

# Force Fetch Training, Delivery to Hand and Related Behavior

By Robert Milner



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Force fetch training is training pup to fetch or pick up on command, a dummy, bird, or other object. The purpose of force fetch training is to accomplish the following goals:

1. Cure the fault of either not delivering to hand and/or dropping birds
2. Cure the fault of having a hard mouth
3. As the behavioral basis for forcing a dog on lines.

## Delivery to Hand

The simplest solution to delivery to hand is to never let pup get started dropping dummies. Many puppies are born with a tendency to deliver to hand, but are inadvertently “trained” at a young age to drop the dummy on they way to the handler.

There are several ways to get pup to spit out that dummy on his way to you:

1. Grab at the dummy as pup comes up to you. You will likely startle him and cause him to drop the dummy. Don't grab at the dummy. Crouch down and slip your hand under pup's chin as he comes up. Help him hold the dummy in his mouth and stroke his head and praise him a couple of minutes as he holds the dummy. Then take it from him.
2. Jump at pup as he is coming up and cause him to run from you. Puppies have an innate behavior to chase and “be chased.” Use the former. Move away from pup a step or two as he comes up to you with the dummy.

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3. The first time pup you throw something for pup to retrieve, he runs for the bushes with it. You chase and catch him. He spits out dummy somewhere along the way. The solution is to give for several weeks all subsequent retrieves in a place with no escape exits. A long hallway in the house is excellent. Develop well the good habit of delivery to hand before you venture back around bushes again.
4. Pup comes up to you with the dummy and you start harassing him to come to heel and sit to deliver. He either starts dropping the dummy, or stops coming to you or both. The right way to have pup heel and sit to deliver is:
  - a. Attach a 6-foot length of cord to pup's collar for him trail.
  - b. When pup comes to you with the dummy, crouch down and slip your hand under his chin to hold the dummy in his mouth as you stroke his head and praise him as he holds the dummy. Then take the dummy from him, and with the check cord guide him to the heel position and command "sit" with a pull upward on the cord. After he sits pet and praise him. After a number of repetitions pup will be heeling and sitting automatically after you've taken the dummy. Next just reverse the sequence. When he comes up, don't take the dummy until after he has heeled and sat. He will be so much in the habit of heeling and sitting that he won't drop the dummy.
5. A more insidious cause of dropping dummies is the use of plastic dummies. Plastic dummies are slippery when wet, and less comfortable for a dog to carry than canvas dummies. Dogs are more likely to drop plastic dummies than canvas. Using plastic dummies increases the probability of encountering problems with pup delivering to hand.

## **Force Fetch as Foundation for Field Trial Lining**

Force fetch training is done on nearly all field trial dogs in America because of the importance of lining to the field trial dog. If you don't plan on running field trials, and your dog delivers to hand, and is gentle with birds then you do not need to force fetch train him.

If you are going to run field trials and want to win then you should force fetch train pup. The force fetch training is the foundation behavior for lining and is a necessary first step for forcing pup on lines.

## **Hard Mouth**

A dog has a hard mouth is when he crushes birds, eats birds, or refuses to give up a bird. This is a major fault as it pretty much renders pup useless for his primary function, which is retrieving birds. A thorough force fetch training regimen will usually counteract hard mouth.

## **The Hidden Danger in Force Fetch Training**

The hidden danger in force fetch training is that it compensates for behaviors that should be developed by selective breeding. This idea occurred to after a few years of working with many

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puppies of American Field Trial breeding and many puppies of British Field Trial breeding. There is a glaring behavioral difference between the two genetic pools of puppies. A much higher percentage of British puppies automatically deliver to hand, than do American puppies of field trial breeding.

You don't have to look far to find the reason. The British very seldom force fetch train their dogs. This training practice is not widely accepted or practiced in England. Therefore, in that breeding population, soft mouth and delivery to hand is developed by selective breeding. Dogs that are not soft mouthed or that don't deliver to hand are not successful field dogs and thus tend not to be hunted or campaigned in field trials. Thus they also tend not to be bred to for good working stock. In England, selective breeding is still operating to produce soft mouthed retrievers.

In the US working retriever population, training is operating to produce soft mouthed retrievers. Selective breeding for soft mouth and delivery to hand has been replaced by training to develop these traits.

Since fetch training has become a general and nearly universal practice in the training of field trial dogs, we are camouflaging one of the major traits that molded the retrieving breeds through selective breeding of hundreds of generations. When you cover up a primary trait with training, then it no longer has value for selective breeding. Today when you look at a prospective sire for breeding, you can't tell whether his soft mouth and delivery to hand came from his ancestors or from his trainer.

