

**Wildrose Kennel
Training Newsletter
Mike Stewart
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What Not To Do

A question frequently asked is how long will it take to finish my retriever as a proper gundog. The answer....it depends. Realistically, I don't think you can expect to have a seasoned retriever, one would consider finished, until they are 3 years old providing each of the following steps is properly completed. Any snags or postponements can extend this estimate. Steps in developing an excellent retriever include:

- Pup selection
- Pup socialization
- Pup pre-training conditioning
- Basic training around 6 months old (4 to 5 months)
- First hunting season
- Advanced retriever training (3 to 5 months)
- Second season
- Second advanced training sequence (3 months)
- Third season

Around the climax of the third season you should have an honest, reliable retriever of upland game and waterfowl.

The first key in getting the finished dog of your dreams is to buy the best puppy or started dog candidate you can find. This will be the best money you can spend. The right pup will save you hours in training. At some point I will discuss how not to pick a pup, but to pick litters/breeders. For now, you must remember, "garbage in, garbage out," and "you get what you pay for." Good pups don't cost, they will pay dividends in ease of training, health, and natural ability passed on through genetics.

This issue is focused on socialization and pre-training. I am not going to expound on what to do in these two phases at this time. We will save these discussions for a later issue and some of the tips I will put forth can now be seen on the Drake page of my website, www.uklabs.com. We will return to puppy selection, socialization and pre-training tips at a later point.

This issue is to put to the front somewhat out of desperation. I entitled it, "What Not to Do" in the pup's early months because each of the disastrous activities I list are conditions I have been faced with when pups arrive at Wildrose to begin basic training. Owners begin to toy with their pups between 2 and 6 months in a good faith effort to ready the pup for the real world and because the pups are fun to play with. Socialization is fun for the owner—which is why they bought the pup in the first place, to enjoy the interaction with the

pup during these first months. But there is a proper way to accomplish this.

The misguided attempts to socialize and train the new pup sometimes damages the pup in undetected ways that will complicate and slow training processes in the future. Things that occur in the pup's early life often must be untrained by the trainer or owner in the future. This has many trainers telling clients "do nothing with your pup before you send him to trainers. Just let him be a pup." They advise this because it is easier to deal with a wild, uncontrollable pup who has a clean slate versus one that has problems entrenched during his highly impressionable adolescent months.

Actually, the socialization and pre-training development of your pup prior to formal basic training is quite simple and not time consuming. What we want to explore this month, though, is what not to do. Correcting these avoidable problems will drastically lengthen the time it will take you to get that finished retriever. So don't go there.

And now... The Don'ts of Puppy Conditioning

1. Too many retrieves. Nothing is to be gained by repeatedly throwing objects for the pup to retrieve. If you have selected that properly bred pup, the retriever desire is there genetically as is marking, delivery, and birdiness. This is what you paid for when you bought the pup, hopefully. Too many retrieves at early ages just promotes:
 - Hyperactivity and excitement
 - Boredom, if overdone
 - Running about with the object or dropping it in pursuit of more interesting endeavors, both resulting from boredomA couple of short retrieves with a soft bumper or sock per week in a confined area are enough. That's right, wingshooters of the world, 2-6 retrieves per week and not more than 2 per session. Let the stoning begin if it must. Drake thus far at 5 months gets no more than 4 retrieves a week!
2. Tug-of-war is a horror to fix when you later expect nice delivery of your bird. Pull nothing from your pup's mouth or do things which promote hard mouth. I actually saw a film on the market that recommends this—frolicking practice to increase desire! This is a NEVER.
3. Allowing pups to play with and chew on bumpers to increase their desire and regard for the bumper—NUTS!
4. Free swimming in swimming pools or ponds. Uncontrolled and unrestricted swimming will produce pups that know no difference when it's time for water work. He may decide to hit the water for a refreshing dip when the moods strikes him....right in the middle of your training session. And how does the handler respond? You can find him running the bank in a frinzy, yelling and peeping the whistle.

Now we are teaching the pup something special, "Hey, I'm out here where the boss can't get me... this is great!" I've seen this too many times. Handlers teach the pup too early that he can get beyond their control. I try never to let a pup discover that he is not in some way under my control.

5. Chasing a pup with an object in their mouth. Never chase a pup for any reason...in play, when he won't come or when he is carrying an object. The pup will soon pick up that bumper or bird and stand there or bound around hoping to solicit a chase from you. This is a bear to correct.
6. Not coming when called. Settle this early and don't reward running away.
Never call to punish.
Don't call and then do things the pup doesn't like such as give him a shot, put him in the crate, etc.
Overuse of bribes.
Take this example from Wyoming. The pup would not come so tidbits were used to encourage the pup. This is not a problem in limited use at first, but they took the low, easy road and kept up the use of food treats as the reward for coming when called. The dog now only comes when tidbits are offered. No reward, no compliance. Who is training whom? Get the pup to understand two words at a very young age—"No" and "Here."
7. Bolting or running away. When a pup merely bolts to avoid your desirables, this must be dealt with quickly at an early age. If it persists, when you start to train and the pup decides there are better pursuits elsewhere, you now have a much faster and determined fugitive on your hands.
8. Allowing pups to run free is very much like #7. When a pup tires of present company and he has been allowed to run free for months before beginning training, he takes to the wind. I have one in training now that often runs away and you never know when he'll take off. He'll make a couple of nice marks and he may over run the next one and return some 45 minutes later. Keep pups under control at all times.
9. Shooting over pups while too young. Most gunshyness is manmade. Forget shooting over pups while they eat to introduce gunfire. How would your kids react to surprise shots while they partake quietly of their cocoa puffs? Gunfire conditioning comes much later and employs a much more logical, progressive format.
10. Other common, ill-advised practices include:
 - allowing playing with dead birds
 - putting pup on live birds too early which may scare the pup
 - letting pup jump out of objects, i.e. boats, porches, pickup beds. This damages more hips and shoulders in the U. S. than genetic problems.

- snatching objects from the pup's mouth
- punishing pup for carrying valuable objects in this mouth (Nike shoes, etc.)
- allowing pup to chase off game at an early age—rabbits, chickens—supposedly to build drive or because it's amusing
- rough housing with the kids which can result with the dog being intimidated or injured. When the kids pick up or drag the pup by his legs, the pup's hips could be damaged. Never allow kids to play with pups unsupervised—an unpopular statement, I know... but you do want an easily-trained gundog, don't you?
- retrieving sticks, especially in water
- throwing pup into water, especially cold water

Here's another Wildrose law of training-- "Don't condition something into your pup that you must train out at a later time." Pups don't forget. The most important element in pre-training socialization is to develop the pup's confidence in you. Good or bad, the pup won't forget. So, my friends, let's make it good!

Yours in sport,
Mike

"Histories are more full of examples of the fidelity of dogs than of friends." -Alexander Pope, 1709