

Field and Feather

The Retrieving Game

Workshop well worth the trip

Where do I begin? The workshop was excellent—an amazing opportunity to interact with (and pick the brain of) Mike Lardy. The biggest problem was not being sharp enough to know all the questions we should ask!

First, Mike is polite, eloquent, funny, approachable and extremely patient with dogs and their owners. He is able to articulate precisely what he wants you or the dog to do, and how to get there. I think what sets him apart from other professional trainers is his unique ability to “read” a dog and determine what training approach will help bring the best out in the dog.

We attended the “Basics and Transition” workshop. There were ten dog-handler pairs and 22 observers. These dogs were from early stages—say just starting force-fetch—to one dog that was running Master and another dog that had been running some Qualifying field trial stakes.

There was a woman from Holland who had flown over to be an observer. Apparently there are approximately 3,000 retriever fanciers across the Netherlands involved in retriever sports. It was interesting to talk with her about how they train retrievers. For example, she said most retriever people there think the electronic collar is a horrible thing and frown upon anyone who uses one. They are also not allowed to train with live birds. If they need ducks for training, they must go to a licensed game producer who gasses the ducks to death! Then the dog trainers buy the dead ducks.

The rest of the group was made up of people from all across the country. Some were hunt test enthusiasts; some were gun dog/hunt test professional trainers; some had field trial aspirations. One observer had been participating in field trials for over 40 years. He has known Mike for years and wanted to see what makes Mike and his clients so successful at a very competitive sport. He was thoroughly impressed with Mike’s techniques and told me he learned quite a bit, even as a lifetime field trialer.

The main message from Mike was that it doesn’t matter whether you are training a hunting dog, a hunt test dog or a field trial dog. The principles and the process are the same. If you don’t give your dog a strong foundation, you and your dog will not be successful.

The seminar started on a cold and rainy Wednesday morning. So much for a vacation in warm, sunny Georgia! We squeezed our folding chairs into Mike’s garage to keep out of the rain while he began explaining what he hoped to accomplish in the next five days. Because of the rain, he had to change plans a bit. He decided to start the force-fetch procedure on a 6-month old pup so we could observe the process. In fact, he had a short session with this dog each day of the workshop and the force-fetch was complete by day five.

Mike wanted us to see his “big dogs” work—he normally lets the workshop participants observe a training session with the dogs on his truck (dogs he is training). The rain let up enough where we were able to watch the dogs work through one setup. Mike told us the name of each dog, its sire and dam, and where the dog was in its training. He explained why some dogs ran the marks as a triple, while others ran it as a double with a single. He also explained why the marks were set up where they were, and what he hoped to teach or accomplish with that particular format.

Then he had the 10 dog/handler pairs run their dogs on three singles so he could watch the dogs work and get a feel for where they were in their training. We all had to fill out a detailed questionnaire about our dogs when we applied to attend the workshop, but this was what Mike calls a “field check” to see where the dogs were. If you are familiar with Mike’s training program, there are field checks throughout the training process to evaluate the dog’s progress.

At the end of that first day, Mike told us he would have a training plan for each of us the next morning. And that he did. Every day, we each had a session of yard work, and then a session in the field. He helped us correct or refine our handling skills, from the proper sequence for sending and receiving a dog, to a review of basic obedience and force-fetch for some of the dogs. Some of the handlers had identified specific problems with their dogs. For example, one dog had a severe bird-munching problem. Mike was able to analyze the problems, identify some of the causes and devise a training process for each to help correct the problems. It was truly amazing to watch his ability to evaluate a dog and figure out what training techniques would work best in each situation. Sometimes he would say, "We are going to try this and see what happens." He evaluated the result and built on that to help correct the problem.

I was there with my 2-yr old chocolate female, Ruby. I had already taken her through force-fetch, walking fetch and stick fetch. Mike had us review basic obedience and stick fetch, then we started on simple three-handed casting. One issue that presented itself quickly was that Ruby was not steady on lead. This complicated three-handed casting because I had lots of "sit" corrections and lead handling was messy. My first homework assignment—get Ruby steady on lead.

