

Delivery Problems

This month we address one of our most frequently asked questions. Occasionally, I receive emails from distraught individuals faced with a problem - their pup or young starter abruptly ceasing to retrieve. The dog had been retrieving well but now nothing--either a "no go," "no interest, just runs about," or "goes out but won't pick up the bumper." The mainstream's likely response is, of course, force. But, I disagree. There are better options to try first. The Wildrose philosophy in training is, when faced with a new problem, do not immediately switch to the dark side with a force mentality. Stay patient and teach or motivate first. Most of the questions I receive about the problem of a sudden onset of non-retrieving involve younger pups, 4 to 6 months old or young starters 6 to 8 months. The story line from the writer usually goes like this: "I have been retrieving with my pup for weeks and all of a sudden, he just stopped retrieving, showing no interest." Or "I put my young prospect through hold conditioning, she was retrieving before I began but now she wants nothing to do with the bumper."

We will assume that the dog in question is from a good genetic line of working sporting dogs, dogs demonstrating retrieving characteristics. Like produces like. If the lineage of the pup is unknown or unproven in the field, one has less predictability as to the prospect's potential. Lack of retrieve drive or a poor mouth can be an inherited trait. With this important point put to rest, next I question the pup's age. Often owners, eager to progress with the training of a talented pup, overdo it. Too many repetitious, meaningless retrieves can result in the pup losing interest in the game. To avoid boredom, a pup under five to six months of age really only needs two to three retrieves per session each day. Keep the interest and the enthusiasm high for the retrieve. Give retrieves to reward the dog's best behaviors, not indiscriminately applied and stop retrieving while the pup is still excited about the game, not when interest and enthusiasm wane. So, the second potential source of the non retrieve becomes boredom.

Starters, six to eight months old, can lose interest for repetitive, boring retrieves as well. If a prospect has previously shown talent for retrieving and the enthusiasm is lost, STOP retrieving. Put the dog in timeout for about two weeks with no training activities. It's best that he reside outside in an individual pen, separated from his pack. Provide food and water but no working. When you can see your dog's desire to get out and be with you peaks, take him straight to a new area previously unused in your training. Put out a different type bumper to peak interest. And try for the retrieve. If successful, provide lots of reward and run one more repetition, then that's it. Slowly build the repetition. Boredom can be overcome in the older prospect by:

1. Time out
2. Change circumstances
3. Change locations

4. Change object to be retrieved

Change of Circumstances: Dogs are place oriented. If a young retriever has a bad experience at a particular location (frightened, hurt, excessive correction, etc.), he will repeatedly associate the negative experience with the place. Return to the same place to repeat a training session and the dog could well react negatively.

Change the place for the non retriever. A new location, different time of day and change the routine of the training session. The change itself may well jump start the youngster with new interest.

Change of Reward: In positive reinforcement retriever training, the retrieve is one of four positive reinforcers. The opportunity to retrieve is a motivator to positively reinforce desirable behaviors. If a pup were to lose interest in retrieving, a significant setback occurs. The object must remain desirable for the pup to hold their interest. If a pup begins to show signs of boredom for retrieving, I switch the object:

1. Tennis balls
2. Pigeons (cold game)
3. Feather-laced bumpers
4. Scented balls or bumpers
5. Bumper of a different size or material

Changing the reward as well as the routine may keep interest keen.

Too Much or Improperly Applied Force: The pup with a weak mouth may find himself subject to the handler's misapplication of force. Too much force, improperly-timed force, force applied while the pup was carrying - the list can be a long one. Know this: Wildrose Law #10 - Any application of force applied in the training may result in a latent, often negative, behavior, reaction, or condition in the dog elsewhere. That is you may get results desired with one behavior when force training is applied. But an unpleasant result may appear in the dog elsewhere, sometimes subtle, sometimes abruptly. For instance, the non-retrieve.

1. Never correct your dog when he/she is carrying the bumper.
2. Avoid force fetch. Use the method only as a last resort and then know exactly what you are doing. No experience? See a professional.
3. Be calm and gentle when teaching hold conditioning. Use repetition to build habits with reward. Avoid force and losing patience.

Prevention:

To prevent retrieving problems, lay down a proper foundation.

1. No tug-of-war.
2. No chasing with an object in the pup's mouth.
3. No chew toys.
4. Don't give cold game to the pup too early in training.
5. Never snatch bumpers or objects from the pup's mouth.
6. Encourage hand delivery. Never teach pup to drop and object.

A last consideration. Pups four to six months old lose their baby teeth and the gums become sore. Stop retrieving all together! A pup will pick up the bumper and feel pain, a bad association. Wait until all adult teeth are in before returning to retrieving; just concentrate on obedience and patience during these months.

Welcome New Subscribers:

We have added quite a number of new subscribers to the Wildrose e-training letter recently. The letter has been in existence with monthly updates since 2000. New subscribers interested in catching up a bit on some of our back articles can visit the training archives at www.uklabs.com. Also see our articles and video clips on Ducks Unlimited web page, www.ducks.org. Click on the DU logo at the center of the Wildrose home page and visit DU.

Seminar Dates

May 17, 2008 - Starting Your Pup the Wildrose Way, Wildrose, Oxford

May 31-June 1, 2008 - Training the Wildrose Way, St. Louis, Missouri. Proceeds going to Mississippi Valley Duck Hunters. Contact Dan Patrick at 314-537-1796 or dan.patrick@microsoft.com.

June 20-24 - Starting Your Pup/Basic Retriever/Seasoned Retriever Training for the Upland and Waterfowl Gundog, sponsored by Bozeman Ducks Unlimited, Bozeman, Montana. For more information, contact Jason Baker, jbaker@fnmsmt.com, 406-599-0212.

August 28 to September 1 - Training the Wildrose Way, Sandanona Orvis Shooting

School, Millbrook, New York, 1-day puppy seminar, 2-day basic, 2-day seasoned gundog training. Contact Peggy Long, longp@orvis.com, 845-677-9701.

September 27, 2008 - Starting Your Pup the Wildrose Way, Wildrose, Oxford

October 25 and 26, 2008 - 2nd Annual Wildrose European Driven, Double Gun and Retriever Classic, Wildrose, Oxford.