

FIELD AND FEATHER
The Retriever Game
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Get Serious!

Okay, you got that new whistle, boots and lanyard for Christmas. Now this is the year you get serious about the hunt tests!

If you don't already have a training group or don't know where to start, find out if there are any retriever clubs in your area. Clubs that sponsor hunt tests should have some members with similar interests and goals as you. Find out about the club, see if there are any "picnic" trials or club trials that you can attend. These are like an obedience "fun" match--the events are set up like licensed events, but are just for practice and training. Completion does not count toward a title. Some clubs may have a points system for trophies or ribbons at the end of the year, but this is just to make the club trials a little more interesting for members and participants.

You have found a club and can attend some club events to observe. You can visit with some of the club members and find out who is willing to work with a "newbie" to the sport. Keep in mind that everyone trains a little differently and it may take a while to find someone whose training techniques make sense for you and your dog. Every dog is a little different, so you need to realize that dogs of the same breed or age or sex will not develop or learn at the same pace.

Get some good training books and read as much as you can about the basics. Or get some of the video tapes that provide training steps for early retriever training. Some retriever clubs may have a loaning library of tapes or books that you can use. Magazines dedicated to the sport of retrieving often have regular columns or articles about training tips and techniques. I clip the training articles from one magazine I subscribe to and keep them in a three-ring binder for easy access.

Like obedience training, it helps to establish a regular training schedule with your training group or mentor. That gives you and the dog regular exposure to the techniques and concepts so you can become more familiar with the lingo and the process.

Your training group will most likely have people and dogs at different levels of training and experience. Just judge your comfort level and your dog's abilities and adjust accordingly. For example, if the group sets up a triple retrieve and your dog isn't doing doubles yet, just run each mark of the triple as a single for your dog. If the distances are more than you are comfortable with, move up a bit to make the retrieve a shorter mark for your dog. If the dog does well, you can always back up a bit for the next mark and challenge the dog a bit.

Ask questions! You can learn a lot from observing, but you need to ask questions to make sure that you are not misunderstanding something.

You will be expected to help the group by throwing marks. Ask where and how they want the marks to land--throw a test mark to make sure you understand. Be sure you know how to use the blank pistol or popper gun you are given.

Don't expect the group members to train your dog for you. They will help you train yourself and your dog, but the group members all have their own dogs to train. You need to be responsible for your own education--and that of your dog.

If you discover a problem while training in the field, don't take up everyone's time if you don't have to. For example, if your dog has never seen a pheasant before and is hesitant to pick one up in training, ask to take an extra pheasant home and work on fetch and hold on your own time. However, if there is a problem that needs to be addressed in the field, your training group will understand.

Another option would be to find a local professional retriever trainer who will let you pay for training time. Many pros will have some clients who come for training sessions with the dog rather than leaving the dog for extended periods of time with the trainer. The clients work out a daily rate with the pro and get together on pre-arranged training days. The trainer can give guidance and even assign "homework" to help you keep making progress with your dog. Some pros will even let you run other client's dogs in training to experience dogs at different training levels. It can be very enlightening to handle a fully-trained dog when you are still working on the basics. It helps you understand why consistency is so important and how just the slightest movement can send signals to the dog--and you didn't even realize that you were moving!

Remember like with obedience, a perfectly well-behaved dog at home may be a totally different creature in a new situation! Expect the unexpected--don't say "my dog has never done THAT before!" Expect your dog to react differently in a field situation and be prepared--like using a check cord for the first couple of retrieves. Whatever happens, be sure to maintain your sense of humor because these dogs can always humble us!

P.S. I have a new puppy! Her name is Critter Creek's Blue Note, known as Jazz. Jazz will be training for both obedience and field. I will give a progress report on her periodically and share some stories about her development.

Happy Training!

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