

Training Newsletter
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Wildrose Kennel

Steadiness
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Among the most important attributes of a quality retriever is steadiness to shot and fall of game. Little else can spoil an otherwise promising wing shoot quicker than an uncontrollable, disruptive and otherwise, untrained dog who associates gunfire as a reason to immediately run in after a retrieve. An unsteady dog cannot be considered properly trained as it is disregarding the command sit. Many individuals simply do not give equal billing and attention to conditioning steadiness in their training process as compared to other skills such as marking, water work or handling. Yet, the fact is, steadiness is a fundamental element to the success of other gundog skills such as marking, honoring, flushing and sitting quiet in the blind while birds work. Actually, steadiness is being under control at all times despite distractions, diversions or temptations.

Steadying a dog is not achieved through a few quick lessons drilled in an enthusiastic dog as a secondary consideration. Steadiness conditioning should be interwoven into the ongoing training process beginning quite early and progressing throughout the dog's entire life. It is unwise to just one day decide to steady-up our prospect. By following a logical progression in training, one can develop a naturally steady dog without interfering with retrieving desire or use of unnatural force methods.

First, consider the preliminaries:

Steadiness is an extension of obedience. Insure compliance with obedience command prior to enforcing steadiness.

- Avoid too many meaningless retrieves for pups. They only serve to over-excite the dog. Keep retrieves between 2 to 4 per week in pre-training; 6 to 8 marks per week in early basic training and reduce marking drills to perhaps one session in five as training progresses. Concentrate on memories, site blinds, diversions,
- Don't expose your retriever prospects to hunting situations until basic training is completed. Ideally the age for a pup's first hunt should exceed 12 months allowing greater maturity.
- Too many birds at a young age over-excite pups. Keep bird exposure limited to brief sessions re-introduced periodically throughout basic training. Avoid "bird crazy" training sessions unless you have a very low-drive dog needing motivation.

- Include dogs in group work where the retriever must remain patient, still and quiet while honoring other dogs. The quietest dogs gets the retrieve, thereby dogs soon realize that patience brings about the reward of a retrieve.
- Make the association between gunfire and something to retrieve the best kept secret possible between you and your young dog. The connection will be realized quickly enough. Train young dogs to sit at the sound of gunfire.
- Pick up 75% of all downed birds yourself the first hunting season keeping the rookie tied in the blind or at heel to avoid mishaps. We do not want to reward running in with a retrieve thereby reinforcing negative behavior.

Training Steadiness

Approach the conditioning of steadiness from 3 positions. These concepts apply equally to young prospects and to seasoned pro retrievers in need of a bit of a tune up.

Denials

The dog does not get the mark, retrieve or bird. Either you or another dog picks up the fall. A gundog must realize two things: 1. All retrieves are not theirs and 2. Whining, creeping, or movement will not result in a retrieve; only patience results in a retrieve. Denials also apply to hunting situations. A pup normally should pick up only 25% of the falls they encounter their entire first season. For the old pro, a couple of denials are equally effective in maintaining steadiness. Use a second dog or pick up the fall yourself.

Delays

Don't send the dog on a retrieve too quickly after a shot or fall. Let time pass, move about, talk, reload, then send. Hone patience. Initially, with a pup, the delay will only be brief. Later, the duration between fall and release expands. In training, the young dog may be actually heeled away and re-sent from another position. With the aged dog delays on a hunt can be quite extensive, even to the point of dropping additional birds before all are retrieved.

Diversions

Effectively ignoring diversions or distractions, whether in the blind or when completing a retrieve, is actually a derivative of steadiness. Steadiness includes quietly honoring other working dogs, ignoring secondary falls on a retrieve without switching, handling flushing birds, and not pursuing off game and remaining undisturbed by other hunters and their gunfire. Steady dogs can manage temptations while remaining focused on their job.

Steadiness conditioning by no means should be entrenched at the peril of retrieving desire. This need not be the case if the dog has natural retrieving instinct, the conditioning occurs progressively with minimal force, and the process is begun at the early stages of training.

Remember, control coupled with keenness and natural ability are the desirable qualities of a fine shooting dog. Our training methods must be structured to accomplish this goal.

Steadiness methodology will be discussed in our next feature covering:

1. the beginner
2. basic fundamentals and group dynamics
3. walk ups
4. substitution for marking
5. distractions: birds, balls and gunfire
6. pre-season conditioning drills