My husband (Tracy) was there with his 2.5-year old black male, Raven. Raven has been professionally trained through most of the yard work, but Tracy had not worked with him much other than running some marks. Since Tracy is not a very experienced handler, the main issue was getting Tracy and Raven to work as a team. The first challenge—get Raven to wait until Tracy gave the command to retrieve. Raven was anticipating and would take off just a split second before Tracy said his name. The fix was to make everything very mechanical and repetitive: Heel, Sit, Drop (release the bird) and proper use of his hand above Raven's head as a queue.

The combination of our one-on-one time with Mike and the opportunity to observe the other handlers with their dogs was a very effective learning atmosphere. In the course of the workshop, we watched a dog complete force-fetch, one go through collar-conditioning, one go through swim-by, two go through three-handed cast and one start on cold blinds. We watched Mike analyze the bird chomper, devise some techniques to reduce the behavior in the controlled environment of the yard and then use these tools to control the behavior in the field. The owner was amazed—especially since the pro trainer working with her dog had no idea how address the problem. The audience was also amazed at how far the dog came in such a short time.

Mike stressed the importance of following his flow chart on the training steps. This is available on his web site (www.totalretriever.com). The left side of the flow chart shows the progression in the yard—from basic obedience, to force-fetch to three-handed cast, to collar-conditioning, etc. The right side of the flow chart shows where the dog should be in the field at each of the training stages in the yard. Mike will tell you that the basic steps are the same or similar to what most professional retriever trainers use. How he progresses through the steps and incorporates/translates this into the fieldwork with his use of indirect pressure is the difference.

One thing he emphasized repeatedly: THERE ARE NO SHORTCUTS. If you think going straight to collar conditioning before the basic yard work is going to solve all your problems and save you time, it won't. In fact, it will most likely cause problems.

Mike also made an interesting comment. He said that the Junior Hunter test was the worst thing to ever happen to the retriever sport because people were running untrained dogs and they were occasionally being rewarded with ribbons. That was encouraging poor training (or no training) and the establishment of bad habits, like poor (or no) line manners, vocalizing, creeping, etc. Mike's guideline with his client dogs is that he doesn't enter them in competition until the dog is training successfully at the next level up. For example, dogs aren't run in Derby unless they are already training successfully at the Qualified all-age level. He has a valid point—as a judge (and

occasional participant) of Junior stakes, I can tell you that the lack of basic obedience in the dogs is appalling and the handlers are often clueless about the guidelines or what is expected. Someone has told them, "if you get all the birds, you pass."

On day five of the workshop, he had one last yard session for all the handlers and dogs. At the end of each session, he explained to the handler and the group what should come next for that particular dog and whether there were any specific problems that needed to be addressed.

He reminded all of us that we should **never** enter competitions or hunt tests before training is complete (I am guilty of this and I know many of you are too). Running a dog before it is ready can lead to bad habits that you may never be able to totally correct. For example, he told the woman with the bird chomper that she should not enter any field trials until August because she had to take the techniques they developed in the yard and translate that into the field. Until she was sure she had the necessary control, she should not run the dog. She was disappointed, but she also knew Mike was right.

Here are the points from his final comments:

1. We really have to work on establishing and maintaining our standards—for example, don't let the dog creep one day and then correct him for it the next day. You can maintain a high standard even with a sensitive dog.
2. Follow the program step by step. Skipping steps causes problems.
3. Steadiness is **primary**. You can steady dogs early on without destroying drive or desire.
4. The most effective training is in an environment of repetition.
5. Praise is important but it must be at the right **time** for the right **behavior**. Praise is not "happy talk" to cajole a dog--it is to reward a dog for the correct behavior.
6. Don't fall back into old habits!

Our challenge now is to try to assimilate—and remember—all that we learned and use it to help improve our training and our dogs. And above all, we have to resist falling back into those old habits.

Happy training!

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Photos below



Mike discusses dog performance during a water session



After a review of swim-by, Mike discusses Raven and Tracy's progress and what their next steps should be.