

**Wildrose Kennel
Training Newsletter
Mike Stewart
October, 2000**

**Pre-Season Conditioning
"Pre-Con"**

After months of off-season lazing about, drawing a full pension (unless you shot a few dove or teal), your retriever may need a little "tune up" prior to the upcoming waterfowl or upland game seasons. It's time to "pre-con" the old hunting pal to be able to handle an active, full day's shooting. These tips apply primarily to the trained retriever. Most started pups that have been in training this summer should be in shape for the type work they will experience their first season.

Categories:

- Physical
- Obedience/Control
- Practical Experiences

Physical conditioning is the most written about and the most dangerous to your retriever. The biggest problem..trying to make up lost time and pushing the dog too fast. Physical conditioning must be gradual and progressive or you risk: heat exhaustion, muscle strain, joint stress and sore pads. First, how is your dog's weight? Too heavy? Reduce through diet and light exercise prior to serious work.. Too light? Provide a reasonable diet of a medium protein/fat, high quality feed. Begin with walks/jogging, then move to roading with bike or ATV if you like. Just don't overdo it at first. Build endurance through short-frequent sessions. Nothing beats swimming--long swims in cool, deep water (no bounding off the bottom at first) works wonders.

Repetition training sessions on piles or marks will build stamina. Just be sure that you don't compromise steadiness with too many reps. A few long drives to the pile and marks, long swims, roading and proper diet work best over time.

Obedience/Control. Spend some quality time reviewing basic obedience skills. The retriever must be under control for long periods by opening day. They will be expected to sit and stay calmly for long periods... Drill this. Get them smooth at heel off lead for those long walk-ins. Proper hand signals, quick recall, and response to the whistle must be reviewed to "get the rust off." Dogs get a little unresponsive in this area off season if standards are relaxed and expectations low. The British refer to this as "coming off the peg."

Marking and lining skills will not likely be forgotten and need little re-work. Spend equal time on steady and honor drills. Train with groups

of people and dogs letting your dog know all falls are not his. Shoot skeet to condition to multiple gunshot and non-retrieves. Your retriever may not react to single shots in training, yet over-react when multiple hunters quickly stand and fire repetitively. Expose the retriever to dead and wing-clipped bird falls, always demanding steadiness, and you walk out and pick up most of them. Have your dog sit closely beside you, still and quiet, for long, idle periods. Think...what will be expected on opening day and duplicate necessary control factors in training. Incorporate, if appropriate, blinds, boats, handling in woods and heavy cover, working with other dogs, steady to fast repetitive gunshots, multiple birds falling or flushes, duck calls, etc. Demand a quiet, calm demeanor at all times.

Practical Exposure. How is it going to be on opening day? Flooded woodlands, open big water, a new blind, large decoy spreads, a wonder ducks moving: Don't have your dog first experience these factors at sun up on opening day. Pre-drill him in training. Use a lot of decoys on land and water and include motion decoys. Vary working terrain and water sources. Will there be flooded stubble, fallen logs, heavy brush, mudflats, cane stashes, etc.? Vary time of day and weather conditions. Will you use a pit blind, a small boat, tree stands? Introduce them in your training before the big hunt.

Re-visit feathers. Re-exposure to live and cold game is important. Feather-covered bumpers help. Get your dog using that nose and hunting fall areas in cover closely. It would be poor form for your retriever to blink on the first bird down insisting upon a knobby bumper instead. Put dogs on wing-clipped, live birds and cold birds on both land and water before season.

How's the dog's delivery? How's the water exit while holding game? Clean that mouth up.

Finally, it's a good idea to make a pre-season trip to the hunting area, if possible, for a little training exercise or try to duplicate the environment as closely to eliminate as many surprises as possible. This will prove its worth as the sun rises on opening day.

Best of luck to all.