

Field and Feather

The Retrieving Game
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Avoidance Behaviors

We have all seen some avoidance behaviors while training our dogs. Some of it is quite obvious, while other behaviors are very subtle.

Remember the obedience dog hauling butt out of the ring at a class or a show? Hopefully it wasn't your dog! That is obvious avoidance—run from the task or command. Putting on the breaks and refusing to move is a similar blatant tactic. Refusing eye contact is another.

What about the dog that leans on you, or places a foot on top of your foot when in the heel position? Those are avoidance behaviors too—whether avoiding a command or just using this as a cheap trick to keep from watching you.

How about the field dog that sits on the whistle, but refuses to look at you for the hand signal? Or sits sideways or backwards? These are avoidance techniques that tell you it's time to go back to the yard to work out the problem.

How would you handle this same problem in an advanced obedience dog that takes the “go out” command, but doesn't turn and sit? You would go back to the basics to reinforce the correct response to the command. It is the same with field work, but you need to go back to the “yard” where you can have more control to reinforce the proper behavior.

When you are starting to work on the double-T drill or have advanced to pattern blinds, some other avoidance behaviors might be not heeling properly between sends (crooked, or a few steps behind, or maybe refusing to heel at all), or “bugging” where the dog looks every direction EXCEPT the direction you are going to send him.

All of this can be extremely frustrating and try your patience. I have had days where we just had to stop, take a break for a day or so and come back when the dog is fresh and I am not frustrated. Getting angry at the dog, raising your voice or using collar pressure inappropriately will only make things worse—and delay the desired result. A “time out” for both dog and handler may be just the distance you need to view the problem more clearly and devise a strategy to fix it.

As we have all learned, training situations and competition situations are entirely different. Our dogs can come up with the most unexpected responses to a new location, the excitement of the venue, other dogs, the long drive, etc. What has been solid and predictable in the obedience ring or in the yard can fall apart right in front of you when you are in a “real world” setting.

One thing that always helps is to train in as many different situations as you can. For obedience, that means different show locations, different clubs, etc. For some of you, that is easy—my friend in the Minneapolis area has three or four obedience schools

within an hour's drive. I have ONE. So if I am serious about obedience competition, I have to get creative about where I go to expose my dog to new sights and smells.

With field work you have the same issues. Always training by yourself, or with the same group or on the same grounds becomes predictable and blasé for the dogs. Conversely, never training with live fliers is setting your dog up for failure at a test. My dogs are visibly more excited even in training sessions where we are throwing ducks instead of bumpers—and the excitement gets cranked up a few notches more when we use live birds. This gives me the opportunity to reinforce my level of expectation for steadiness (no creeping, no standing on tip-toe, no squatting instead of sitting), no vocalizing, and the other important mechanicals that make for a reliable retriever.

When the dog is showing avoidance or “boredom” such as leaning, or placing a foot on top of yours, you must correct this behavior and demand the same high standard you have established for yard work and the field. Correct the dog, and do not let the dog make a retrieve when the incorrect behavior is exhibited. Don't say, “It's ok because the fliers make him more excited.” It is NOT ok and you need to fix the problem early before it becomes insurmountable.

My Diva gets pretty excited about ducks and I swear she stands on her toenails! I give her a “sit” verbal command, and a tap on the butt with the heeling stick to reinforce the verbal command. She has to have her butt planted on the ground, without any fussing or squiggling before I will release her. She must learn quickly that her gratification of the retrieve is delayed if she doesn't play by the rules. If she really acts up--stands, creeps or vocalizes--I will walk her off the line and I will not let her have the retrieve. Tough love, but you have to do it!

So once again, set high standards and be consistent. Read your dog to figure out what's going on—avoidance or something else. Sometimes it helps to have an observer who can see the whole picture (but probably NOT your spouse!) and give some insight that you might be missing.

Happy Training!

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