

Field and Feather

The Retrieving Game

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More on Walking Fetch

I had planned on making this article about “back to the pile,” but I ran into some issues with my one-year old pup, Diva, on walking fetch that I thought I would share.

Usually after the initial force-fetch is done, I introduce different bumpers and then a bird to make sure the dog fully understands the concept. Then I move outside to repeat the basic “hold” and “fetch” commands in a different setting. When I am sure the dog understands the concept, then we reinforce the “hold” and “fetch” commands in field training. Remember: You cannot correct a dog if the dog does not understand the command. For example, it will do you no good to constantly tell your dog “Hold it, hold, hold..” if you haven’t completed force-fetch and the dog does not know what the command means.

When we have finished force-fetch and move to walking fetch, I place different types of bumpers out—small knobby, big, soft ones from the Bumper Boy, and canvas bumpers. Again, the purpose is to make sure that the dog understands the command with ALL types of bumpers and items. Sometimes your dog will decide she only likes one type of bumper. This is exactly what Diva did. She decided she only liked the Bumper Boy bumpers. No matter how many times I reinforced the “fetch” on the other bumpers, the next time around, she would refuse to pick them up.

So, I removed her favorite bumpers from the line-up. Only small knobby bumpers were used, white and orange. Within two sessions, Diva was happily picking up the smaller bumpers on command. So, now I will re-introduce her preferred bumper interspersed with the small, knobby ones and see what happens. Hopefully she will understand the concept enough where we won’t have to repeat the process. I had one dog where it was like starting over every time I introduced a new item.

The final step will be to place some birds in the line-up. We want a swift pickup and a good hold. No messing with the bird, licking or flipping it around. Remember that with the walking fetch, you maintain a steady speed and the dog should scoop up the bumper and continue in the “heel” position while you take the bumper (or bird) and toss it over your shoulder. We want this same smooth response with birds. If you do not take this step in force-fetch and walking fetch to make sure the dog handles birds the same way she handles bumpers, you will run into problems.

I can tell you as a judge of Junior Hunter events, one of the most common problems I see is dogs that are not properly force-fetched and who do not pick the bird up quickly or hold the bird until commanded to release it. Although some judges will tolerate this, it is not acceptable at the JH level. The dog is supposed to fetch the bird promptly and deliver it to hand. That doesn’t mean dropping the bird and the handler pleading “fetch it up!” a dozen times. It doesn’t mean flipping the bird around like a beanbag a few times before delivering it. It doesn’t mean putting it down to pluck feathers and have a nice meal. **IF YOUR DOG DOES NOT DELIVER TO HAND PROPERLY IN TRAINING, SHE WILL NOT SOMEHOW HAVE AN EPHIPHONY AT THE TEST.** Do not enter your dog in a test until the dog is solid on the skills required at that level of test. You cannot correct your dog at a test. Allowing this behavior to occur where you cannot correct the dog only serves as reinforcement of the wrong behavior. Delivering to hand is the most basic and the most important skill next to marking.

So the next step with Diva is to add her favorite bumpers back in. Then I will add some ducks and repeat the exercise. When I am sure that she is performing consistently well, then I will add the stick pressure for “stick fetch.”

As I mentioned in the previous article, “stick fetch” is just a way to add some pressure to the dog while performing the retrieve. The purpose is to again reinforce that the dog should retrieve under all circumstances, rather than give up when there is a little pressure or an added degree of difficulty. Start the session just like you did walking fetch. Let the dog have a few fetches before you add the stick pressure. The tap with the heeling stick needs to come at the same time you give the “fetch” command.

Sometimes the dog will be startled and not complete the fetch. In that case, be ready to reinforce with the ear pinch. This is where the coordination and a third hand come in handy—not to mention rapid reflexes! Other dogs—like Ruby—just snatch up the bumper anyway, totally ignoring the stick pressure. I suspect that Diva will be distracted by it and it will take a few times before she understands. We will see how it goes and I will report in the next column.

Happy Training!

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