

Field and Feather

The Retrieving Game
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Steadiness

Don't underestimate the importance of a dog being steady. "Steady" means not breaking away before being sent for a retrieve. It can also be used as "steady to wing," which means the dog does not take off after a flushed bird, or "steady to wing and shot" which means the dog doesn't break at birds or gunshot.

In the hunt test and field trial games, steadiness is critical. Some people equate straining at the leash or creeping with desire or talent. It may be one indicator of desire, but it is a bigger indicator of lack of control.

Have you ever heard, "Don't restrain a puppy because you will kill its desire" ? This is one myth that keeps a lot of people from properly training their dogs. I am guilty myself—I didn't teach Ruby "steady" until she was way past puppy age. Why? Well I just hadn't taken the time to do it properly, so I always trained her with a check cord.

Why is steadiness important? Well, a dog that is straining at the leash or creeping isn't paying attention to the big picture. If the dog doesn't take in the whole scenario, the dog will miss a mark, misjudge the distance, or otherwise mess up. And if you are there nagging the dog the whole time--heel, heel, HEEL!--that further distracts the dog and helps contribute to failure (not to mention raising your blood pressure).

When I was at the Mike Lardy workshop a couple of years ago, Mike talked about how important steadiness is and that you need to teach it early, along with other basic obedience commands, for your dog to be successful. He demonstrated a steadiness drill that is simple, but very effective. Here's how it works.

You need an assistant with a blank pistol and a handful of bumpers. Start with the "gunner" about 15 yards away. Have your dog on a check cord or short line, but don't hold the line tight. The line is so you can correct the dog if needed, but the dog should not feel restrained. The dog should be given the command to stay put—use "sit," "stay," or "sit" with a tap of the heeling stick, or whatever you queue is.

Signal the gunner to shoot the pistol. If the dog does not jump or strain or vocalize, the gunner can toss the bumper a short distance. **IF THE DOG STRAINS AT THE LEASH, TRIES TO BREAK OR VOCALIZES, THE DOG DOES NOT GET THE RETRIEVE.** You turn away from the mark, walk away from the line and have the gunner pick up the bumper. Why is this important? If you reward the dog with the retrieve after the dog has demonstrated unwanted behavior, you are rewarding the wrong behavior.

Bring the dog back to the line, give your command and signal the gunner again. If the dog sits still without squiggling or vocalizing, release the dog and let the dog complete the retrieve. You can repeat this as many times as necessary to enforce the correct behavior—sitting quietly without fidgeting or creeping until you send the dog.

We watched Mike use this technique with a screamer—the kind that screams bloody murder and rolls its eyes up in its head—and with breakers and creepers. Just a few short sessions taught the dogs the expected behavior and what they had to do to get that bumper.

Always remember that the level of excellence you expect and enforce in the yard has to carry over into the field. So once you know your dog understands the command or behavior, you must

also reinforce it in the field. You can't say "I will let him creep today because it is the first live flier he has seen in a while." That inconsistency will come back to haunt you!

So, just like with the "hold" command, and everything else, once the dog understands you must require the appropriate behavior in the field. You can't make exceptions. You can't allow some foot "dancing" one day, and expect the dog to sit perfectly still the next day. Practice, practice, practice. Consistency, consistency, consistency. Being consistent is one of the best things we can do for our dogs to be successful in any kind of training.

Back to Ruby. When I was scolded for her not being steady yet, I used Mike's techniques and she understood the concept at the end of the first session. That doesn't mean she won't try to break on occasion. But it does mean that if she tries to break, she gets corrected, brought back to the heel position and we do it again, the RIGHT way.

As soon as we started throwing bumpers for Diva when she was just a few months old, I kneeled beside her, restraining her gently until the bumper hit the ground. Then I released her on her name. As she grew, we demanded more of her, requiring her to sit a few seconds before release. So now as her field work gets increasingly more challenging, she sits by my side and waits to be released. It was SO EASY! And it didn't reduce her desire one bit. AND she was more successful on puppy marks because she actually saw the bumper land. That allowed her to better gauge the depth/distance of the mark and get into the area of the fall consistently.

And THAT builds confidence in her (and in me).

So, teach your field dog to be steady. Maintain the same high standards in the field that you demanded in the yard. Let your dog know what to expect, and you can expect consistent results.

Happy training!

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