

Field and Feather

The Retrieving Game

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The Chronicles of Ruby—Continued

Well, when last I wrote, Ruby and I had completed a Mike Lardy workshop and we were following Mike's program.

We reviewed stick fetch at the workshop. This is an exercise done after force-fetch to help reinforce the "fetch" command. It is started as "walking fetch," where you place several bumpers, spaced a few strides apart, in a line or circle. You walk the dog at heel, on leash past the bumpers commanding "fetch" or skipping the bumper, alternately. So, you have the dog in heel, and are walking the dog to the right of the bumpers—so the dog is between you and the bumpers on the ground. You command "Fetch!" as you approach the bumper. The dog should strain against the leash or lunge toward the bumper, snatch it up and continue walking at your side. You take the bumper, toss it over your shoulder and continue the process.

It takes some coordination for sure! If the dog doesn't pick the bumper up, or messes with it or hesitates, you must enforce the "fetch" command with the ear pinch. You are teaching the dog that "fetch" means "fetch," even in an unusual context.

After the dog is successful at walking fetch, you move on to "stick fetch." This uses the heeling stick—which is basically like a riding crop—to further enforce the fetch command and add some pressure. The routine is the same as walking fetch, but on some of the fetch commands, you will give the dog a firm tap with the heeling stick as you give the "fetch" command. The dog should continue to fetch the bumpers without hesitation, just as you expected with walking fetch. Any failure to do so will mean using the ear pinch again to reinforce the command.

Then we started three-handed cast under the tutelage of Mike and in front of the other workshop participants. This drill is done on a long line and starts to teach the basic principles of handling. Some people call it "baseball" because the dog sits facing you, like on the pitcher's mound, and bumpers eventually are placed at first, second and third base positions. Using the long line to correct any mistakes the dog makes, you gradually teach the dog to take "over" and "back" commands. This REALLY takes coordination and control of the long line, reeling it in when needed, and making sure you and the dog don't get tangled.

Ruby LOVED three-handed cast and flew through the concept. I did do a quick review of it when we got home, just to make sure we could do it without Mike coaching us every step.

Then it was on to collar-conditioning. This was the one that really had me worried. I was afraid I would use the collar incorrectly—at the wrong time, too much, not enough—and mess Ruby up for life. It sure would have been nice to do this training task under Mike's supervision, but no such luck. I prepared by reviewing Mike's tape on collar-conditioning and reading his articles about it that have been published in *Retriever Journal*. I have to admit I was VERY cautious and it probably took me longer than it should have. However, I couldn't think of a better time for the old adage, "Better safe than sorry!" to be used.

The first part of collar-conditioning is reviewing basic obedience, and reinforcing the commands with collar pressure. For example, you start incorporating one short whistle blast with the "sit" command while you are heeling. Then you add a collar nick to the routine, so you give the "sit" whistle, a nick of the collar and another "sit" whistle to reinforce the command. Sounds easy.

Of course, Ruby presented me with problems that weren't addressed on the tape, or in Mike's articles. You use the collar to enforce "come" or "here" and you use the collar to enforce "sit." The proper sequence is to give the command, then a light "nick" with the collar and repeat the command. You have a session or two with several "sit" commands using the collar pressure. Then you have a session or two using the collar pressure to reinforce the "come" or "here" command. Then you have a session where you use pressure for BOTH of the commands in the same session. So when you get to the point where you are using the collar for both the "here" and "sit" commands in the same lesson, it stands to reason that the dogs might get confused. Ruby became confused when I was trying to teach her to stop on the "sit" whistle during a "come" command.

No matter what I tried, if I gave a "sit" nick, "sit" command after calling her to me, she just barreled right into me and sat on my feet! Not acceptable.

I thought about it for a while and devised a plan. It required my husband's assistance and the long line. I placed Ruby in a sit. My husband was several yards behind her, holding the long line very loosely. I was several yards in front of Ruby, ready to do a recall. I gave the "here" command, and when I was ready to give the "sit" whistle, I signaled my husband. As I gave the "sit" nick "sit" sequence with whistle and collar, my husband popped the long line forcing Ruby to sit. It WORKED! After only a couple short sessions, Ruby understood and we were able to proceed with the lesson plan.

There is something very satisfying and almost exhilarating to realize that you have taught your dog to stop anywhere on a "toot" of the whistle, turn and sit facing you. Even now, I give the "sit" whistle, and think "I taught her that!"

Ruby is the first dog I have done all the yard work on myself. I have always had the help of a professional retriever trainer with my other dogs. So, as we muddle through this together, I am thankful that Ruby—as all Labradors are—is forgiving and trusting. Her strong desire to retrieve and her strong desire to please me will get us through this process. I do think that working with professional trainers and having the opportunity to attend two Lardy workshops has given me a basic understanding of the process that I would not have had prior to my first field dog. Seeing the commands used in the field and understanding the concepts behind the commands and corrections has helped me know where we need to go, what we need to strive for.

It may take us a while, but Ruby and I will get there. Next time, I will write about "back to the pile" and the "double-T" drills.

Happy training!

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