

**Delivery to Hand Part III:
Retriever Transitional Training
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Retriever transitional training processes are designed to transfer learned behaviors and skills from yard work and other controlled environments to practical field hunting situations. Although these exercises usually lack multi-level concepts or actual hunting scenarios, they do involve elements that will be confronted in the field. Individuals occasionally fall short in this aspect of retriever training. They work hard on skills, drill, patterns and conditioning then pitch the young prospect directly into the exciting atmosphere of a hunt test or actual day's shooting and the outcome can be less than desirable. With this in mind, one should progress systematically and concentrate on transitional exercises, which will benefit a young dog's skills by reinforcing, learned behaviors in a variety of practical situations.

As we begin the transition to delivery to hand conditioning, it is important to be absolutely consistent in the manner in which delivery is accepted as well as the use of the command, "hold," and "release" (or "drop," "give," "dead"). If one decides upon the side delivery/finish, work must begin on the various turns and alignments prior to involving the bumper. Then, once proficient in the recovery position for delivery, the bumper is added to begin hold/delivery sequences. It is important to accept the object (bird or bumper) from under the object and the dog's lower jaw. Release should only occur on command. Handlers should avoid making a habit of delicately grasping a bird's wing or foot to accept delivery. By taking a firm grip from underneath the dog's jaw, the hunter stands less chance of losing those boisterous wounded drake mallards or cock pheasants that the retriever has worked hard to deliver to hand.

Front delivery is popular with spaniel and bird dog handlers. There is obvious merit to this delivery position for waterfowl retrievers as well:

1. It is fast and accurate. Straight in, sit, deliver and recover to heel.
2. Wet dogs will shake in front once the bird is delivered and not on hunter.
3. Usually handlers can better grip the bird from the front position, as both hands are available avoiding mishaps.
4. Side delivery is often useless in hunting situations—tight quarters in blinds, pits, boats, deep water, etc.

The aspiring gundog is now delivering consistently to hand and finishing nicely in yard work as well so now we move to the field. The suggested exercises are designed to facilitate the transition of delivery to hand skills developed thus far to practical field situations. Other exercises exist, but these, reinforced in a positive manner, will effectively transfer newly established behaviors into

enduring habits relative to hunting situations. If sequence I and II have been successful, these transitional exercises will progress quickly and enjoyably.

1. Recall from sit – Sit pup 50 yards out and place the bumper in the mouth with the command, “hold.” Recall the student from remote sit to heel while holding. Insure a direct route is taken without dropping. Require a smooth finish (side or front) and delivery on the drop command.

Additional options:

- A. Stop to Whistle – Incorporate a stop and sit to the whistle on the recall. The dog should sit, hold, and remain seated until recalled without dropping.

- B. Diversion bumpers should now be tossed as the dog advances from remote sit. This is a great way to introduce diversions and prevent switching. Add cold game and gunfire to create more attractive diversions. Other distractions should be implemented as well including other people about, and dogs working at a distance, kids playing, and/or other dogs honoring at the line. The pup’s attention must not regress compromising proper delivery.

2. Water work- Locate a water source with a long shallow bank. Practice hold-heel and recall drills along the bank in the shallow water requiring the pup to bound in the water on the return. Also include recall across deeper water while working in waders in waist-deep water to accept delivery.

Water exit – Place pup in chest-deep water and walk out on the bank, recall out of the water and get delivery to hand. No drops should occur at the water’s edge or to shake. Begin close to the water if necessary then extend to 40+ yards.

3. Obstacles—Set up situations which require the dog to recall negotiating various types of obstacles while holding. Begin with pup at sit/hold, cross the barrier yourself along the desired route and recall. Include practical situations such as jumps over fallen logs, rail fences, crossing steep ditches, punching through thick, tangled grass or briar patches and negotiating under fences. Use a variety of hold objects in this drill such as Dokken duck dummies, heavy bumpers and cold game.

4. Land/Water/Land Drills—Place pup at sit/hold on land then wade across a narrow body of water to land on the opposite bank. Be sure the channel of water extends long enough to discourage running around the

bank. Recall the pup directly across the water and accept delivery. Lengthen land distances on both sides as you progress. Occasionally incorporate diversions such as throwing a bumper and gunfire and other distractions, like decoys or other dogs, and controls like a "stop" to the whistle command.

Finally, our retriever prospect is naturally quite comfortable with deliveries to hand in a stylish manner without the pressure of force fetch methods. Retrieving exercises now may progress with reasonable assurance that delivery behaviors have been successfully modified.

The sequences and steps outlined may seem a bit involved but not so. Phase II and III may only take a week for the talented pup with a natural mouth while 3 to 4 weeks may be required for other young dogs. It is important to get delivery skills properly instilled in all retrievers of waterfowl or upland birds in the early stages of basic training. Through patience, persistence and consistent application of each of the outlined steps, success will embrace you and your future hunting pal.

"A dog believes you are what you think you are." Jane Swan