

10 Pitfalls in Retriever Training

By Mike Stewart
Wildrose Kennels — Home of Drake the DU Dog

Many of the problems that owner-trainers experience when training retrievers could be easily minimized if addressed early in training. It is much better to not condition in a problem that you must later train out. Here are some of the top pitfalls trainers face:

1. Long Training Session

Too much enthusiasm from the trainer often proves detrimental to young pups. As a result of lengthy, repetitive training sessions, the pup simply loses focus, becomes distracted, and finally burns out. Pups under six months have very short attention spans. Sessions should not exceed 5 minutes and should include only a few repetitions-any more than that and they will lose focus. It is not essential to train every day. A few minutes twice a day is more effective than an hour every day. Often a break of a few days in training produces surprising results.

Pups between 6 and 12 months must maintain a positive attitude toward training. Pups this age will benefit most from sessions no longer than 20 minutes. Never continue to the point of boredom. If things are going well and the session is complete, there is no need to push pups past 2 to 3 repetitions. Always stop on a positive, successful exercise or response. A good duck dog can be trained with the investment of 10 minutes a day three to four times per week if one adheres to an effective training plan.

2. Premature Hunting

Nothing can be gained by exposing pups to hunting situations under the age of 10 months, whether it's upland game or waterfowl shooting. Taking a 4 to 5 month old pup on a dove or duck shoot for "experience" is similar to taking a first grade child to high school for "experience." What positive effects could possibly be achieved? Yet the downside potential is huge: gun shy, water shy, bird shy, even physical injury.

Shyness can result from the exposure to aggressive dogs on the hunt, fatigue, frigid water, etc. What is the up side? Be patient. Let the pup mature and do your homework building strong basic gundog skills. No dog should be exposed to a hunting situation until all basic gundog skills are entrenched, excluding blinds. Don't rush the process.

3. Waiting to Steady

People are fearful that if they attempt to steady their pups early in basic gundog training, the dog will lose enthusiasm and drive. Not true if properly accomplished with gentle methods. Steadiness to shot and fall is one of the most important lessons a young dog will learn. Any

10 Pitfalls in Retriever Training

properly bred retriever can mark and retrieve with very little formal training; it's knowing when not to retrieve that takes the conditioning. Start early denying pup retrieves. Pick up 50% of all bumpers and later 50-60% of all the downed birds on your pup's first few hunts. Condition patience from the beginning.

4. Too Many Meaningless Marks

After a pup is enthusiastic about early retrieve (no more than 2 to 3 per session), there is little point to continuing meaningless, repetitive, hand-thrown retrieves in elementary sessions. Once the pup dashes out, picks the mark and returns back to the handler, nothing more is necessary. Marks now must teach something-falls in long grass, in water, over water onto land or in high crops.

Marks can be used to teach doubles, lengthen the dog's retrieving distance, or to exercise watching the sky. Excessive marking can be counterproductive by unsteading the pup and promoting independence rather than interdependent relationships. Additionally, marking to improve memory is actually is the poorest of methods. Place more emphasis in the early steps of training on steadiness and memory development rather than marks.

5. Setting Pups Up to Fail

Nothing is learned from failure in the dog world. It is vital that pups succeed every time in training to develop confidence in you and in themselves. Don't ask young dogs to exceed their capabilities. Nothing succeeds like success. If necessary, walk out and help locate the fall yourself, shorten distances, simplify the concept or re-visit basic core skills. Train-don't test.

Teach every skill within a concept and then link them together. Dogs learn from association established through consistent repetition. In effect we are establishing a learning chain through causal relationships. Be careful not to circumvent this process. Think "win, win"...how can the exercise be set up to enhance the possibilities of success?

6. No Transitional Training

This error commonly occurs in one or two forms when individuals eagerly press their dogs into hunting situations too quickly. For example:

- A.** They rush through skills and exercises without sufficient repetition to make a skill a habit. When pressed on the hunt, the pup becomes confused or merely disregards the commands, and spins out of control.
- B.** Individuals do not sufficiently transfer training skills introduced in drills to practical hunting situations.

10 Pitfalls in Retriever Training

A proper training sequence for a gundog includes:

Yard work — introduction to skills in a controlled environment

Field training sessions — training exercises and drills usually conducted on familiar training grounds to entrench skills

Transitional training — practical exercises on simulated hunting situations including varied terrain, locations, and natural environmental factors that will likely be confronted on the hunt, such as birds, gunfire, boats, etc.

