

## **Field and Feather**

The Retrieving Game

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### **Update on Ruby's Progress**

At the end of the Lardy workshop, I was supposed to work on getting Ruby steady, complete three-handed cast and then continue through Mike's program. Here is a report on how things are going.

Ruby LOVED three-handed cast. She thought that was a wonderful game and once I had her steady, we were able to move through it fairly quickly. I would occasionally have a "no-go" from her on the left "over" pile, but was able to work through that.

The next step was collar conditioning. This is something that most amateur trainers cringe about—your biggest concern is that you will mess your dog up for life. I viewed Mike's tape on this subject several times before I started with Ruby. Basically you start by using the collar to reinforce obedience commands the dog already knows. The first one is "sit," so you heel the dog around giving verbal "sit" commands, and then on one "sit," you slip in a nick from the collar. Every dog reacts differently. Since Ruby is already a strong obedience dog, it was hard to time the nick from the collar because she sits so fast. However, I was able to get her to understand the nick for "sit" in a couple of sessions.

Then you introduce the nick on "here" or "come." Ruby's reaction was to come like a freight train and bury her head in my knees—totally unacceptable, but understandable. Of course, the dogs profiled on Mike's tape didn't exhibit this particular avoidance behavior, so I had to work through it on my own. I had to use the heeling stick to reinforce the front sit on the "here" to keep her from hiding in my knees. It took several sessions to get her to understand this and to sit quickly in front of me without the avoidance behavior.

Then the next step is to introduce the nick on "sit" and "here" in the same session. I completely lost "sit" with Ruby when I had both nicks in the same session—she wanted to come on each nick and I could NOT get her to do a remote sit (sit on a return to me). I struggled with this for several sessions, and then decided to try something. I had Ruby on a 40-ft long line. After a little warm-up of basic obedience, I gave Ruby the "sit" command and walked away to set up for a recall or "here" command. I had my husband take the end of the line and stand several yards behind Ruby. I called her in, and gave a verbal "SIT" while my husband jerked on the line at the same time, forcing Ruby to sit in the remote position. We did this several times with no collar pressure, to make sure she understood. Then I re-introduced the nick on the sit, with my husband popping the line to make her stop and sit. It didn't take long for her to get the picture, so by the next session, I was able to get her to remote sit quickly without any of the avoidance behavior. That was a major victory!

The last thing is to introduce the whistle for "sit" and "here" which went very quickly.

After collar conditioning, Mike recommends re-visiting three-handed cast. The purpose is to see if you can use the nick to reinforce "sit" or "here" in the controlled situation of "back" and "over" casts. This went very quickly for Ruby and we were ready to move on.

While we were working on these concepts in the yard, I continued Ruby's fieldwork. First, we worked on being steady on a loose lead. That came quickly once she understood that she had to sit and wait for me to send her before she could get the mark. We were able to progress to steady off lead fairly quickly. We have had some controlled breaks—where she took off before I sent her—but I was able to stop her just a few feet out and make her return to heel. I am making sure I decide when she goes, and that I don't "flash send" her—she must sit several seconds with my hand above her head before I release her for the mark.

We have been working on longer marks because she was hunting short. She is doing much better at accurately gauging the depth of marks, so she is not breaking down to hunt too soon.

I have also started the "bird in mouth" routine with her. This is where the dog is running singles, but when the dog returns from the first mark, you make the dog hold the bumper or bird while watching the second mark go down. This prepares the dog for doubles and helps develop more control at the line. The first couple of times I tried this, Ruby spit the bumper out as soon as the second mark hit the ground. I made her pick the bumper up and hold it for several seconds, then took the bumper from her and sent her for the new mark. She is now fairly solid on this concept.

We have started pile work, specifically, going "back" to a pile, from left heel and right heel positions and from a remote sit. She is also sitting on the whistle on return from the pile and she is taking left and right "back" casts well. At the end of each pile work session, I have been throwing her a simple double. Interestingly, she chooses to pick up the first bumper tossed, then the last one down. At this point, I am not going to insist that she pick up the "go" bird first—I am happy that she understands the concept and can count to two! She even had her first water double this week--she broke and I had to call her back. However, even with that distraction, she still got both bumpers.

We may be moving more slowly than some, but we are making steady progress. I am in no hurry! We don't have any performance goals set for this season, so we will just continue through the program for now.

Happy training!

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