

FIELD AND FEATHER
The Retriever Game
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This column will be a series of articles dedicated to explaining the AKC Retriever Hunt test program from the perspective of a participant.

Starting a Puppy for the field

Last time we talked about preparing an older dog with an obedience title to participate in the hunt tests. This time, we will talk about the things you can do with a puppy, in conjunction with obedience training, to prepare for hunt tests.

There are so many reasons you pick a particular puppy—I learned long ago that my “pick of litter” may not be the same as someone else’s. I won’t even presume to tell you how to pick a pup, but there are a couple of things to keep in mind if you want to include field work in the pup’s future.

The pup should not be easily startled by loud noises, or should at least be quick to accept noises if startled. And, the pup must already show signs of liking to retrieve. As early as three or four weeks old, I see my puppies start to carry toys around. By five weeks, they are carrying the metal food bowls around and taking the toys back and forth through the dog door. They introduce themselves to startling noises early on—ever hear a metal dog dish clang on a concrete floor? It’s great early conditioning for the pups.

So, you have your pup. It likes to carry things, will retrieve a plush toy or other soft item tossed a short distance. It isn’t easily startled and it loves attention. Now what?

Again, work on the basics. Culture your dog’s natural retrieving desire. This includes not only chasing an object or toy, but also the returning the toy to you. An easy way to keep a small pup on track is to toss the toy or small dummy down a hallway in the house. The best setup is a dead-end hallway, with all the doors shut, so the only place to go is back to you. Keep it fun and always leaving the pup wanting more—don’t work the pup until it tires of the game. **DO NOT LET THE PUP PLAY KEEP-AWAY** with you, a child or another dog. It is a bad habit that will haunt you later.

Begin your leash and obedience training like you would any pup. You cannot have a successful field dog without basic obedience and control. The younger the pup, the shorter the sessions. As the pup learns the “sit” command, you may want to introduce the whistle command for “sit” that becomes a necessity in the Senior and Master levels of work.

As discussed in my previous article, you need to introduce the pup to gunfire. Some people introduce a starter pistol shot to pups at mealtime, so the shot is associated with a pleasant event. Or, you can do it the same way we discussed for an older dog (see previous article in [Front & Finish](#))

Give the pup lots of life experiences. It needs to be exposed to rides in the crate, new places, new smells, birds, other dogs, other people—everything that you will encounter at hunt tests or obedience events. Try to keep some duck or pheasant wings or dead pigeons on hand and keep the pup interested in the look, feel and smell of feathers. If you can't keep birds or wings, find someone who can help with that aspect of the training. If you don't hunt, ask someone who does if he or she will save you some wings. Swap throwing time in a training group for access to birds, join your local retriever club or pay for access to birds—whatever works.

When the weather and water are warm enough, introduce your pup to water and swimming. You don't want a pup's first experience in the water to be a shocking, cold one. And don't toss the pup into deep water either. Find a pond with a bit of a beach or gentle sloping shore. Let the pup play in the edge of the water. Tie a piece of light cord to the training dummy or toy and toss it just slightly out of the pup's reach or drag it past the pup. Let the pup figure out how to get it. Some pups will dive in without hesitation and swim like old pros. Others will need a little time and encouragement. Also, pups learn by example. Let the pup watch another pup or older dog swim and retrieve. This can be a great tool to help the pup overcome any hesitation about water. Jealousy can be a wonderful thing!

Once the pup is swimming fairly well, challenge it a bit with longer and longer tosses. Remember though that swimming takes a lot more energy than running and pups can tire quickly. You don't want the pup to get into trouble in the water because it is tired, or to get chilled. And remember, always quit with the pup wanting more! I have literally dragged pups away from the pond after a training session. Sometimes they don't know when to quit

Remember to incorporate the gun shot into play sessions in the pond and in the yard or field. Try to get to areas with different cover and textures. Let the pup "bust " some cover and crash through high grasses. Let the pup build its confidence. But don't let your pup run unchecked across unfamiliar ground—if necessary, walk the area first to make sure there aren't any holes, barbed wire or other dangers to your pup. After a romp in the field, be sure to check your pup's eyes for grass or weed seeds. These seeds often get into the corner of a dog's eye and can be washed out by tearing action. However, sometimes the seed gets caught under the lid or elsewhere where the dog can't dislodge it without help.

Also remember that your pup is low to the ground and has limited vision. Take this into account when you toss a dummy, wing or pigeon—you want to make sure the pup sees the dummy in the air and sees where it falls. Remember to make sure the pup is successful—have your "gunner" ready with a second dummy or bird if the pup loses momentum. Don't set up training situations beyond the capabilities of the pup, but don't keep the tests too simple either. You need to continuously evaluate your pup and challenge it with new situations when ready.

Use duck or goose calls to help the pup focus on the gunner. Introduce the pup to a flat-bottomed john boat. Let the pup crawl or hop in and out of the boat on land. Later you can do the same thing on water.

Be sure the pup sees decoys, on land and water. You will see all kinds of decoys at tests—plastic ones, paper or lightweight goose decoys that flutter in the wind, anything that could be used in a hunting situation. As with an older dog, place decoys on the ground and walk the pup through them. Then toss the dummy near the decoys and let the pup retrieve. Toss the dummy into the middle of the decoys, then on the other side of the decoys where the pup has to go through the decoys to get the retrieve. When the pup is a solid swimmer, do the same thing on water. Don't do this just once and go on. Continue to introduce decoys into your training, even placing them where the dog can't see them from the line, but comes upon them while running or swimming to the retrieve.

Somewhere between four and seven months old, your puppy will start to lose its baby teeth and the adult teeth will begin to erupt. During this time, the pup's mouth can become quite sore and many times a pup will not want to retrieve for a week or so. Watch for the first signs of swollen gums or missing teeth and make sure that you do not force the pup to retrieve during this time. Until the adult teeth are in place, focus on other aspects of training. When you are sure the pup's mouth is no longer sore, you can resume retriever training.

Through all of this, continue your obedience training. Good manners, on the line and in the field, are an essential part to having a good hunt test dog or hunting dog. A dog that is vocalizing or squirming or jumping around when it is beside you will be out of control when it is out in the field away from you. You can't expect a 10-week old pup to be steady for a toss of a dummy, but start early making the pup stay focused on the gunner and the bird. The pup can't retrieve a bird it didn't see. Good manners and obedience WILL NOT destroy a dog's ability to retrieve. It only enhances the experience for everyone involved. As the pup is older and learns more, you can start to work on steadiness and delivery to hand. Adjust your level of expectation to the level of the dog. For example, turn a small pup loose as soon as the dummy hits the ground. As the pup ages, make it learn to sit and wait to be released.

The ultimate goal is a well-behaved, enthusiastic retriever that will perform the task at hand. You can't get there without basic obedience.

Happy training!