

Field and Feather

The Retrieving Game

©2004, Meredith Kuhn

What to do in the winter?

For some of us with retrievers, this is an easy answer...hunting! But many people who participate in hunt tests do not hunt, so what do you do with your dog in the winter months?

I have a friend in Arizona who doesn't hunt, but she volunteers to handle her dog for friends who do hunt. Or, you might be interested in attending a peg shoot like I described in one of my columns earlier this year. But if you don't like guns and lots of shooting and birds raining out of the sky, this may not be for you either.

You can still do your basic retriever training, weather permitting. If there is snow on the ground, use it to your advantage. Make your dog use his nose instead of his eyes to find marks—throw white bumpers into the snow. When your dog gets to the area of the fall, he will have to use his nose to locate the bumper. This is great for teaching him to rely on his nose as well as—or instead of—his eyes. Sometimes our dogs get lazy and if they get into the area but don't see the bird right away, they give up, or look for help. We need to mix things up enough to remind them to use all of their senses, not just sight. "Hunt it up" is a great command to help a dog persevere and turn up that bumper.

Maybe winter is the time you "cross over" to other dog activities. For example, this winter, I have my youngest dog in obedience class preparing for her CD and my two older dogs in tracking class. I have never tried tracking before, but it seems a natural fit with hunting dogs. We have only been laying track for about a week, but the dogs already LOVE it and just about dislocate my shoulder when I tell them to "find it." My instructor wants us to enter our first TD test in April, 2005...I'll let you know how it goes.

It seems to me the main challenge in training a retriever to track is getting the dog to follow scent on the ground, instead of air scenting like they do when we hunt. There is no problem with desire or interest...those hot dogs are great incentive! But the first track I laid, my Master dog saw the white glove and bypassed everything to get it. Once again, relying on her sight. It didn't take her long to figure out this new game though, and that there were rewards for keeping her nose down.

The other concern I have is that for upland hunting, the dog is taught to "quarter" back and forth across the field to cover the most ground possible and help flush birds. I did notice both of my dogs "quartering" across the first tracks I laid...it is what they know. However, as we have progressed, they are learning to follow the track more precisely.

A friend of mine did tracking a couple of years ago with her Golden who is an accomplished field dog. At the TD test, her dog was tracking along when he flushed a pheasant. The stuff nightmares are made of...this is a titled hunting dog after all! She expected him to head out after the pheasant. But, he watched the pheasant fly away, then put his nose back on the track and passed the test! It always amazes me how the dogs can keep all the "games" that we play straight and follow the right set of rules.

My young dog, Ruby, actually enjoys obedience training (not at all like her mother!). One complication is that I am training Ruby to heel both sides for field training. Her mother was taught two-sided heeling and it really helps the dog remember complicated scenarios. If you aren't familiar with how this works, you put the dog on the side the bird is coming from. So for example, if it is a single being thrown from your left, the dog is on your left. If it is a double or triple, you start out with the dog on the side where the "go" bird (last bird down) will come from. Then when the dog brings back that bird, you place the dog on the side where the next bird came from, etc. It actually helps the dog remember the positions of the marks.

Anyway, I am teaching Ruby to heel both sides. This poses a little problem in the obedience ring. If she is in front of me and I say "Ruby, HEEL" there is a 50-50 chance she will go to the "wrong" side. In field training, we queue the dog with a hand signal—just the arm and hand out to the side where you want the dog to return. I discussed this with my obedience instructor, who is an AKC obedience judge, and she confirmed that it is ok to use hand signals in Novice as long as it is ONLY the hand signal and no voice. Even though I have titled seven dogs at the CD level, I have never used hand signals in the obedience ring. So, I am working Ruby on taking her heeling queue from my hand/arm position only. She is a quick learner so she was doing a pretty good job after just a few minutes of practice. The other advantage to the hand signal is that Ruby has to stay focused on me to see the command. It gives me another tool to keep her looking at me instead of checking out the rest of the dogs or people.

Normally in field training, you teach the dog to deliver the bird to hand in the "heel" position. However, with Ruby I have made her do a "front" delivery. I did this because she tends to "showboat" with her prize. If I call her to me, have her sit in front and present the bird, she can't be goofing around behind my back. So, this has been an advantage for the obedience ring. She isn't slipping into the "heel" position on the recall like my other field dogs tend to do, and she is already used to sitting in front of me.

In between obedience class, tracking class and obedience shows this winter, we will also be doing some pheasant hunting and hopefully some duck and/or goose hunting. Having a quiet, obedient dog is a definite advantage while hunting. If you have a dog that vocalizes or have seen one of these dogs at a test, imagine sitting in a duck blind with that dog. I had to flunk a dog in a Senior test this summer because of excessive noise. The dog vocalized the whole time he was in the holding blind, again at the line, but more importantly, he vocalized during the honor to the point where the working dog turned to look at him. This is interference with the working dog and is a failure.

Having an obedient dog helps in upland hunting because you don't want the dog to range out too far. If the dog flushes a bird out of shooting range, you have missed your dinner! Or, if the dog won't come when called out in the field, you risk the dog being lost or injured. One of the rules in working dogs on "blind" retrieves is "out of sight, out of control." That is also true in hunting. If you are hunting on public land where there are lots of other dogs and hunters—at various training and shooting skill levels—you need to be sure your dog is under control at all times.

Well, I started with a purpose and ended in a ramble. I guess it's time to sign off.

Happy training!

###

