

FIELD AND FEATHER

The Retrieving Game

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Start them Young

People always ask me “When should I start my puppy on retriever training?” The most common answer you hear would be seven or eight weeks old, but in reality, the breeder should have laid the groundwork for you long before that.

Everything that happens to the pups from the time they are born will affect their abilities to be good companions and working dogs. When I have a litter of pups, I make sure that I touch and handle each pup for a short time every day. Even though their eyes and ears aren't open at birth, I always talk to them constantly, getting them used to the sound of my voice.

The pups need to be touched and handled gently so there are no anxieties about being touched or held. Even at just a few days old, I start working on their trust by taking each pup and holding it belly up in my hands or in my lap. Some pups don't like this and will struggle, but I continue to do this until they trust me and relax when I turn them belly up.

Their legs and ears need to be stroked, their backs and tails petted, both sides of their heads and muzzles touched.

As they approach 10-14 days old and their eyes and ears start to open, I continue the handling and talking. It is always fun to see the first time they all respond to my voice by waking up and turning their heads my direction! Then as they start to walk, they learn to follow the sound of my voice, even though they can't look up far enough to see me. But if they follow the sound of my voice, they will find a hand waiting to pet them.

What else can I do with the pups in these first weeks? Well, I can expose them to all kinds of sounds and experiences. For example, running the vacuum cleaner around the whelping box and petting the pups at the same time allows the pups to again learn to trust and not fear a new sound. Clanking dinner bowls, closing doors and the other daily sounds are all important to help acclimate and educate the pups.

When they are old enough to walk, their world increases in size. They get little adventures outside the whelping box onto the concrete floor, grass, tile—whatever different surfaces I can expose them to. And as they outgrow the whelping box, they are moved into a run with a dog door. It always amazes me how quickly the pups learn to use the dog door! They learn to pour through, three or four at a time. The other thing they learn quickly is to go outside to relieve themselves and inside for play and sleep. Having the option to go out the dog door and using the outdoor run for this purpose lets them keep their sleeping space clean and helps start the crate training process.

It is important to continue to introduce them to new things—sudden noises, different sights and sounds like a new obstacle to climb, a new toy, steps or stairs. My exercise yard has railroad tie steps from the kennel down to the grassy area. The pups learn to go down and up the stairs. I give them lots of encouragement to tackle this obstacle and solve the problem.

When they are spending more time outside, I will fire a 22 blank pistol from a distance, then closer to help get them used to the sound of gunfire. And if the weather is warm enough, they get a trip out in the pasture for playtime in the pond. The hike from the kennel to the pond will take them across a concrete floor, vinyl floor, mowed grass, gravel then tall pasture grass. Changes in texture and terrain may seem like no big deal, but to a four- to five-week old puppy, this can be quite an adventure.

I also have several cats that live in and around my kennel. These cats have watched many puppies grow up and they are an integral part of the learning process. It is important to me that my dogs be gentle and accepting of cats and other animals and the cats help them learn. Over the years, I

have always had one cat who would climb into the fenced yard to be with the puppies. If the pups got too rough, a quick pop with claws NOT extended gives a warning. The pups learn to back off and ask permission the next time they try to approach the cat.

Although making sure that no disease is introduced to the pups before they have had first shots is extremely important, I do have friends come visit the pups to get them used to other voices and hands. Their shoes must be sprayed with disinfectant and hands washed in warm, soapy water before touching the pups. It is important that they see humans of all sizes and shapes, including children. However, the children are closely supervised. Small children must sit on the floor or the ground and hold the pups in their laps.

Pups get a few car rides before they are old enough for their new homes. Again, this helps in the crate training process and learning to stay clean. However, I have learned that it is important for me to have ear plugs handy. Sometimes first rides are a bit noisy!

The retrieving and carrying instinct is visible quite early. As soon as the pups can walk, they try to pick up their metal food bowls. Talk about noise! The pups drag the metal bowls across the concrete floor, drop the bowls, clank the bowls into everything in the room. Any bones or toys they have will be carried back and forth through the dog door. Encouraging that instinct is easy—just a bit of direction and praise when they return with the toy makes the game that much more fun for the pup.

At about five weeks old, the pups are introduced to wing-clipped pigeons. Flapping bird wings can be a bit scary for a young pup, so they need the opportunity to work through this startling experience. The pups learn to pursue, catch and carry the birds. I try to do this with the pups as a group and one-on-one because bravado in a pack is quite different than a one-on-one experience.

Between five and eight weeks, the pups continue to get lots of holding, touching and new experiences. By the time their new owners get the pups, they should be happy, outgoing, healthy pups ready to tackle the world of retrieving.

Now it is up to the new owner to continue to culture the retrieving instinct through play, and add new experiences such as obedience class and more car rides (safely in a crate). Then as the pup grows older, the obedience and retrieving can merge and more serious training can begin.

Such exuberance and potential is always a thrill to see! Puppies are truly a great adventure.

Happy training!

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