

Wildrose Kennel  
Mike Stewart  
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Wildrose frequently receives questions about hunter retriever training and possible solutions to specific training problems. This month we continue examining the top 10 common pitfalls we see owner/trainers experience in early retriever training.

#### 6. No Transitional Training

Logically one cannot expect skills taught to a young dog in yard and field training sessions to readily be transferable, in the dog's mind, to hunting situations unless transitional training sequences are practiced.

This error commonly occurs in one or two forms when individuals eagerly press their dogs into hunting situations.

- A. They rush through skills and exercises without sufficient repetition to make a skill a habit. When pressed on the hunt, the pup becomes confused or merely disregards the commands, thereby spins out of control.
- B. Individuals do not sufficiently transfer training skills introduced in drills to practical hunting situations.

A proper training sequence for a gundog includes:

Yard work – introduction to skills in a controlled environment

Field training sessions – training exercises and drills usually conducted on familiar training grounds to entrench skills

Transitional training – practical exercises on simulated hunting situations including varied terrain, locations and natural environmental factors which will likely be confronted on the hunt. Birds, gunfire, boats, etc. are included.

Training on the hunt – Actually, the first hunts with a young gundog must be dedicated to training, not the taking of game. Early hunting experiences are extensions of training. The settings, circumstances and conditions of the hunt must be controlled to the extent possible. Focus remains on specific goals. Attention is placed on the dog and their particular needs.

Young prospects should not be rushed into hunting situations until all basic gundog skills are understood and thorough transitional experiences have been afforded the handler and the dog.

## 7. Counterproductive Interference

Many hunting dog prospects spend much of their time in uncontrolled environments such as the home, apartment or office where they remain unconfined during off-training periods. They are commonly confronted with opportunities for dysfunctional behavior/activities afforded them by well meaning friends, visitors or neighbors. Dogs are learning all the time, not just in training. Question what is being learned outside the controlled training environment. Many times the experiences occur while the owner/handler is not present. People love to amuse themselves by playing about with an eager, enthusiastic retriever. They find the experience quite entertaining as they promote unsteadiness by tossing repeated, meaningless retrieves, encourage free running or swimming; or perhaps even a bit of rough house, tug-a-war or chase. A 20-minute training session cannot reverse 23 hours of daily, uncontrolled activity. Guests, kids at home and neighbors all may unintentionally become ambassadors of hyperactivity and dysfunctional habits for our gundogs. People may also interfere with the concentration (focus) of your dog/pup during training by attempting to praise, interact or provide treats while the dog is involved with a session. These acts are seemingly harmless from the individual's perspective. They only want to interact briefly with your fine stamp of a dog, but the practice must be discouraged and avoided.

- a. Set rules for family members as to how to handle the dog while you are away.
- b. Instruct visitors and neighbors as to your expectations for their conduct with your dog, especially pups.
- c. If you cannot control the situation while you are absent, control the dog's environment. Invest in a space where the dog can remain away from others awaiting your return. (i.e. outdoor pen, enclosure, etc.)
- d. Don't allow others to interfere with or distract your dog while involved in training.

## 8. Late Whistle Introductions

Often, individuals introduce whistle commands far too late in the pup's training cycle. Starting pups very young on the whistle for recall (here) and sit (stop) pays huge dividends, yet most ignore the opportunity. Introduce the whistle by associating pleasurable experiences early during the days of puppyhood. Pups will readily respond to the recall whistle by 8 weeks old. I have had entire litters of 6-week old pups rush to the whistle peeps in excitement. When pups associate a positive experience with the whistle, they will respond to accept their reward of affection, food, treats, or a short retrieve... always something positive. The same is true of the sit whistle. Pups can consistently comply with this whistle command by 3 months old. They will eagerly sit on the whistle when the associated reward is sufficient and the commands are conducted infrequently.

Waiting to implement whistle commands offers no benefit. Far too often 6 to 7 month old pups pay no heed to their handler's recall command making the training challenge more difficult. Similarly, once the pup has advanced in basic training and is charging hard on retrieves, whistle stops are much more difficult to introduce.

### 9. Postponing Hand Signals

A common mistake is to wait to introduce hand signals until the pups have completed extensive marking training and actual hunt experience has been achieved. This strategy promotes a self-employed, overly independent dog. What we want to produce is an interdependent hunting partner who readily works with us to locate game and one who easily complies with direction in the field. Get the young dog handling well on casts and whistle commands before providing too many marking exercises and certainly before hunting exposure.

### 10. Poor Timing

Incorrect timing of praise and rewards for correct behavior is meaningless. Incorrectly timed correction or punishment for inappropriate behavior likewise has no value and is often counterproductive. A simple rule applies here. Reward and/or corrections, to be effective at modifying behavior, must occur exactly when the desired or undesired behavior occurs and it must occur at the location of the action. If we wait to reward a great cast or stylish water entry with verbal praise until the dog returns to our side, the dog associates the reward with returning to heel with the bumper, the last act, not the correct behavior we wanted to encourage. The same is true of correction. Negative behavior or improper response to commands must be corrected immediately at the time of the behavior and as close to the exact spot of the infraction as possible. For instance, a non-response on a stop whistle must be corrected immediately and in the exact place the refusal occurred, if possible. It requires immediately returning the dog to the exact spot where the refusal occurred, making the correction and re-emphasizing the command at that location. This is why we must thoroughly drill skills to proficiency on land before progressing to water, unless we are fond of swimming. (Actually this is yet another common error).

Correction in dog training seems to be the favored method—avoidance methodology. Actually, reward stimulus usually carries a much more powerful behavior modification effect if properly utilized, yet from my observation of handlers, they do not properly reward their prospects in training enough for effort and when they do it is usually mistimed, holding little meaning for their dog.

### Parting Thought:

As always, the best strategy for gundog training is to set pups up to succeed and to not condition in a problem that will have to be rectified later.

Best of seasons,  
Mike