One of the primary traits for which retrievers have been selectively bred since entering into a partnership with the sportsman has been delivering to gently to hand an undamaged bird. With the widespread practice of force fetch training we have effectively reversed years and years of breeding selection for soft mouth retrievers.

### **Force Fetch Training – When to Do It**

Only force fetch train if and when you have to. If your pup delivers to hand naturally, reinforce and reward that behavior. Don't do things that cause pup to change that behavior. Then you may never have to force train him.

The two behaviors that may require you to force fetch train are (1) dropping birds or dummies; (2) hard mouth. Neither behavior requires an immediate resorting to force training. With both you are better served to wait on the force fetch training.

If your dog is hard mouth and rough on birds, simply train him with dummies for several months, until he is obedient, steady and doing double marked retrieves and blind retrieves with confidence. Check him on birds again after that several month period of working strictly on dummies. Often the force of habit will prevail, and the hard mouth will be overridden by the strong habit of retrieving dummies softly to hand. On the other hand sometimes the hard mouth is still operating. You take him through A thorough course of force fetch training will usually cure it. Cease all other training for a couple of weeks while the force fetch training is in progress.

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In the case of the hard mouth dog you should condition pup on the dowel, dummies and on birds. After the dowel and dummies you should force him to fetch first frozen birds, then unfrozen birds.

For the dog that is dropping dummies the solution is similar. If he's dropping them within a few feet of you, simply ignore it and continue with his initial obedience and retrieving work. After he's had several weeks of obedience work and is steady and doing double marked retrieves with confidence, start the force training. Cease all other work with pup while you are engaged in the force fetch training process.

If pup is dropping birds far away from you, move his work to the water for a couple of weeks. Usually a dog won't spit a dummy while he's swimming with it. He will generally wait until he's exiting at water's edge, then he drops it. Therefore give the distant dropper his retrieves at the water. The basic principle here is that you want a dog to have some foundation of obedience training and retrieving work before you put him through the force training process.

### **Force Fetch Training – The Mechanics**

Force fetch training is bad for the breed, but we seem to be saddled with it. The ceasing of selective breeding for soft mouth insures that more and more sportsmen will have to force fetch train their dogs to compensate for the lack of breeding selection. Force fetch training appears to be a necessary evil. Therefore I present the mechanics of performing force fetch training.

Force fetch training is a negative conditioning process training the fetch behavior as an escape response. The negative stimulus which pup is escaping in the force fetch training is an ear pinch or toe pinch. The sequence is:

<b>Signal</b>	<b>Negative Stimulus</b>	<b>Escape Response</b>	<b>Reward</b>
"Fetch"	Ear or Toe Pinch	Grab Dowel in Mouth	Stroke slowly and gently on head and top of neck with gentle verbal praise

That describes the total conditioning sequence. For the best results and least amount of force used, the sequence should be carefully structured and progressively built. This behavior can be accomplished in as short a time as 3 or 4 ten minute sessions or it might take 15 or 20 sessions. A lot depends on the nature of the individual dog being trained. A lot more depends on the skill and experience level of the person doing the training. With a cooperative dog and a skilled dog trainer the process can be accomplished gently and rapidly in 3 or 4 sessions. With an uncooperative dog and a novice trainer, it might take many more sessions.

### **Ear Pinch or Toe Pinch – Ground or Table**

There are two places and two methods to do the force fetch training. You can do it on a table using the toe pinch or you can do it on the ground using the ear pinch. If you are a fairly skillful dog trainer and have a cooperative dog, then force fetch train on the ground using the ear pinch.

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This method is simpler, and faster for a skillful trainer. I have used both methods extensively. I prefer the ear pinch on the ground because it is simpler and faster. I have also watched a large number of novice trainers attempt the force training process on the ground and have seen a lot of lost tempers, confusion for the trainer and confusion for the dog. Generally the novice trainer attempting to force fetch train on the ground will nearly always use too much force, and hamper the process.

If you are a novice trainer, make it easy on yourself and your dog. The toe pinch method used with a dog up on a table is much the preferred method. It is more complicated and takes longer, but it is also much harder to screw up.

Tethering pup up on the table puts you in complete control and makes it much easier for you to elicit the desired response from pup at the right time. Putting pup on a table for force fetch training also accomplishes several other objectives:

1. It puts him in an unfamiliar place, which gives the trainer an advantage
2. It removes you from physical contact with pup. It is much easier for the trainer to maintain an objective attitude and keep his emotions out of the picture. Thus a training session is much less likely to degrade into a wrestling match.
3. It puts the trainer in a comfortable position. The trainer is less likely to lose his patience.

