

Training Newsletter
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10 Pitfalls in Retriever Training

Wildrose frequently receives questions about hunter-retriever training and possible solutions to specific training problems. We very much enjoy the opportunity to offer assistance to our fellow retriever enthusiasts. In reviewing questions, one can identify re-occurring problems to which the same advice is offered, often to the point of redundancy. Many of the problems that owner-trainers experience could have been easily minimized if addressed earlier in training or avoided altogether. We shall briefly look at 10 of the most common pitfalls owner-trainers experience in early retriever training. Bear in mind that it is far better to not condition in a problem that you must later train out.

1. Lengthy Training Session

Enthusiasm for the game on the part of the owner often proves detrimental to young pups. As a result of lengthy, repetitive training sessions, the pup simply loses focus, becomes distracted and finally burns out. Pups under six months have very short attention spans. Sessions should not exceed 5 minutes and only include a few repetitions---more and they will lose focus. It is not essential to give sessions every day. A few minutes twice a day is more effective than an hour every day. Often a break of a few days in training produces surprising results. A positive attitude toward training must also be maintained in pups 6-12 months of age. Pups this age will benefit most from sessions no longer than 20 minutes. Never continue to the point of boredom. If things are going well and the session is complete, there is not need to push pups past 2 to 3 repetitions. Always stop on a positive, successful exercise or response. A very nice duck dog can be trained with the investment of 10 minutes a day three to four times per week if one adheres to an effective training plan.

2. Premature Hunting

Nothing can be gained by exposing pups to hunting situations under the age of 10 months, whether it is upland game or waterfowl shooting. Taking a 4 to 5 month old pup, as is often the case, on a dove or duck shoot for “experience,” is similar to taking a first grade child to high school for “experience.” What positive effects could possible be achieved? Yet the down-side potential is huge: gun shy, water shy, bird shy, even physical injury. Shyness resulting from aggressive dogs on the hunt, fatigue, frigid water etc. all are risk factors. What is the up side? Be patient. Let the pup mature and do your homework building strong basic gundog skills. No dog should be exposed to a hunting situation until all basic gundog skills are entrenched, excluding blinds. Don’t rush the process.

3. Waiting to Steady

People are fearful that if they attempt to steady their pups early in basic gundog training, they will lose enthusiasm and drive. Not true if accomplished properly—that is with

gentle methods. Steadiness to shot and fall is one of the most important lessons a young dog will learn. Any properly bred retriever can mark and retrieve with very little formal training; it's knowing when not to retrieve that takes the conditioning. Start early denying retrieves of thrown bumpers. You pick up 50% of all bumpers and later you will pick up 50-60% of all the downed birds on your pup's first few hunts. Condition patience from the beginning.

4. Too Many Meaningless Marks

After a pup is enthusiastic about early retrieve (no more than 2 to 3 per session), there is little point to continuing meaningless, repetitive, hand-thrown retrieves in elementary sessions. Once the pup dashes out, picks the mark and returns back to the handler, nothing more is necessary. No point in just spinning up a normally enthusiastic retriever pup. Marks now must teach something—falls in long grass, in water, over water onto land or in high crops. Marks can be used to teach doubles, lengthen the dog's retrieving distance or to exercise watching the sky. Excessive marking can be counterproductive by unsteady the pup and promoting independence rather than interdependent relationships. Additionally, marking to improve memory is actually is the poorest of methods. Place more emphasis in the early steps of training on steadiness and memory development rather than marks.

5. Setting Pups up to Fail

Nothing is learned from failure in the dog world. It is vital that pups succeed every time in training to develop confidence in you and themselves. Don't ask young dogs to exceed their capabilities. Nothing succeeds like success. If necessary, walk out and help locate the fall yourself, shorten distances, simplify the concept or re-visit basic core skills. Train--don't test. Teach every skill within a concept and then link them together. Dogs learn from association established through consistent repetition. In effect we are establishing a learning chain through causal relationships. Be careful not to circumvent this process. Think "win, win"...how can the exercise be set up to enhance the possibilities of success?

(Next month—Pitfalls #6-10)