

Steadying the Retriever, Part II

Steadiness to shot, fall and flush is a fundamental element to the success of any good retriever. A dog that remains quiet and steady in the field and readily honors other working dogs is not developed by means of an individual step in a training program. Contrarily, steadiness is an intricate part of the entire training process from puppyhood to an aged dog. Steadiness conditioning must be practiced and maintained throughout the dog's life.

It is important to structure training exercises and drills so that they do not compromise the steadiness of the dog. Too many marks, quickly releasing dogs for retrieves and associating gunfire to immediate retrieves all serve to undermine steadying efforts. As often as possible, utilize training methods that protect steadiness integrity.

Part I of "Steadying the Retriever" presented the preliminaries. Part II will offer a few proven methods to help produce that rock-steady, shooting dog that will be admired by all.

The Beginning. Steadiness conditioning must begin quite early in the pup's life. Young pups should not be "spun up" with repeated, meaningless retrieves. Keep pups calm and focused with only a few retrieves per week.

When the time comes to delay the pup's release on a retrieve, don't use forceful restraints. Place the pup between your legs as you kneel down. Place hands across the pup's chest and cradle the pup against the legs. Pitch the bumper and release when ready by simply removing your hands. Now we are already in the kneeling position to encourage prompt return. As the pup understands the concept of the delay and becomes calmer, lengthen the extent of the delay.

Next, restrain the pup lightly from the side delaying the release. When the pup is patient for short periods prior to release, move out in front of the pup to toss the bumper. Remotely place yourself between the bumper and the pup by tossing the bumper over your shoulder out a short distance. The pup's path is blocked to the bumper and the sit command can be encouraged. If pup runs in, he can be stopped or you can quickly pick up the bumper yourself.

Group Dynamics. After the concept of steadiness is introduced and understood individually, leverage can be gained by beginning to steady the pup in groups of other dogs. Pups pick up on the mannerisms and action of other dogs in the group. It is quite easy to steady 3 to 4 pups together as one often feeds upon the actions of the others. This exercise also begins the concept of honoring.

Walkups. After the pup promptly responds to sit to the whistle at heel, walkups become possible. The pup is heeled along as the bumper is tossed out front. The pup is required to sit on command as the bumper is thrown. This begins the concept of sit to flush. Whether or not the dog will ever be on an upland hunt, the drill pays dividends. A handler is actually training the pup to sit when the bird/mark is thrown and a shot fired. The counteraction (sit) is conditioned to minimize the likelihood of the undesirable reaction (run in). Use bumpers, cold game, remote launchers, and planted, live birds to condition pups to sit on flyers.

Memories. Substitute memories for marks. Excessive marking destabilizes steadiness and promotes independent action on the part of the dog. Memories involve placing bumpers or birds in varied locations and sending dogs back for the retrieve at a later time from a different location. Site, trailing and circle memories enhance steadiness, as will sending dogs away from thrown marks back to previously placed memories. The dog is not sent straight away for the retrieve.

Distractions. Another important part of steadiness is the ability of the dog to handle distractions in the field especially on the retrieve. Involve planted birds, thrown bumpers as diversions, flushing birds, gunfire and other dogs working on land or in water as your dog remains focused on making their retrieves. Steadiness also involves the dog sitting quietly without noise or movement in the blind for long periods as other dogs work, calls are blown, guns are fired and birds are working in the sky—even sitting motionless as birds land directly on the water in front of the dog.

Conditioning. Steadiness conditioning must be drilled even in aged dogs before each hunting season. The excitement of the hunt may well destabilize the most experienced dog. Get the dog in some birds and shooting exposure prior to the opening day. Private game farms and sporting clay shoots offer great preseason training opportunities. Utilizing live pigeons, pen-raised quail or domestic ducks provide a bit of live game exposure to reinforce steadiness. As a final point, don't leave anything to chance in the field with your first-season pup. Tie young pups on their first hunts to ensure no breaks or creeping.

One of the most important goals to have for a new retriever prospect for the first year in the field is to develop their steadiness to shot and fall. This skill is considered by most wingshooters as the cornerstone to a fine gundog.

Short changing the training program for steadiness in early training limits the potential of your hunting companion long term. Haste will make waste. The long-term outcome is well worth the investment of time, effort and patience.