### **Building the Behavior Chain**

Looking at the table and toe pinch method, start with the table. A 4 x 8 sheet of plywood is a good size. Make it waist high and sturdy enough to support pup. About three feet above the table string a length of cable running lengthwise. The cable will initially serve to anchor pup in place and subsequently as a “trolley wire” to allow pup to move back and forth the length of the table. Then you begin a step-by-step behavior building process. Looking at the basic elements of the behavior and building them in sequence is by far the easiest on pup.

1. Pup must learn to give to pressure on the collar on his neck. Since you have already obedience trained pup, he will have learned to give to his neck.
2. Put pup on the table and let him get comfortable on it. Anchor pup to the cable with a few swivel snaps fastened together. Tie him short enough that he is in the sitting position. Walk him back and forth on the table a few times while petting and encouraging him. Get him comfortable on the table.
3. The next step is to make him accept a foreign object in his mouth. First make him accept your hand in his mouth. If you don't like dog saliva, put on a leather glove.
  - a. Grab pup's collar with your left hand so you can keep his head still.



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6. When pup is automatically reaching for the dowel when he feels the pinch, then it time to add on the command “fetch”. The sequence will look like this:

Signal	Negative Stimulus	Escape Route	Reward
“Fetch”	Ear or Toe Pinch	Grad Dowel	Pet and Praise

- a. With pup on table, give light pinch with cord and command “fetch” as the dowel goes in pup’s mouth. Repeat several times.
  - b. Lengthen the attachment from pup’s collar to the trolley cable, so that he reaches further to grab the dowel. Repeat several times until pup is taking the dowel just above the tabletop.
  - c. Wrap some tape around each end of the dowel so that it has a dumbbell shape and the taped ends hold the dowel off the table. Then require pup to fetch it off of the table instead of out of your hand. Some dogs have a little trouble here. The normal human reaction is to pinch harder. The solution is keeping the pinch the same light intensity for a longer period of time, until pup grabs the dowel off the table.
7. Continue for several sessions until pup is automatically fetching the dowel from the table upon command without the toe pinch.
8. Give pup a session on the table with a light ear pinch instead of the toe pinch. The proper way to use ear pinch is to grasp pup’s collar with your hand. Then fold his ear back against the collar. Next lightly press your thumbnail against the ear, which is lying over the collar. Press just hard enough that pup becomes uncomfortable and fidgets a little. Then put dowel in front of his mouth and wait for him to grab it. Release the pinch when he does.
9. Next give pup a session or two on the ground with a light ear pinch using first the dowel and then a dummy.

At this point, pup should be fetching dummies from the ground crisply with just the command “fetch”. This completes pup’s force fetch training unless you plan to run him in field trials. Field trial dogs will need an extension of force training in the form of forcing them a progressively greater distance to a pile of dummies.

The table method is complicated but structures the process so that a novice trainer can accomplish the training with minimum confusion to the dog, and minimum force.

### Force fetch training without the table

If you choose to force fetch train without the table you should go through the same sequence of steps as the table method. The major differences are that the dog is started on the ground, and an ear pinch is used instead of the toe pinch.

## **The Most Common Mistakes**

**The most common mistakes that beginning trainers make are:**

- 1.** Using too much force. The trainer applies the pinch, and doesn't get an immediate response, so he pinches harder. Some dogs will respond by shutting down and doing nothing. The correct method is to apply the light pinch. It should be just hard enough that pup is uncomfortable, then provide the escape rout for him, by making sure that he gets the dowel in his mouth, which makes the pinch cease. There is not a requirement for speed. Keep the pinch at the same intensity and wait for the response to occur. Use more time, not more force.
- 2.** Skipping steps in the sequence will make it difficult for some dogs to get the picture. When pup is not progressing, simplify. If he's not grabbing for the dowel, slip it into his mouth and release the pinch so he learns what turns off the pinch. Whenever you encounter problems, simplify.
- 3.** Don't think that the command produces the response. You the trainer produce the response with the pinch. Only after the response is reliably occurring do you start preceding the response with the command "fetch". That's how pup learns.
- 4.** Many beginning trainers get wrapped up in the pinching and forget the power of reward. Just because the pinch is working don't neglect the reward following the correct response. Petting and praise following the correct response increase the effectiveness of the force fetch training process ten fold.