

Field and Feather
The Retrieving Game
1/2/01

My husband and I just got back from a 3,250-mile trip with our four Labradors. It was a reminder of what good travelers they are and how important obedience training is. Everyone we met or visited commented on how quiet and well behaved they were. It was our first extended trip with our little travel trailer and the dogs. The “girls” were very well behaved, even in the tight confines of the travel trailer, although they all tried to steal some time on our bed. I have to admit that I often thought of the T-shirt I have that says, “Labradors are easy to live with, once you get the hang of it!” The drawing that accompanies the statement shows four Labs lounging on the bed, while the human is curled up on the dog bed! We didn’t sink to that level, but the dogs would have been okay if we did. The trip also gave me a lot of “windshield time” to think about my plans and goals for the 2001 season.

I decided to dust off my obedience training and get a CD on my Master Hunter dog, Scarlett, this winter. It is too cold right now to do any field training—or to hunt for that matter—so it will give us something to do together. It never hurts to collect another title, or to brush up her basic obedience. When you do field work, some behaviors you wouldn’t accept in the obedience ring become acceptable—for example, the precise heeling or a front finish required in obedience sometimes disappear in the field. It is common for field dogs to return directly to the heel position with the bird. I think changing the “return to heel” back to the “front finish” will probably be my biggest obedience challenge with Scarlett.

Right now, we have about 30” of snow on the ground, so we have to wait for the snow to melt a bit before we can continue any yard work with the dogs. Yard work describes the skills you teach in a controlled setting, usually flat and closely mowed, like a yard. Yard work includes handling drills, heeling exercises and other teaching methods like “walking fetch.” Walking fetch is an exercise used to make sure your dog understands the “fetch” command. I do it by placing a series of training dummies in a line or a circle, several feet between the dummies. The dog heels at my side as we walk past the dummies. The dog should only reach to pick up the dummies I tell it to fetch—walking past the ones where I don’t give the command and quickly picking up the ones where I do give the command.

There are lots of other yard exercises you will read about and hear about, like “baseball,” “three-handed cast,” “back to the pile” and countless others. I will not recommend one technique or method over another or try to teach you how to use these exercises. There are many others more qualified than I who can provide that guidance--and there are many training books and videos available on the subject. My best advice would be to find someone who is experienced who has happy, nice-working dogs and ask if you can watch or assist so you can learn. I personally find demonstration or the videos much easier for me to understand rather than trying to follow a diagram in a book. But once I understand a basic concept, then I can use the written descriptions and diagrams to strengthen my understanding or provide me with variations of the basic exercise.

If training my dogs progresses as planned (does it ever?), I will be running two dogs at the senior level this hunt test season. I will also be “crossing over” with my MH dog to try some Qualified All-Age (QAA) field trial events. The field trial game is very different from the hunt tests, so this will be an interesting experience. Luckily, I have worked at my retriever club’s field trials for several years as a marshal or as a gunner so I have some idea of the field trial world. I also have several friends who compete at the field trial level who can give me some additional insight. QAA work is similar to Master Hunter, with the distances being longer for retrieves and blinds. You do not need to be in camouflage or dark colors and handlers often wear white to enhance hand signals during blind retrieves. You never have to carry a gun. The event is also a competition to eliminate all but the top four to six dogs instead of the pass/fail format of the hunt tests. There are other

differences too. For example, in Master Hunter, you can talk quietly to your dog during the honor. In QAA, you cannot talk to your dog during the honor after your initial command. With some dogs, this is a major difference that can determine success or failure. I am sure we will discover some of our weak points that need work!

Many of you may be starting the New Year with a new pup or a new dog. What fun! Puppies are always fuzzy bundles full of such hope and promise. It is up to us to help them reach that potential. But we have to set realistic goals and keep our training going to realize that promise. The breeds we work with for retrieving events are so intelligent and eager to please—it is almost a sin to not challenge these dogs and let them reach their potentials. That doesn't mean you have to have lots of titles or train constantly, but it does mean that they like to work for us—and with us—and they are happier when we give them that opportunity.

Make up retrieving games around the house—hide a favorite toy and tell the dog to find it. You can also drop a training dummy into the snow and teach your dog the “hunt it up!” command. This helps strengthen their scenting and retrieving skills. Turn daily chores into fun retrieving games. A friend of mine was picking up old apples from under the tree and putting them in a wheelbarrow. Her Labrador watched for a while, then began helping—he picked up the apples one by one and placed them in the wheelbarrow too!

My husband and I joke that if you have a Labrador (substitute with “retriever”), you never have to bend over again. Over the years, my Labs have brought me my slippers, delivered socks to my husband, carried notes back and forth between us, carried bottles of water or cans of pop for us and even brought me eggs from an errant hen's nest. (Of course, they also picked cantaloupes and peas from the garden, learned how to dig potatoes and eat tomatoes off the vine—not necessarily skills you want to culture.) Even at age 11, my Labrador BJ still loves to bring my slippers, pick up a dropped glove or go through her obedience routine. She knows what is expected and loves the praise for a job well done. We even had her out on opening day of pheasant season and she flushed a hen. They never understand when you don't shoot the hens. (It is illegal to shoot hen pheasants. Only roosters can be harvested.)

The point is they love to work. Keep them happy by letting them work and please you. If it results in a hunting companion your friends love to talk about, that's great. If you do get bitten by the retrieving game and participate in working certificates, hunt tests or other events, that's super! Your dog will love every bit of it.

Happy training!

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