. You have got to be consistent before you can expect your dog to be consistent.

Now we are in the process of re-training and reversing old habits. So initially, we have got to expect confusion and possible refusals. You must get your point across to your dog that a dropped bird is an unacceptable idea, and a reprimand will promptly follow. As to with your voice, and body language, corrections have got to be consistent as well. We use two different methods. The ear pinch and the nick (momentary) function on an e-collar.

In the case of a dropped bird we begin to express our disapproval with the use of an ear pinch. Though it sounds a bit barbaric, your voice and spontaneous action has more to do with deterring a reoccurrence than any pain you may induce. Say the pup suddenly decides not to pick up the bird. Rush over, grasp his ear with a pinching action between your thumb and index finger and command "Fetch". The first few times I simply pickup the bird place it into his mouth and heel him back to where you we standing and continue with the format. Within a couple of times, as you reach for his ear, you will notice him reaching down and beating you to the bird, rather than the ear pinch. This also applies to a dropped bird at your feet. Later in training, when you are absolutely sure your dog knows what you want and desires as a perfect retrieve and still test you periodically I recommend the use of the e-collar. In this situation we have our clients institute the nick (momentary) function starting at a low setting and often times using the vibration mode on the softer breeds. The nick pulse may have to be instituted 2 -3 times in succession to get your point across due to the low setting.

There are dogs out there that will readily retrieve a toy, feathered bumper, and even a frozen bird but, not a warm freshly killed bird. At this point we are going to address this problem. We are going to break it down into simplicity. Feathered covered bumpers, frozen birds, thawed out birds, and warm birds.

We always want a willing and happy hunting partner so there are specific rules that are going to apply in our training program. A retrieving session with Fido never exceeds a 10 minute time limit. Every effort should end with your pup thinking he is looking for more excitement. That is how we maintain a high level of energy, speed, eagerness. A happy dog is a compliant dog.

Also..., more important than the previous rule is...it is not how many retrieves you do. It is how perfect the retrieves are accomplished. Once my pup absolutely knows exactly what I am demanding of him, I seldom request more than 3-4 retrieves. I strive that all 3 retrieves are done to the best of the dog's ability, and quit right there. You should do the same.

Begin with a task your dog will not have any trouble with. This will familiarize both of you with the retrieve format that will be the foundation for your entire future. Though you may have the impression that it is too simple use a feathered covered bumper and instill your training routine with an object the pup will enjoy for a few lessons.

Inject the frozen bird, along with bumper and phase out the bumper. Be ready to step in if your pup decides to be testy. Do not go to a thawed out bird till you can achieve 3 perfect casts in a row, without a rehearsal. Then using the same standard, introduce the thawed out frozen bird, and finally using a freshly killed bird.

This is a simple step by step process that can be covered in very little time. As soon as your pup realizes you are going to be consistent, be it be your voice, body interaction, or reprimand, your pup will settle into a retrieving of your liking.