

Improving Whistle Commands: Part I, "Sit Whistle"

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Retrievers are taught that a series of short whistle blasts means "come" and one blast from a whistle means, "sit". A sit whistle should also mean: sit quickly, turn around and face the handler. In this article we will discuss ways to improve your dog's response to the sit whistle.

Whistle Intensity

If you are an inexperienced handler, practice blowing your whistle until the sound is not only loud but intense as well. When you blow your whistle it must come across to the dog as a definite command.

A handler that cannot blow a whistle with intensity is going to be perceived by the dog as lacking in authority. This in itself is enough to cause a dog to disregard a whistle command in many situations.

The best way to learn to blow a whistle with intensity is to listen to other handlers. When you hear a handler that consistently blows a whistle with intensity, ask them to show you how they hold the whistle in their mouth and how they expel the air from their lungs into the whistle. Then have them listen to you blow your whistle and coach you until you can blow your whistle with intensity.

Timing of the Whistle Sit Command

When handling a retriever, being able to give the dog a whistle sit command at the proper time is extremely important. When the dog is sent on a blind retrieve, immediately put the whistle in your mouth. If you wait until you recognize that it is time to handle the dog it will be too late!

Often we see handlers that give the dog a whistle sit ten yards after they should have. Being too late with a whistle can cause the dog to get into a lot of trouble. So, do your part, be ready and give your dog timely whistle commands.

How to Teach a Pup the Whistle Sit Command

First teach the pup to sit on command for a food treat. Then blow the whistle once, tell him to sit and give him a tasty treat for sitting. The pup will anticipate the sit command and food treat when he hears the whistle and will begin to sit at the sound of the whistle. It won't take many repetitions until the pup will learn to sit when he hears one blast from your whistle.

The Whistle Sit Should Also Mean Turn and Face the Handler

A common error is teaching the young dog that a whistle sit only means, "sit". You must also teach the dog that the whistle sit means turn around and face you.

In our training program we first teach the dog to go to, and be steady on, a place board. (Retriever Journal Feb/March 1996. Past Retriever Journal articles can be found in our web site library at www.dobbsdogs.com). Once the dog understands to go to a place board you can leave him on one board and call him to another.

Give the sit whistle just as he is about to step onto the board. You want to time the whistle so that the dog stops and sits on the board. Wait one second, then call him and throw a fun bumper while he is coming toward you. Soon the dog will anticipate that you are going to throw a bumper right after he obeys the sit whistle.

Next, instead of calling the dog toward you, send him away from you to the place board. As he is stepping onto the place board give him a whistle sit. Because he anticipates that you are going to throw him a fun bumper, he will turn around and face you as he sits.

Developing a young dog's whistle sit using the place board technique will cause him to develop two good habits. First, he will learn to turn and face the handler. And second, because he knows he must stop quickly to stay on the place board he will stop without taking extra steps.

When the dog is steady, finish the whistle sit exercise by increasing excitement. Send him to a place board and stop him with a sit whistle. Immediately flight a bird and shoot it so it falls behind you. Then send the dog to retrieve. It won't take much of this exercise before the dog will stop on a dime and face you when he hears the sit whistle.



Leave the dog on one board and call him to another that is placed halfway to you. Stop him on the board with a sit whistle. Let him sit for a few seconds then call him to you and throw a fun bumper.

Sitting Quickly

While being taught to heel the young dog will often demonstrate a resistant attitude. Consequently, he will sit slowly when given the command to sit.

Teach the young dog that a poor attitude and a slow sit are unacceptable. To do this have another person walk behind you and tap the dog on the rear end with a "sit stick" if he sits slowly. If the dog tries to sit quickly let him beat the stick tap. After a few repetitions, he will learn that by sitting quickly he can avoid getting tapped on the rear with the stick.



If the dog sits slowly, you can have someone walk behind you as you heel the dog. Have your helper tap the dog on the rear with a "sit stick" if he sits slowly on your sit command.

Sit Quick Out of a Run

Another method for teaching the dog to sit quickly to the whistle requires a pinch collar. In this exercise, command "Heel" and run with your dog in the heel position. As you are running, give a sit whistle, yank upward on the leash and come to a sudden, abrupt stop. After you observe that the dog is sitting quickly when he hears the whistle allow him to avoid the yank on the pinch collar.



To speed up the dog's response to your sit whistle, run with the dog at heel then give the whistle command as you yank up on the leash and come to a sudden, abrupt halt.

Problem Solving

Lying Down When Given a Whistle Sit

Some dogs will feel the urge to go into a submissive posture and lay down when they are stopped with a whistle sit. Teaching the dog not to lie down when given a whistle sit starts with teaching him to sit up from the down position. To do this we like to use an overhead lead as it allows us to pull the dog up into the sit position.

First, put the dog in a down position. Then, give the whistle sit and guide the dog up into a sit. After several repetitions, use the e-collar to reinforce your sit whistle if the dog does not move into a sit position by himself. Continue to guide the dog with the overhead lead if necessary.



To teach the dog not to lie down when given a sit whistle teach him to sit-up from the down position.

Point of Contact

If the dog stands or refuses to sit quickly we put an e-collar around his waist. The contact points are placed on top of his rump.

Give a whistle sit and push the button. The dog will move away from the stimulation on the top of his rump causing him to sit very fast. This technique can also be used to correct the dog that continues to travel several steps before responding to your whistle command.

In the next issue we will discuss improving your dog's response to the "Come in" whistle.



Another way to get a quick sit is to put an e-collar around the dog's waist with the contact points positioned on the top of his rump. The dog will move away from the stimulation on the rump and sit quickly.