

Field and Feather

The Retrieving Game
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When in doubt, simplify

One of the best rules to remember when training dogs in any event is “simplify.” If the dog does not understand the task, break it down into smaller components to help the dog understand the bigger picture.

It is very common for trainers to assume that their dogs should understand a concept, and therefore should be corrected when the dog does not perform accordingly. However, often the dog has not made the connection, or cannot see the task clearly—and the handler is correcting for something the dog does not understand.

YOU CANNOT USE PRESSURE UNTIL YOU ARE SURE THE DOG UNDERSTANDS THE TASK.

Let’s look at some examples. Your dog has been doing a great job on single retrieves in a featureless field with little or no cover. You take the dog to a location with some terrain changes and some cover changes. The gunner throws the mark, the dog sees it, and you send the dog. The dog breaks down at the first cover change, starts hunting and won’t drive back to the mark. What do you do?

The dog has been doing marks longer than this distance, but NOT with cover changes and changing terrain. So that means the whole picture has changed for the dog. Therefore you have the gunner help the dog—holler, get the dog’s attention and throw another bumper. This should help pull the dog through the cover so it can find one of the bumpers. Then you should repeat the mark to let the dog put the picture together. Maybe the dog doesn’t do a clean job the first day out. That’s ok. You are teaching a new concept and some dogs need more time than others to digest new things. This is why it is so important to train in as many different situations as you can. The more the dog is exposed to, the more the dog will be able to transfer the knowledge and skills from one situation to the next.

You have a dog that is consistently completing doubles on land and water, in various conditions. However, on this day, the dog has trouble with the memory bird. The mark seems straight forward to you, so what’s the deal? Maybe you didn’t take the wind into account, or the mark is landing in a low spot where the scent is swirling around and confusing the dog. Or maybe the terrain is causing the dog to run on the upwind side of the mark so the dog can’t wind it. A dozen other factors could be coming into play. In this instance, I would break the double down into two singles so the dog can complete both marks successfully. Then put the dog up for a while—run another dog, or have your training partners run their dogs. Bring the dog back out after a rest, and try it again as a double.

Recently I was training with a friend. I ran my two females first, and then my male. He has been training for SH level work for quite a while, but he couldn’t find anything that day. I broke the double down into singles and he STILL couldn’t find the marks. Can you figure out what the problem was? One of my females came into heat the next day! He was so distracted by her scent that he couldn’t think straight. So, about three days later, I was training again. I ran him first and miraculously, he could count AND mark again. All sorts of things can affect their performance.

Dogs tend to run diagonally up a hill, so that can affect their relationship to the mark and whether they will be able to wind it. If your dog is notorious for avoiding patches of cover, the more the dog gets off-line, the more difficult it will be for the dog to find the mark. That’s why it is important to teach your dog to take the straightest line possible to the mark. Any deviation from that line will affect the dog’s ability to remember where the mark landed.

As you advance with your dog to Senior and Master level work, the more complicated concepts will often require that you break down the components to help the dog learn. Some dogs can extrapolate what they have learned and apply it to new situations; others cannot. My Master Hunter, Scarlett, was a quick study—show her a concept once and she had it. Her daughter, Stella, required much more repetition. Scarlett's other daughter, Ruby, seems to be following in her mother's paw prints...she learns quickly and is always ready to learn more.

If a dog fails at a task, chances are the dog doesn't understand the task. They don't think of ways to tick us off or make us angry—they just don't understand what they are being presented with.

You need to be able to read your dog and adapt your training accordingly. No two dogs are alike and we all have our good and bad days. Advance from one concept to another when you think the dog is ready, and be prepared to simplify when needed. Simplify to succeed.

Happy training!

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