Training on the hunt — The first hunts with a young gundog must be dedicated to training, not taking game. Early hunting experiences are extensions of training. The settings, circumstances, and conditions of the hunt must be controlled to the highest extent possible. Focus remains on specific goals. Attention is placed on the dog and his particular needs. Young prospects should not be rushed into hunting situations until all basic gundog skills are understood and thorough transitional experiences have been afforded the handler and the dog.

7. Counterproductive Interference

Many hunting dog prospects spend much of their time in uncontrolled environments such as the home, apartment, or office where they remain unconfined during off-training periods. Well-meaning friends, visitors, or neighbors commonly confront them with opportunities for dysfunctional behavior/activities. Dogs are learning all the time, not just in training.

Question what is being learned outside the controlled training environment. Many times the experiences occur while the owner/handler is not present. People love to amuse themselves by playing with an eager, enthusiastic retriever and they may be promoting unsteadiness by tossing repeated, meaningless retrieves, encouraging free running or swimming, or perhaps even a bit of rough house, tug-of-war, or chase. Guests, kids at home, and neighbors all may unintentionally become ambassadors of hyperactivity and dysfunctional habits for our gundogs.

People may also interfere with the concentration of your dog/pup during training by attempting to praise, interact, or provide treats while the dog is involved with a session. These acts are seemingly harmless from the individual's perspective. They only want to interact briefly with your dog, but the practice must be discouraged and avoided.

- A. Set rules for family members to follow when handling the dog while you are away.
- B. Instruct visitors and neighbors about acceptable conduct with your dog, especially pups.
- C. If you cannot control the situation while you are absent, control the dog's environment. Invest in a space where the dog can remain away from others while you're away, like an outdoor pen, enclosure, etc.
- D. Don't allow others to interfere with or distract your dog while involved in training.

8. Late Whistle Introductions

Often, individuals introduce whistle commands far too late in the pup's training cycle. Starting pups very young on the whistle for recall (here) and sit (stop) pays huge dividends, yet most ignore the opportunity. Introduce the whistle by associating pleasurable experiences early during the days of puppy hood. Pups will readily respond to the recall whistle by eight weeks old. I have had entire litters of six-week-old pups rush to the whistle peeps in excitement.

When pups associate a positive experience with the whistle, they will respond to accept their reward of affection, food, treats, or a short retrieve...always something positive. The same is true of the "sit" whistle. Pups can consistently comply with this whistle command by three months old. They will eagerly sit on the whistle when the associated reward is sufficient and the commands are conducted infrequently.

Waiting to implement whistle commands offers no benefit. Too often six- to seven-month-old pups pay no heed to their handler's recall command, making the training challenge more difficult. Similarly, once the pup has advanced in basic training and is charging hard on retrieves, whistle stops are much more difficult to introduce.

9. Postponing Hand Signals

Another common mistake is to wait to introduce hand signals until a pup has completed extensive marking training and has had some actual hunt experience. This strategy promotes a self-employed, overly independent dog. What we want to produce is an interdependent hunting partner who readily works with us to locate game, and one who easily complies with direction in the field. Get the young dog handling well on casts and whistle commands before providing too many marking exercises and certainly before hunting exposure.

10. Poor Timing

Incorrect timing of praise and rewards for correct behavior is meaningless. Incorrectly timed correction or punishment for inappropriate behavior likewise has no value and is often counterproductive. A simple rule applies here: Rewards and/or corrections, to be effective at modifying behavior, must occur exactly when the desired or undesired behavior occurs, and rewards and corrections must occur at the location of the action. If we wait to reward a great cast or stylish water entry with verbal praise until the dog returns to our side, the dog associates the reward with returning to heel with the bumper, which is his most recent act, not the act we wanted to encourage.

The same is true of correction. Negative behavior or improper response to commands must be corrected immediately at the time of the behavior and as close to the exact spot of the infraction as possible. For instance, a non-response on a stop whistle must be corrected immediately and in the exact place the refusal occurred, if possible. It requires immediately returning the dog to the exact spot where the refusal occurred, making the correction, and re-emphasizing the command at that location. This is why we must thoroughly drill skills to proficiency on land before progressing to water, unless we are fond of swimming.

10 Pitfalls in Retriever Training

Correction in dog training seems to be a favored method for many trainers. Actually, reward stimulus usually carries a much more powerful behavior modification effect if properly utilized. Yet from my observation of handlers, they do not properly reward their prospects in training enough for effort and when they do it is usually miss-timed, holding little meaning for their dog.

Parting Thought: As always, the best strategy for gundog training is to set pups up to succeed and to not condition in a problem that will have to be rectified later.