

FieldandFeather
TheRetrievingGame
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Spring!

AsIwritethis,thesnowismeltinganda65-degree day is predicted over the weekend. It is almost spring! With spring comes the promise of longer days and more training opportunities. No more dealing with the snow and ice. No more darkness when you get home from work!

We also have to remember that our dogs may be a bit out of shape, and probably the handler too! Despite their enthusiasm and ours, remember to take it easy as you set up the spring training schedule. And even though we would love to pick up right where we left off, that may not happen either. You may need to review a few basics with your dog to get back on track. Then as confidence is re-established, you can begin to challenge your dog again.

If you hunt your dog, then there will be some bad habits to correct. For example, most people don't care if the dog is completely steady when hunting, and we don't care if the dog takes the most direct line to the bird. It's OK if the dog runs the bank -- the object is to retrieve all downed game. Then when the test season rolls around, you have a dog that breaks and avoids water or cover. Just a little time to review these technical points will get you and the dog back on track.

Remember too that early spring open water can still be VERY cold! In my part of the country, it could be May before the water warms up. Even an experienced duck dog will hesitate a bit to train in really cold water. Remember that in hunting, the dog is in the water for a short time to retrieve the bird and then out of the water for a stretch of time. When we are retraining, the dog may be doing numerous water retrieves in a row, or with "swimby" or other training concepts, the dog is in the water for an extended period of time. It is easy for a dog to get chilled in this situation and it is possible for the dog to get hypothermia.

If you have a puppy that hasn't experienced water yet, WAIT until later in the spring when the water is warmer! A cold-water first experience can set a puppy back -- then you may have trouble getting the pup to enter the water willingly even when it is warm. It is just much easier to wait until the water is warmer and the pup is enthusiastic about entering. Then you have a positive experience to build on as your pup's training progresses.

If you train on public land, there may be restrictions on dog training in the spring. In Iowa, it is against the law to train dogs on public land between March 15 and July 15, except in designated dog training areas. This is to protect ground-nesting birds, like pheasants and quail, from being disturbed. If you are not sure about designated training areas, contact your Department of Natural Resources (DNR) office and find out what is available. It may be possible to request that an area be designated — I have done this with a state park near my home. However, remember that few areas will be mowed or groomed to dog-training specifications. In my case, the area is only usable in early spring before the grasses get too tall.

Also remember that if you are training on public land, you have a responsibility to be aware of other users of the area. Training techniques that are too harsh would be perceived by a non-dog person as cruel and can cause friction and may cause the area manager to ban dog training all together. Be sure to know the rules about training with blanks or starter pistols and if/where live shot can be used. And as always, use common sense! Shooting live shot over the heads of boaters is not a good practice, but I have seen it happen.

Don't dispose of rottenducks in the park trash cans and don't just leave them "for nature to take care of." Take out what you brought in and dispose of any old training birds appropriately when you get home.

Some public areas have strict leash laws to and from the designated training area. Be sure you follow these regulations and make sure that you clean up after your dog too. It only takes a couple of careles people to ruin the privileges for all of us. Many of us don't have the luxury of private land for training.

The one thing that we all need to remember is that our dogs need to see as many different situations as possible. If you train all the time on a round farm pond and get to test with marsh or channels, you and the dog could both be in trouble. Try to rotate the locations and types of setups as much as possible. Your dog needs to understand the concepts regardless of the terrain. Some dogs can use what they have learned in any situation, but others cannot. The more you can expose your dog to, the better for both of you.

And DON'T FORGET THE DECOYS! Your dog should be used to running or swimming through decoys that he never gives them a second look. There is nothing more pitiful than to see a handler's face when his dog brings back a decoy instead of the duck. If you aren't a hunter, you can buy used decoys fairly cheaply from a hunter getting new ones. There are several web pages that have dog-related classified sections where you can find someone selling used decoys. You don't need them to be pretty or pristine — you just need them to help condition your dog.

What else? Get out there, be patient and remember to have fun. If you and/or your dog are not getting some enjoyment out of this, you need to find a new performance event.

Spring is here. Line up your training locations, find some training buddies and get to it!

Happy training!

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