

Field and Feather

The Retrieving Game

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What are you worried about?

I remember when I first got interested in the retrieving game. It all started with Brooke, our first chocolate Labrador. It was immediately apparent that she needed to carry things and that the retrieving desire was strong.

Okay, I thought. I will find out if there is a retriever club in the area and see if I can join. I called the club secretary and our conversation went something like this:

“Hi I am interested in joining the retriever club and I wanted to know what the process is.”

“Well, we are an informal group—I guess you just show up at our next club event.”

“When is that?”

“I’m not sure—it depends on who’s in town that weekend.”

“Okay then, why don’t I just come to your next club meeting?”

“Well, we don’t have any real set time or date for those—they just sort-of happen when we need to discuss something.”

“Would you call me before the next meeting, or add me to your list to receive mailings?”

“I suppose I can do that—but we don’t have any mailings.”

Two things were quite obvious to me...they didn’t want a woman to join and they weren’t terribly well organized. It was probably five or six years later before I tried again to join the same club. The leadership had changed, the core group who did all the work was burning out and they were short on bodies, so they were even letting women join!

That was over eight years ago. The club has gone through a lot of changes, some more painful than others. The introduction of hunt tests to the club was painful because of misperceptions and ego. Many of the “old-timers” thought that hunt tests would “ruin” the club, that the tests were not challenging enough, or a number of other unfounded concerns. I am happy to say that our 2002 hunt test will be the fourth year we have sponsored an AKC licensed test, in addition to the two AKC licensed field trials the club has sponsored for close to 30 years.

How did we get the nay-sayers to agree to a hunt test? Simply put, you have to get new people into the sport to keep the club alive. If “newbies” come to a club trial and see only field trial level competition, they will most likely see that as an unattainable or

unrealistic goal for their dogs, so they get disillusioned and give up. For most of us, our first retriever will not be Field Champion quality.

However, if the club offers introductory events, like Junior and Senior Hunter, maybe the family dog and occasional hunting companion could do that. So the first dog runs in the club trials and maybe gets a Junior Hunter title, but he doesn't quite have what it takes for Senior level. The next dog he gets will have a little more talent and he will do Senior Hunter and maybe Master Hunter with the dog. Now he is hooked! Whether or not he goes on to try field trials or aspires to that aim, he has helped the sport by attending club trials, helping at the licensed trials, running in some hunt tests, telling his friends about the sport. And if he is a bird hunter, he has improved his hunting companion's skills and reduced the number of dead or wounded birds left in the field because they couldn't be located without a trained dog.

So what reasons hold you back from joining a retriever club or participating in hunt tests? Maybe you are trying to get other goals completed first, like your obedience title. Maybe you live in an urban area and don't know where or how to get started. Maybe you don't hunt and don't want to hunt and think that you have to as part of participating in hunt tests. Maybe you don't like the idea of killing birds so your dog can have something to retrieve. Maybe you are just worried about embarrassing yourself or your dog. If you work with dogs long enough, they will find lots of ways to humble you, so what's one more?

Maybe you just haven't tried it yet so you don't know what kind of fun you are missing!

As I have said before, you may be surprised—maybe even SHOCKED—at how excited your dog gets when you show him a bird. It will conger up something deep and primal that you didn't know your sweet obedience dog had in him, and you will see a gleam in his eye that you have never seen before.

A trainer I worked with several years ago had a client who drove four hours one way every other weekend to train with him for two days. She had a Golden Retriever who was an OTCH and she lived in a large, metropolitan area. Where did she train between visits to the professional trainer? She used city parks and corporate ponds. Where there is a will, there is a way!

I was recently talking to a woman who purchased a pup from me about two years ago. She told me proudly that her dog had just completed his "seasoned" title in the Hunting Retriever Club (HRC) program (roughly equivalent to the AKC Senior title). She said that after she watched her dog run in some hunt tests being handled by someone else, she realized that she didn't have to kill anything personally and that neither did the dog. She instantly recognized how much the dog loved the work and decided that it looked challenging and fun. Then her husband claimed the dog as his duck dog. So now she has her own puppy to train and run in tests! And the cycle continues...

Okay so let's look at that Christmas list again.

Camo shirt? Check.

Training dummies? Check.
Whistle and lanyard? Check.
New rubber boots? Check.
New resolve? I think you have to get that on your own!

Happy training!

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